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Sandra C. Jones

University of Wollongong, sandraj@uow.edu.au

A Reid

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Abstract

Alcohol advertisements often attract criticism for portraying women in an overtly sexual and demeaning fashion, with past research finding that women are more critical than men. The first study reported here found that neither feminism nor gender role identity added substantial explanatory power beyond that of gender. Females reported more negative attitudes toward ads that used demeaning sexual appeals and more positive attitudes toward empowering appeals. The second study provided quantitative evidence in support of the assumption that it is offensive sexual portrayals, rather than other aspects of sexist advertisements, that are disliked.

Keywords

Sex, sexism, Australian, alcohol, advertising, are, women, more, offended, men

Disciplines

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SEX AND SEXISM IN AUSTRALIAN ALCOHOL ADVERTISING: (WHY) ARE WOMEN MORE OFFENDED THAN MEN?

Sandra C. Jones
Centre for Health Initiatives, University of Wollongong, Australia
sandraj@uow.edu.au

Amanda Reid
Centre for Health Initiatives, University of Wollongong, Australia
areid@uow.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Alcohol advertisements often attract criticism for portraying women in an overtly sexual and demeaning fashion, with past research finding that women are more critical than men. The first study reported here finds that neither feminism nor gender role identity add substantial explanatory power beyond that of gender. Females reported more negative attitudes towards ads used demeaning sexual appeals and more positive attitudes towards empowering appeals. The second study provided quantitative evidence in support of the assumption that it is offensive sexual portrayals rather than other aspects of the sexist advertisements that are disliked.

Keywords: Advertising; Australia; Alcohol; Sexism; Consumer Attitudes

INTRODUCTION

Although we have moved beyond the oversimplified perspective that people accept and imitate everything they see on television, it is clear that media exposure does influence people's understanding of their world [1]. The genre of advertising in particular may create, reinforce and prime stereotypical interpretation of events. Advertisers have a short amount of time to make an impression: thus they prey on cognitive short-cuts used by individuals [2], which may activate associated ways of behaving. As a result of their heavy utilization of stereotypes, advertisements have been the subject of much research with regard to portrayal of gender roles.

Sex and Sexism in Advertising

Studies in the 1980s found that sexual images in advertising had become more overt over time [3], and that models were wearing more suggestive clothing [4]. This trend continued into the 1990s and beyond, with eroticism and nudity in advertising becoming

more prevalent and increasingly blatant [5]. Sex appeals are obviously used by advertisers in the belief that they increase the effectiveness of the ad. Considering the proliferation of sexual appeals in advertising, it is surprising that although the literature indicates that attention may be increased (particularly among males [6], it also indicates that brand recall, attitude [7] and purchase intention [8,9] may be negatively affected.

The use of derogatory gender role portrayals or stereotypes is often termed ‘advertising sexism’ [10]. Fundamentally, advertising sexism is a concern because it is felt to limit women’s aspirations, achievement, self-esteem and equity in compensation [10]. One third of the ads most complained about to the Australian Advertising Standards Council in 1995 drew complaints of sexism [11]. Interestingly, complaints consistently demonstrated a crossover between objections to the sexual content of the ad and objections to their sexism; that is, feminist critiques have become intertwined with social conservatism [11]. Nokes offers the definition: sexy ads ‘show men and women enjoying themselves and each other’ and sexist ads ‘show or refer to women as powerless objects to be used by and for the gratification of men’ [12]. This takes into account the fact that not all sexual images are sexist, and not all sexist images are sexual in nature.

The two major Australian studies of advertising in the second half of the 1980s provide conflicting results – with one finding minimal evidence of gender role stereotypes [13] and the other finding considerable evidence of their pervasive nature [14]. A follow-up study conducted in 2002, using Gilly’s methodology, reported findings that were consistent with that of Mazzella and colleagues and concluded that “not only do Australian advertisers continue to portray men and women in restricted roles, but that over time the portrayals are actually becoming more stereotypical in a way that emphasizes traditional roles for women” [15].

Gender differences in response to sex appeals are commonly reported. One study found that males reported a more positive response to ads with nude models, and females a more negative response [16]—which, as the investigators pointed out, would result in little net effect if the target audience contained equal numbers of males and females. LaTour and Henthorne also found that this was the case for both perfume brand attitude and ad attitude; further, females in that study displayed more tension and uneasiness when shown the nude ad than did males [17]. Studies that have found an absence of gender differences when “attractive” (but not “sexy”) models are used suggests that it is likely that “sexiness” (or provocation) is responsible for the usual gender differences in advertising effects [18].

With regard to societal effects, the potential effects of sex and sexism in advertising are broader than the direct impact on purchase intention. There is evidence that the ubiquitous presence of sexually attractive female models in advertising contributes to body dissatisfaction and eating disorders [19,20]; subsequent depression and loss of self-esteem [21]; a climate that tolerates sexual harassment [28]; and sexual aggression and domestic violence [22, 23].

Sex and Sexism in Alcohol Advertising.

One advertised product that is particularly associated with sexual appeals is alcohol. Some authors have described alcohol advertisers as promoting an alcohol stimulated, sexually active lifestyle to young consumers, despite the fact that alcohol is seen to have a negative effect on sexual performance [24]. In the case of alcohol, criticisms of sexual appeals may be further inflamed due to concerns about responsible drinking behavior—that is, do these images imply that certain irresponsible sexual behavior (or treatment of women) is appropriate in the context of drinking. This concern is unfortunately supported by strong evidence of associations between alcohol consumption and unsafe sexual behavior [25,26]. The effect of multiple images on young people who are developing their sense of self and their understanding of relationships is also likely to be a strong contributor to the social norm of (excessive) drinking as an essential component of sexual interactions.

Various gender-stereotype perceptions were assessed by Ford and colleagues [27] for four industry advertising categories; the greatest criticality in the US was for the *alcoholic beverage industry*. Beer ads in particular have been criticized for their sexist portrayals of women [28]. For example, Anheuser-Busch was widely criticized in 1990 for a series of ads which were seen as sexist; including one which an announcer asked “Why do gentlemen prefer blondes?” followed by a shot of an attractive blond woman and the words “Dumb question.” Clear gender differences in ‘acceptability’ of beer ads, in particular, were also evident in Fahy and colleagues large national U.S. study [29]; however, reasons for acceptability were not analysed. An Australian study measured attitudes towards offensive advertising among 125 university students [30], and found that although alcohol ads were 12th on the list overall, they were one of only two products for which women reported a significantly higher level of offensiveness. By far the largest gender difference in reasons for offence occurred in relation to the category “sexist”. Further, the mean score for “nudity” was far lower than it was for “sexism”, and the absolute difference between males and females on offensiveness of nudity was one-third of that for sexism.

Advertising, Feminism and Gender Role Identification.

Feminism is defined by the Oxford dictionary as “advocacy of women’s rights and sexual equality.” Feminists, by definition, should have more negative evaluations of messages which portray women in a demeaning fashion (independent of gender). A number of studies have assessed feminist orientation or ‘consciousness’, and found that this perspective is associated with being significantly more critical of female role portrayals in advertising. In Australia, Harker and colleagues measured ‘feminist consciousness’ in relation to advertising gender role portrayals but not with alcohol ads specifically [31]. On the basis of their cluster analysis, the authors suggested that there were two groups of feminists – those who are very concerned about gender role portrayals (labelled by Harker et al. as ‘pessimists’, only 28% males), and those who are less concerned (labelled ‘optimists’). The ‘optimistic’ cluster (who actually had the highest autonomy scores) was comprised of 41% males, which raises the possibility that gender is a more important influence than feminism.

Other published Australian research investigated whether ‘feminist’ women (classified according to scores on the Bem Sex Role Inventory) were more critical of sexist (i.e., gender stereotyped) appeals in *beer ads* than were ‘non-feminist’ women [32]. Unlike Lavine and colleagues, this research found little effect of feminism; however, feminism may have had some impact on the recognition of sexism within highly sexist ads. In general, women (both feminist and non-feminist) ‘liked’ all the ads, and level of feminism did not yield a negative impact on their purchase intentions [21]. Further, they found that women did not wish the ads to be modified in order to target female consumers. The differences in the results of this Australian study may be related to the use of only beer ads which, as reported, women saw as targeted only at men; the use of the BSRI, which uses gender role identity as a proxy measure of feminism rather than measuring feminism directly; and the use of ads which were sexist in their implied attitudes towards women rather than their portrayal of women and which were actually fairly mild compared to many current campaigns.

Overview of Current Research

The current studies were designed to investigate the independent and interactive effects of gender, feminism, and gender role identity on ad liking for alcohol products that used visuals portraying women in an overtly sexual and demeaning fashion as opposed to empowering or neutral portrayals. Study 1 measured feminism and gender role identity and examined the extent to which these constructs predicted responses to sexual portrayals in print ads for alcohol brands independent of gender. Study 2 addressed a methodological assumption by using the same print ads to investigate whether what was liked about the empowering ads in study 1 was indeed that they were empowering, and what was disliked about the sexist ads was indeed that they were offensive and demeaning – as opposed to some other quality.

STUDY ONE

On the basis of previous research, it was expected that women would find sexist (demeaning) portrayals of other women more offensive than would men, which would result in lower ad liking scores; that men would react negatively toward ads that presented women as powerful, independent entities (particularly where the appeal may be taken to imply that men are not necessary for women to be happy and successful); and that ads which presented women neither as subservient (sexual objects) nor as dominant (empowered) would not specifically appeal to, or against, gender-specific conditioning. To measure, and control for, the potential confounding effects of gender role identification and feminism (as reported by previous studies), we included the measures used in these previous studies.

Method

The participants were 316 undergraduate college students taking a first-year introductory marketing course. The mean age of the participants was 19.9 years (range 17 to 56). Forty-nine percent of the participants were female, and 74% were born in Australia. Gender role identification was measured using the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) (BSRI) [33], which is the most widely-used measure of gender role identification (and the

measure used in the Australian study of responses to sexist alcohol advertising reported above). The full scale presents respondents with 60 personality characteristics; for the purposes of this study we used only 14 items: seven male characteristics (e.g., independent, assertive, self-reliant); and seven female characteristics (e.g., warm, sympathetic, tender). Respondents were asked ‘How well do each of the following words describe you?’ – with four response options (‘not at all,’ ‘a little bit,’ ‘a lot’ and ‘completely’). Feminism was measured using 10 items from the Attitudes toward Women Scale [34]. This scale was designed to “assess attitudes towards the rights, roles, and privileges women ought to have [35]; and includes items such as “women should assume their rightful place in business and all the professions along with men”. Respondents answered each item on a four-point Likert scale (“agree strongly,” “agree mildly,” “disagree mildly,” or “disagree strongly”), and responses were then converted to a 0 – 4 scale.

The stimuli were 9 print ads for alcohol brands. The ads were selected from a group of 35 magazine ads from current campaigns. The initial criterion for selection was that the ad must include a picture of at least one woman (either on her own or with other men or women). This resulted in a group of 16 suitable ads that were pre-tested with a separate group of ten males and females to classify them as either ‘sexist,’ ‘empowering,’ or ‘neutral.’ Participants in the pre-test were given a file that contained 16 print ads for alcohol brands taken from current issues of popular magazines. They were asked to select: ‘the three most *sexist* ads (i.e., demeaning to women);’ ‘the three most empowering ads (i.e., to women);’ and ‘the three most neutral ads.’ The three ‘sexist’ ads chosen for the main study were those that received the highest number of nominations as a sexist ad *and* zero nominations as an empowering ad. A similar system was employed for the empowering and neutral ads. The sexist ads chosen were Ad 3, Ad 5, and Ad 8; the empowering ads were Ad 2, Ad 4, and Ad 7; and the neutral ads were Ad 1, Ad 6, and Ad 9. (See table 1 for complete descriptions of all ads).

Table 1: Description of Advertisement Stimuli

Ad	Category	Description
1	Neutral	An ad for a brand of sparkling wine. It consists of a photograph of a man and a woman, arm-in-arm, walking away from the camera and past an outdoor café; the man, who is carrying a bottle of the wine, is looking back over his shoulder and is smiling. The caption reads “unmistakably Italian.”
2	Empowering	An ad for a brand of sparkling wine. It consists of a photograph of a woman and a man in a bath (the focus of the picture is the woman and only the man’s arms and part of his face are visible); the woman is laughing and holding a glass of champagne, with champagne splashing out of the top of glass. The caption reads “what’s an occasion anyway?”
3	Sexual/ demeaning	An ad for a brand of blended whisky. It consists of a photograph of a middle-aged man in a suit and a young girl in a cropped top, mini skirt and sneakers in a lift. The caption reads “he who hesitates is lost”.

4	Empowering	An ad for a brand of wine. It consists of a photograph of a woman in a bar wearing a bright yellow dress, surrounded by three men in suits who are clearly interested in her (the man's faces are only partially visible). The caption reads "yellow stands out."
5	Sexual/ demeaning	An ad for a brand of scotch whisky. It consists of a photograph of a woman, from the chest down, wearing a very short skirt stepping out of a car. The caption reads "yes, God is a man".
6	Neutral	An ad for a brand of liqueur. It consists of a photograph of a woman looking directly at the camera, and two glasses containing ice cubes, with liqueur being poured from the bottle into one of the glasses. The caption reads "where fire meets ice."
7	Empowering	An ad for a brand of sparkling wine (the same brand as Ad 2). It consists of a photograph of three women laughing and drinking champagne while trying to take a photograph of themselves. The caption reads "what's an occasion anyway?"
8	Sexual/ demeaning	An ad for a brand of liqueur. It consists of a photograph of a woman reclining in a chair with one strap of her dress fallen down, her dress pulled up to the top of her thighs, and her hand between her legs. The caption reads "after a couple of glasses you may find you've taken advantage of yourself."
9	Neutral	An ad for a brand of liqueur. The ad shows three people, two women and a man, smiling and laughing; each is holding a glass containing ice cubes and liqueur. The caption reads "you'll always remember your first [brand name]."

Participants were shown, in a classroom setting, each of the nine ads (in the order in which they are numbered above) on an overhead projector. They were asked, for each ad, to rate their liking of the ad (i.e., How much do you like or dislike this ad?) on an 11-point scale, from minus five (absolutely hate it) to plus five (absolutely love it). Participants then completed an unrelated task (a questionnaire on health status and health behavior). Finally, they completed the above-described measures of gender role identification and feminism.

Results

The mean ad-liking scores, which measured attitude toward the ads, are shown in Table 2. As seen in the table, the mean scores for all ads were not far from the neutral point on the scale, with eight of the nine scored as mildly favorable. As expected (see Table 2), female participants reported significantly lower levels of ad-liking for all three of the sexist ads than did male respondents; significantly higher levels of ad-liking for two of the three empowering ads than did male respondents, with the third being directionally consistent.¹ Finally, there were no differences in ad liking between males and females for two of the three neutral ads, with the third (the only ad in this category that pictured a woman without a man) being preferred by females.

¹ Interestingly, ad 7 (the three girls drinking champagne without a man present) received the highest mean rating of all the ads among female participants and the lowest mean rating of all the ads among male participants.

Table 2. Ad Liking by Gender

Ad	Mean	Male	Female	T	Sig
ad 3 (sexist)	1.38	2.10	0.89	-4.71	.000
ad 5 (sexist)	.62	2.08	-0.39	-8.60	.000
ad 8 (sexist)	.01	1.16	-.76	-7.58	.000
ad 2 (empowering)	.86	.43	1.15	3.14	.001
ad 4 (empowering)	1.08	.90	1.21	1.37	Ns
ad 7 (empowering)	.84	-.57	1.8	9.76	.000
ad 1 (neutral)	-.07	-.02	-.12	-.44	Ns
ad 6 (neutral)	.97	.64	1.22	2.05	.04
ad 9 (neutral)	.40	.19	.55	1.49	Ns

Gender role identity: The mean score on the masculine role identity subscale was 12.44 (SD = 3.39); range 3 to 21 (with a possible range of 0 to 21). There was no significant difference between male and female respondents in the mean masculine identity score (males = 12.21, females = 12.61; ns). There were no significant differences in attitude toward the ad by high versus low male gender role identity, other than for Ad 1 (neutral), which was rated more highly by participants with a low male identity (-0.36 vs. 0.28, $t = -2.75$, $p = .006$). When analyzed separately by gender, this difference remained significant only for females (-0.47 vs. 0.21, $t = -2.24$, $p = .03$). The mean score on the feminine role identity subscale was 13.32 (SD = 3.68); range 1 to 21. The mean feminine identity score was higher for female respondents than for male respondents (13.84 vs. 12.59, $t = 2.96$, $p = .003$). There were no significant differences in attitude toward the ad by high versus low female gender role identity, other than for Ad 7 (empowering), which was rated more positively by participants with a high female identity (1.19 vs. 0.45, $t = -2.72$, $p = .007$) and Ad 8 (sexist), which was rated more negatively by participants with a high female identity (-0.28 vs. 0.28, $t = 2.03$, $p = .04$). When analyzed separately by gender, these differences were eliminated (i.e., the apparent gender role differences were caused by gender).

Feminism: The mean score on the feminism scale was 22.55 (range 6 to 30, with a possible range of 0 to 30). Not surprisingly, the mean feminism score was slightly higher for females (24.21) than for males (20.24). Consistent with previous studies, high-feminism respondents reported significantly lower levels of ad liking for all three of the *sexist* ads than did low-feminism respondents; significantly higher levels of ad liking for only one of the three empowering ads than did low-feminism respondents, with the other two ads being directionally consistent; and no differences in ad liking from low-feminism respondents for any of the three neutral ads. However, when these results were analyzed by gender, there was no independent effect of feminism on ad liking (i.e., all apparent ‘feminism’ differences were simply caused by gender differences).

Discussion

As anticipated, we found that female respondents reported more negative attitudes toward alcohol ads that used overt (or demeaning) sexual appeals than did males; more positive attitudes toward alcohol ads that used feminist (empowering) appeals than did males; and

did not differ from males in their evaluation of ads that used neutral appeals. We also found no consistent effect of gender role identity or feminism on ad liking independent of gender. However, these findings need to be interpreted with caution given the small differences between male and female respondents on these variables.

STUDY TWO

Study 1 provided clear support for the view that women tend to display negative attitudes toward the use of female sexual appeals in alcohol ads. However, that study did not specifically ask respondents whether they found the ads to be sexist, rather their attitudes to the ads were *assumed* to be due to their sexist nature (or, in the case of the empowering ads, their presentation of women as independent). Study 2 was designed to provide quantitative evidence to support these assumptions.

The term ‘sexist’ was operationalized via two related but distinct concepts: ‘offensive level of sexuality’ and ‘demeaning to women.’ We anticipated that sexist ads would be rated as more offensive and demeaning to women (and particularly so by female respondents) than would empowering and neutral ads; and empowering ads would be rated as more empowering to women than would sexist and neutral ads. If we are correct in our inference from Study 1 that it is the portrayal of women in the ads that influences ad liking, this would result in ratings of the sexist ads as offensive and demeaning to women being associated with lower ad liking (by female respondents); and ratings of the empowering ads as empowering to women being associated with higher ad liking (by female respondents).

Method

The participants were 161 undergraduate college students taking a first-year undergraduate marketing course. The mean age of the participants was 20.5 years (range 18 to 36). Forty-eight percent of the participants were female and 70% were born in Australia. Feminism was again measured using the same ten items from the Attitudes toward Women Scale [34]. Gender role identification was not measured in this study.

The stimuli were the same nine print ads for alcohol brands used in Study 1. Participants were given, in a classroom setting, a printed questionnaire that included a three-quarter page reproduction of each of the nine ads (in the order in which they were numbered in Study 1). Section one of the questionnaire measured ad liking as in Study 1. Section two of the questionnaire included a small reproduction of each ad and three questions about the portrayal of the woman (or women) in the ad: “This ad contains an offensive level of sexuality,” “This ad is demeaning to women,” and “This ad is empowering to women.” These questions were answered on a 7-point scale, where 1 = “strongly disagree” and 7 = “strongly agree.” Finally, respondents completed demographic questions and the above-described measure of feminism.

Results

The mean ad liking scores for the ads and results of the analyses of ad liking by gender and by feminism, produced results consistent with study 1 and are, hence, not reported

here.² As shown in Table 3, the three “sexist” ads received the highest ratings for containing “an offensive level of sexuality.” Ratings for these three ads were 4.5 (Ad 8), 4.4 (Ad 5), and 4.1 (Ad 1), with no other ad scoring above the mean on this item. Similarly, as shown in table 4, these ads received the highest ratings for being “demeaning to women.” Ratings for all three of these ads were 4.3, with mean scores for all other ads more than a full scale point below this.

Table 3. Ratings of Ads as Offensive (Highest to Lowest)

Ad	Mean	SD
ad 8 (sexist)	4.48	1.87
ad 5 (sexist)	4.38	1.83
ad 3 (sexist)	4.06	1.74
ad 2 (empowering)	3.61	1.64
ad 9 (neutral)	3.27	1.46
ad 6 (neutral)	3.25	1.47
ad1 (neutral)	3.20	1.38
ad 4 (empowering)	3.01	1.34
ad 7 (empowering)	2.42	0.94

Table 4. Ratings of Ads as Demeaning (Highest to Lowest)

Ad	Mean	SD
ad 5 (sexist)	4.33	1.75
ad 8 (sexist)	4.31	1.71
ad 3 (sexist)	4.27	1.72
ad 9 (neutral)	3.30	1.44
ad 6 (neutral)	3.27	1.49
ad 1 (neutral)	3.27	1.41
ad 2 (empowering)	3.24	1.42
ad 4 (empowering)	3.16	1.46
ad 7 (empowering)	2.65	1.24

As expected, and shown in table 5, all three of the “empowering” ads received scores above the mean on the item “This ad is empowering to women”. Importantly, and consistent with the pilot study, the sexist ads received low scores on the empowering item, and the empowering ads received low scores on the offensive and demeaning items.

² Unreported results of study 2 relating to replication of study 1 can be obtained from the authors.

Table 5. Ratings of Ads as Empowering (Highest to Lowest)

Ad	Mean	SD
ad 7 (empowering)	4.88	1.80
ad 4 (empowering)	4.66	1.70
ad 9 (neutral)	4.10	1.52
ad 2 (empowering)	4.04	1.64
ad 5 (sexist)	3.87	1.70
ad 6 (neutral)	3.83	1.68
ad 8 (sexist)	3.76	1.69
ad 1 (neutral)	3.36	1.38
ad 3 (sexist)	3.33	1.57

With regard to sexist ads, regression analysis confirmed that two of the three items predicted ad liking across all respondents combined for the three sexist ads. Rating the ad as offensive was a significant predictor for Ad 3 ($p = .000$) and Ad 5 ($p = .03$); and as (not) empowering was a significant predictor for Ad 3 ($p = .04$), Ad 5 ($p = .003$), and Ad 8 ($p = .000$). Interestingly, rating the ad as demeaning did *not* predict ad liking.

Regression analysis confirmed that rating the ad as empowering was a significant predictor of ad liking for all three ads: Ad 2 ($p = .000$), Ad 4 ($p = .001$), and Ad 7 ($p = .000$). Perceiving the ad as (not) offensive was also a significant predictor for Ad 2 ($p = .02$) and Ad 7 ($p = .006$). Again, rating the ad as (not) demeaning did *not* predict ad liking. Regression analysis confirmed that, as expected, ratings of the neutral ads on the three items did not predict ad liking.

The interaction between gender and ad classification was also examined. As anticipated and shown in Table 6, female respondents rated the three sexist ads as more offensive and demeaning than did male respondents – with female’s ratings for all three ads well above the mean on each of these items. Female respondents also rated all three sexist ads as less empowering than did male respondents.

Table 6. Ad Ratings by Gender

Ad	Type	Male	Female	T	Sig
ad 3 - sexist	Offensive	3.84	4.27	1.89	ns
	Demeaning	4.00	4.56	1.34	.04
	Empowering	3.72	2.90	-1.50	.001
ad 5 - sexist	Offensive	3.99	4.79	2.85	.005
	Demeaning	3.91	4.77	3.17	.002
	Empowering	4.12	3.60	-1.95	.05
ad 8 - sexist	Offensive	3.95	5.05	3.88	.000
	Demeaning	3.87	4.78	3.51	.001
	Empowering	3.99	3.53	-1.75	ns

Also, as expected, there were no differences between male and female respondents in their ratings of the empowering ads as being empowering to women; and, across the three

measures and the three ads, all but one showed no difference between male and female respondents (see Table 6).

Discussion

As hypothesized, ratings of the ads as offensive and as not empowering predicted lower levels of ad liking, particularly among women. Additionally, ratings of the ads as not offensive and as empowering predicted higher levels of ad liking. These findings support the conclusions drawn in Study 1 by providing empirical evidence (rather than subjective interpretation by the authors) that a key driver of the “sexist” ads being disliked by women was the perception that they were offensive and a key driver of the “empowering” ads being liked by women was the perception that they portrayed women in an empowering manner. However, the lack of effect on ad liking of the rating of the ads as (not) demeaning to women is extremely interesting as it raises the question of whether it is sexism or sexuality, per se, that offends many women.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

As discussed earlier, several studies have shown that females report more negative responses to sex appeals in advertising than do males (LaTour et al., 1990). Similarly, we found, across both studies, that female respondents reported more negative attitudes toward sexist alcohol ads than did males. We also found that females reported more positive attitudes toward alcohol ads with feminist (empowering) appeals than did males. This research also determined that females do find overt sexual portrayals more offensive and demeaning than do males. Further research could more thoroughly investigate what it is about overt sexual appeals that makes them offensive to females (and to a smaller proportion of males), and what it is in other appeals that results in positive evaluations by both males and females.

The term ‘sexist’ was operationalized in Study 2 by two related but distinct concepts: ‘offensive level of sexuality’ and ‘demeaning to women.’ The ads categorized in the Study 1 pre-test as ‘sexist’ were indeed rated in Study 2 as being more offensive and demeaning than the other advertisements. However, while the ratings of the first concept predicted ad liking, ratings of the second did not. Further research needs to disentangle the issue of whether it is sexuality or sexism that prompts dislike among women. This idea is consistent with Lass and Hart’s observation that some women are offended by the use of sexual imagery; specifically, women as sex objects, and others do not mind sexual explicitness if the woman is seen as strong and independent or shown in control over a man (Lass and Hart, 2004). The empowering ads in Study 2 were not rated as demeaning or offensive; however, the appeals in these ads cannot clearly be described as “sexy.” Unfortunately, it is expected that there would be difficulty in locating ads that do clearly have a high level of sexuality but cannot be classified as sexist/demeaning.

We measured (ideological) feminism in both Study 1 and Study 2 and found no consistent effect of feminism on ad liking, independent of gender. Although these findings need to be interpreted with caution, given the small differences between male and female respondents on this measure, these studies do provide evidence that it is

gender, per se, rather than feminism that predicts (dis)liking of sexist advertising. Further, we did not find any consistent effect of gender role identity (which was used in a previous Australian study as a proxy measure of feminism) on ad liking, independent of gender.

These are important findings as several previous studies have reported that feminists are more offended by sexist advertising than are non-feminists, which leads to the inference that it is a small group of “radical” people who are offended, not the population in general. We found evidence that women are offended by sexist or demeaning portrayals of women in advertising, regardless of their ideological viewpoint. This suggests an alternative, but defensible, interpretation of the findings of Harker and colleagues (the group they define as “optimistic feminists” contained 41% males and “pessimistic feminists” only 28% males), which suggests that the simpler explanation is that feminist males might not be as concerned about advertising portrayals as are feminist females; that is, *women* are more offended by sexist advertising than are men [31].

Limitations

It is important to bear in mind that ads are multidimensional and that sexual ads may be liked because of other elements of the ad (such as the core message contained within it), regardless of sexual content [36]. Therefore, we endeavored to control for this by setting inclusion and exclusion criteria for the ads (e.g., print ads had to be full-page, full-color, and include at least one woman); but it remains a limitation of this series of studies that we considered only a sample of nine alcohol print ads. However, these ads were fairly representative of the types of ads young people are exposed to in Australia.

The studies reported herein were conducted with university students, who cannot be said to be representative of the population as a whole. However, as Pollay and Lysonski stated, “While students, as a sample population, might be judged a vanguard of impending social change, we also know that their general attitudes toward advertising are not much different from those of the population at large” [10; p.38]. Additionally, although the ads and participants were all Australian, the general findings, in relation to reactions to sexual appeals in ads, are unlikely to be widely divergent from those in similar countries (e.g., New Zealand, the U.S., and the UK).

As with any study of attitudes, there is the issue of social desirability bias [37]. It is possible that participants’ responses may have been influenced by the perception that they should be offended by sexist ads. However, the studies were introduced to participants (in both cases, undergraduate marketing students) as a study of alcohol advertising. A manipulation check was conducted by offering a prize (free movie tickets) to the student in each group who could come closest to stating the actual research question (with responses provided on a sheet of paper separate to the questionnaire). In neither of the cases did any of the students suggest that it was a study of attitudes to sex (or sexism) in advertising; in fact, the predominant response was that we were testing ads to see which one was the most effective for university students.

The conclusions about a lack of independent effects for gender role identification must be interpreted with caution, given the minimal differences between male and female respondents, particularly in relation to male gender role identification. It is possible that our sample, being university students, had more progressive concepts of gender roles than the general population; in which case, an independent effect may have been found in a group of people with more traditional gender role identification profiles.

Implications

There is a considerable body of evidence that the use of sex appeals may result in a more negative attitude towards a brand [7] and lower purchase intention [8]. Nevertheless, there is often a level of complacency among advertisers that is based on the argument that, as it is women who are primarily offended by sexist advertising, reports of reduced purchase intention from studies of mixed-gender groups are not important for marketers of products such as beer, which are predominantly targeted toward men. While sex appeals are more effective for men, Fahy and colleagues stated that the issue for advertisers is clearly that “An important balance needs to be achieved between ensuring that target markets are reached, and refraining from offending other members of the viewing audience” [29; p.243]. Males in MacKay and Covell’s study also showed no difference in their appeal ratings of sex image and ‘progressive’ image ads, while females found the progressive ads to have a markedly significantly greater appeal [23]. As the authors said, this finding gives advertisers little justification for the continued sexual objectification of women in ads.

Pollay and Lysonski commented that despite the articulateness and diffusion of criticism of ad sexism, it is surprising that there is no available evidence demonstrating dramatic changes in the portrayal of women in ads [10]. A decade later, this comment is still valid; in fact, anecdotal evidence (and complaints to the Advertising Standards Board) suggest that such portrayals are *increasing*. In an attempt to explain the reason for this apparent increase in stereotypical gender role portrayals in Australian advertising, Milner and Higgs suggested that the results may be explained by changes in the regulatory environment [15]. They pointed out that, when the data was collected in 1985 for the Gilly study (the only one of the three Australian studies that found minimal gender stereotypes) television advertising was regulated by the Federal government [13]; when the data was collected in 1989 for Mazzella and colleagues’ study Australia was trialing industry self-regulation [14]; and when the data was collected in 2002 for the Milner and Higgs study, industry self-regulation was fully in force [15].

Milner and Higgs also made the important point that, although the self-regulatory system enables people to lodge a complaint about an individual ad, this does not provide a solution to the identified problem: “Collectively, current Australian ads systematically discriminate against several groups of people. Yet there are no means for lodging complaints about a collection of ads” [15; p.92].

However, there is increasing public scrutiny of alcohol advertising and particularly ads that present an association between alcohol consumption and sexual activity – resulting in widespread calls for a return to government regulation of alcohol advertising. As pointed

out by Lass and Hart, “Using images in ads indicating irresponsible, inappropriate sexual behavior as a result of drinking will only make the advertisers’ position look less responsible and more vulnerable in the eyes of both consumers as well as advertising policing organizations” [24; p.620].

In summary, there are two important cautions for the alcohol industry (and, by broader implication, the advertising industry). First, advertisers need to be aware that a substantial proportion of consumers are offended by such portrayals (although the extent to which this is seen as a positive or negative effect depends on the objectives of the ad campaign and the extent to which those who are offended are seen as potential consumers of the product). Second, given the current debate over the regulation of alcohol advertising, continuing to use advertising messages that offend a proportion of the general public may – in the long-term – result in the introduction of a regulatory framework that is out of the hands of the industry.

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