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Sandra C. Jones

University of Wollongong, sandraj@uow.edu.au

Amanda Reid

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Abstract

Coinciding with the rise of raunch culture, a new female stereotype has emerged in advertising - the lusty, busty exhibitionist who exudes sexual power and confidence. Previous research has generally found that women react less positively to female sexual images in alcohol advertising than males, but different sexual stereotypes have not been explicitly examined. The present study utilizes different types of sexual appeals in three televised advertisements for alcohol brands and investigates the relationship between types of sexual imagery and attitude to the advertisement, stated reasons for (dis)liking the advertisement and purchase intention (PI) among 268 Australian university students. Surprisingly, an advertisement using the new stereotype was actually liked less overall by females than an advertisement using the traditional passive demeaning/sex object stereotype. Females liked all of the advertisements significantly less than males, although there was considerable variation in male attitudes towards an advertisement that was generally perceived to contain sexist or demeaning humour. The findings of our study raise two important cautions for the alcohol (advertising) industry and for public policy. First, advertisers and policy makers need to be aware that a substantial proportion of consumers are offended by such portrayals. Second, in a climate in which consumers and advocates are increasingly voicing concerns over the ineffectiveness of the self-regulatory system, policy makers need to consider the introduction of a regulatory framework.

Keywords

advertising, female, public, sexuality, policy, implications, young, adults, reactions, stereotypes, australian, alcohol

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Life Sciences | Medicine and Health Sciences | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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The use of female sexuality in Australian alcohol advertising: public policy implications of young adults' reactions to stereotypes

Sandra C. Jones^{*,†} and Amanda Reid[‡]

Centre for Health Initiatives, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW, Australia

- *Coinciding with the rise of 'raunch culture', a new female stereotype has emerged in advertising – the 'lustful, busty exhibitionist' who exudes sexual power and confidence. Previous research has generally found that women react less positively to female sexual images in alcohol advertising than males, but different sexual stereotypes have not been explicitly examined. The present study utilizes different types of sexual appeals in three televised advertisements for alcohol brands and investigates the relationship between types of sexual imagery and attitude to the advertisement, stated reasons for (dis)liking the advertisement and purchase intention (PI) among 268 Australian university students. Surprisingly, an advertisement using the new stereotype was actually liked less overall by females than an advertisement using the traditional passive demeaning/sex object stereotype. Females liked all of the advertisements significantly less than males, although there was considerable variation in male attitudes towards an advertisement that was generally perceived to contain sexist or demeaning humour. The findings of our study raise two important cautions for the alcohol (advertising) industry and for public policy. First, advertisers and policy makers need to be aware that a substantial proportion of consumers are offended by such portrayals. Second, in a climate in which consumers and advocates are increasingly voicing concerns over the ineffectiveness of the self-regulatory system, policy makers need to consider the introduction of a regulatory framework.*

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Background

Advertisers have a short amount of time to make an impression; thus, they prey on cognitive short-cuts used by individuals (Davis, 2003). Importantly, this process may create, prime and reinforce stereotypes, and influence later behaviour (Wheeler and Petty, 2001).

*Correspondence to: Sandra C. Jones, Centre for Health Initiatives, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW, Australia.

E-mail: sandraj@uow.edu.au

[†]Director

[‡]Research Assistant

'Advertising sexism' has been defined as the use of derogatory gender role stereotypes or portrayals in advertising (Pollay and Lysonski, 1993). While not all gender role stereotypes may be sexist, Pingree and colleagues described a scale of sexism in which at the most extreme level, women are presented as a two-dimensional non-thinking decoration, for example, 'the dumb blond, the sex object, and the whimpering victim', (Pingree *et al.*, 1976).

Some 40 years after the initial feminist backlash against media (and particularly advertising) sexism, there has been a resurgence of the term 'sexism' that is closely aligned with the implications of images of female sexuality (Miller, 2005). Jean Kilbourne argues that the pervasive overt sexual images in advertising are sexist, demeaning and harmful because they do not portray imperfect people in real, committed relationships (Kilbourne, 2005). One third of the advertisements most complained about to the Australian Advertising Standards Council in 1995 drew complaints of sexism that consistently demonstrated a cross-over between objections to the *sexual content* of the advertisement and objections to their *sexism* (Lumby, 1997).

Sexual appeals in advertising

Since the 1970s, sexual images in advertising have become much more overt and both male and female models have been increasingly shown wearing less clothing (for example, Soley and Reid, 1988; Plous and Neptune, 1997; Jones *et al.*, 1998; Reichert *et al.*, 1999). However, in both 1983 and 1993, female models in magazine advertising were still three times as likely as male models to be dressed in a sexually explicit manner - in 1993, 22% of female models were partially clad in underwear or bathing suits, or the context suggested they were nude, and a further 18% were coded as wearing suggestive clothing including very short shorts or that which partially exposed the upper body (Reichert *et al.*, 1999). A study of US prime time television commercials found that female

models were more heavily represented in 'sex-object' appeals (9% of males vs. 21% of females) were classed as somewhat or definitely a sex object, defined as 'whether the role of the model is that of a two-dimensional character whose demeanor embodies primarily a sexual enticement' (Lin, 1998, p. 468).

Sexual appeals in advertising are about more than just clothing and nudity, and can depend on physical features and physical attractiveness of the model, behaviour/movement, intimacy between models and contextual features (Reichert and Ramirez, 2000). According to LaTour and Henthorne (1993), sexual suggestiveness can be subtle, involving double entendre and innuendo, and requiring more interpretation on the part of the viewer, for example a woman licking a drink bottle suggestively (Reichert and Lambiase, 2003; Lass and Hart, 2004). Sexual appeals may also take the form of humour in which stereotypes are often integral (van Zenton, 2005). For example, Anheuser-Busch was widely criticized in 1990 for an advertisement in which an announcer asked 'Why do gentlemen prefer blondes?' followed by a shot of an attractive blonde woman and the words 'Dumb question' (Elliott, 1991).

Advertisers attempt to motivate consumers to purchase by linking their products with consumer needs for sexual intimacy (Reichert and Lambiase, 2003). Considering the proliferation of sexual appeals in advertising, it is surprising that although the literature indicates that attention may be increased (Judd and Alexander, 1983), it also indicates that brand recall, attitude (Simpson *et al.*, 1996) and purchase intention (PI) (Dudley, 1999; LaTour and Henthorne, 1994) may be negatively affected by nudity (see Jones *et al.*, 1998 for a review). However, sexual appeals that are broader than just nudity may differ in these consumer-marketer effects.

Gender differences in response to female sexual appeals (nudity and sexiness) have been commonly reported (for example, LaTour *et al.*, 1990; LaTour and Henthorne, 1993; Jones *et al.*, 1998), with women disliking them more than men. More recently, Mittal and

Lassar's (2000) sample of young university students did not demonstrate any gender differences in relation to brand/ad attitude and purchase intent for two perfume advertisements; however, their sample size was small ($n = 65$). Interestingly, these researchers also measured what they termed to be 'sexual liberation' where scale items for media sexual liberation included 'there is too much degradation of women and men as sex objects in the media today' - and females were unsurprisingly found to be significantly 'less liberated' than males.

Responses to sexual appeals in alcohol advertising

Various gender-stereotype perceptions were assessed by Ford *et al.* (2004) for four industry advertising categories in the US and the greatest criticality was for the alcoholic beverage industry. Alcoholic beverage advertisements are known to commonly use sex appeals - to the extent that a new UK Committee of Advertising Practice code states that 'links must not be made between alcohol and seduction, sexual activity or sexual success' (Thomas, 2005). Solomon and colleagues suggest that beer commercials rely heavily on association with a 'Sex Kitten' stereotype in order to position the product with a predominantly male target market (Solomon *et al.*, 1992). This stereotype is defined as a woman who is usually wearing sexy attire (such as a bathing suit, lingerie, revealing or tight clothes), who often appears less intelligent or personable, is often placed in uncomfortable rather than natural poses and does not look directly at the camera (Englis *et al.*, 1994).

Alcohol advertisements often garner complaints of sexism. Although women are not usually the target market for beer advertisements - and gender differences in reactions might therefore be expected - women are still exposed to many of these advertisements even if alcohol companies do not seek their approval. Van Zenton (2005) emphasized that

television beer commercials are the category most subject to complaint in Australia (44% of official complaints regarding alcohol advertisements from 1999 to 2003, compared to just 5% for wine), with complaints most likely to come from women on the grounds of discrimination/vilification and the portrayal of sex/nudity (29.2% and 28.1%, respectively).

Surprisingly, another Australian research group reported that both feminist and non-feminist women 'liked' beer advertisements and that level of feminism did not appear to have a negative impact on their PI (Polonsky *et al.*, 2001). Further, the women did not wish the advertisements to be modified in order to target female consumers. It is difficult to draw conclusions from this study as women were not compared to men in relation to their 'liking' of beer advertisements, and women are likely to have lower overall PIs, as beer is a product generally targeted at men.

Lass and Hart (2004) used qualitative methods to investigate reactions among 18-35 year olds (from the UK, Germany and Italy) to magazine alcohol advertisements which varied in nudity and suggestiveness, and reported strong overall gender differences. However, one of their advertisements showed a semi-nude woman riding on the back of a man, and it was found that while many women used descriptive words such as *cheap* and *offensive*, some used terms such as *fun* and *dominance*. This strongly suggests that the context of the sexual appeal and the particular female stereotype that is presented is important for women in determining whether the advertisement is considered offensive, rather than merely the amount of sexual suggestiveness, 'sexiness' or nudity, as has been the focus of previous studies. Consistent with this, Waller (1999) found that nudity in alcohol advertisements was considered less offensive by Australian female university students than sexism.

"Women are not afraid of sexy..."

The advertising industry encourages the idea that women 'are not afraid of sexy in the right

setting, especially when it resonates with who they are as individuals' (Miller, 2005, p. 115), and that advertising sex appeals merely reflect popular culture. Ariel Levy's book *Female Chauvinist Pigs* detailed many examples of what she termed the rising phenomenon of 'raunch culture', in which many young women have embraced simplistic and plastic stereotypes of female sexuality (for example, by wearing revealing clothes bearing playboy bunny symbols, or taking pole dancing lessons) as a way of affirming their liberation and right to express their sexuality (Levy, 2005). Treatment of this concept by the Australian media demonstrates the relevance of raunch culture in Australia (Jinman, 2005). Levy writes, 'both men and women alike seem to have developed a taste for kitchy, slutty stereotypes of female sexuality' (p. 34). Importantly, Levy suggests that raunch culture has brought a new commercial shorthand for sexiness: a 'lustful and busty exhibitionist' stereotype.

Similarly, Gill (2007, 2008) discusses how advertising has responded to feminist critiques by constructing a new figure to sell to young women: 'the sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman who plays with her sexual power and is forever "up for it"' (2007, p. 258). Women in so-called 'post-feminist' media culture are increasingly depicted as active, desiring sexual subjects who please and pleasure themselves, rather than as passive objects. However, these women are still performing for a male gaze (Atwood, 2005), and keeping to the traditional boundaries of what it means to look sexy, even if they are allowed to desire. The key difference between the evolved sexual stereotype and the traditional 'dumb/victim/sex object' stereotype (still found in current advertising) is the association with power. According to Gill (2007), 'subjectification' is the new 'objectification', in which active, assertive female subjects choose to be sex objects - and in some respects, this shift can be seen as positive (Gill, 2008). However, Atwood states that 'anti-sexist advertising complaints are often directed with particular vehemence against

images which draw on themes of women's sexual power, for example those that can be read as expressive of lesbian desire, self-pleasuring or sexual power over men' (Atwood, 2005, p. 398).

Overview of current research

In summary, while most (but not all) previous research has found that women like female sexual images in advertising - and alcohol advertisements - less than males, the situation may have become more complicated. Past research has not explicitly examined different sexual stereotypes, instead tending to lump them together under the broad category of sex in advertising. There is a gap in our understanding of how women read the new advertising stereotype (Gill, 2008): do most women perceive advertisements that show women with sexual power over men to be sexy but not sexist and offensive, and is the new stereotype generally liked better than that of a passive dumb sex object? In the context of 'raunch culture', has there been a shift in which women have become similar to men in their attitudes more generally towards sexual appeals in advertising?

The current study utilizes different types of sexual appeals in three televised advertisements for alcohol brands and investigates the relationship between attitude to the ad, PI intention and stated reasons for (dis)liking specific advertisements, including type of sexual imagery (see **Table 1**). Television advertisements were chosen because the dynamic nature of the medium allows for humorous theme development. All three advertisements in this study attempt to use humour; this is important because humour is one type of sexual appeal used by advertisers (van Zenton, 2005) and sexist humour may mask the recognition if not the reality of prejudice (LaFrance and Woodzicka, 1997).

In Australia, it is legal for a person to drink at the age of 18, and therefore the university students in this study were expected to be

Table 1. Advertisements used in the Study

Ad	Product	Description
1	Reduced-alcohol beer	The advertisement commences with a beautiful woman (with long brown hair) in a revealing swimsuit walking beside a pool, accompanied by seductive music. She sits down in a bean-bag beside the pool and relaxes in the sun. A young man then appears on the balcony above and jumps off the balcony onto her bean-bag, accidentally sending the woman flying into the pool. As she splutters up to the surface of the water, she gives him an annoyed look, to which he responds 'what'? The tagline of the advertisement is '...some drink it because they're responsible, others just like the taste'.
2	Cream-based chocolate liqueur (primarily consumed by women)	The advertisement shows an attractive woman (with short blonde hair) in a bar with a group of male friends, playing pool. She appears to be an accomplished pool player. All characters are fully clothed, and the woman is wearing non-revealing clothing with long sleeves. She puts her drink on the bar while she plays her turn and returns to find that her glass is empty (obviously consumed by one of the young men). She then lines the young men up along the bar and kisses each one on the mouth in turn to determine which of them drank her drink; she smiles and laughs after she kisses the last one.
3	Full-strength beer	This advertisement is the second in a series; the first advertisement showed a group of men on a fishing trip – the boat is not seaworthy, but is well stocked with beer, and remains on the sand at the edge of the beach. In this advertisement, a young couple walk past and the man asks if they can come aboard. The camera pans to the woman's large breasts, in a small bikini top, and one of the fishermen says: 'It's not really allowed but I suppose we can make a couple of exceptions'. When they try to introduce themselves to the couple, the man says: 'she doesn't speak any English'. The woman (a brunette with long hair) is silent throughout, smiling but appearing not to understand. The youngest of the fishermen says to his friend 'why is he going out with her if she doesn't speak any English' – his friend laughs at him and pushes him 'overboard'.

familiar with drinking alcohol. The present study deliberately included an advertisement for a cream based liqueur that is popular among females; according to the 2004–05 National Health Survey, the most popular drinks for 18–24 year old male heavy drinkers were full-strength beer (42%) and spirits/liqueurs (37%) and the most popular for females were spirits/liqueurs (37%) and wine (19%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

This study was designed to examine responses to a range of sexual appeals in alcohol advertisements, not merely those pre-categorized as 'sexist' or necessarily related to nudity. Importantly, one advertisement was included because it can be interpreted as presenting suggestive sexual behaviour in which the woman is an active character who is the initiator of the behaviour, and another because it presents a woman as a passive, non-speaking character. However, it was not

assumed that participants would interpret these advertisements in any particular way.

Method

Participants

The participants were 268 undergraduate college students taking a first-year introductory marketing course. The mean age of the participants was 20.3 years (SD = 3.7). Sixty percent of the participants were female, and 66% were born in Australia (those that were not came from predominantly Asian countries and a small number were from the US).

Stimuli

The three advertisements (Table 1) were regularly aired on evening television during the study period (note that, in Australia,

alcohol advertisements can only be televised after 8.00 pm and during sporting events). Male and female characters in all of the advertisements were of Caucasian appearance and aged in their 20s or 30s.

Study design

The study used both quantitative and qualitative survey questions that allowed for anonymous responses. The open-ended questions were included to ascertain that the reasons for stated responses were in fact largely to do with the stereotypes included rather than other aspects of the advertisement.

Participants were shown, in a classroom setting, each of the three advertisements (in the order in which they are numbered above) on a projection screen. They were asked, for each advertisement, to rate their liking for the advertisement (How much do you like or dislike this ad?) on an 11-point scale, from -5 (absolutely hate it) to $+5$ (absolutely love it). The PI question was 'Did this advertisement make you more or less likely to buy this brand of alcohol?' and the response options were: 'more likely', 'less likely', 'neither', 'don't drink this type of alcohol', and 'don't drink alcohol'. They were also asked, for each advertisement, 'What, if anything, do you like about this ad?' and 'What, if anything, do you dislike about this ad?' Finally, respondents completed some demographic questions.

To address possible social desirability bias (Phillips and Clancy, 1972), the study was introduced to participants as a study of alcohol advertising, and a prize was offered (movie tickets) to the student in each group who could come closest to stating the actual

research question (with responses recorded separately to the questionnaire).

Analysis

The open-ended responses were analysed by a research assistant, blind to the purpose of the study, using the software package NVIVO. This tool allows users to analyse emergent patterns and themes in complex text data, and abstract these into relevant categories suggested by the data. As a check, the data were also manually coded (cut and pasted into word documents) by a second research assistant who came up with their own themes. As the latter process identified the same major themes, the presentation of the results focuses on the NVIVO analysis.

Results

Attitude towards the advertisements

The mean advertisement-liking scores for the advertisements are shown in **Table 2**. As can be seen from the table, the mean scores for two of the three advertisements were not far from the neutral point on the scale (mildly favourable) while the mean score for Advertisement 1 was very favourable ($+3.27$). All advertisements were rated significantly more favourably by male respondents than female respondents (see Table 2); however, Advertisement 1 was still rated most favourably by both sexes.

Purchase intention

Of the 161 male and 107 female respondents, 30 (10 males and 20 females) reported that

Table 2. Advertisement liking (overall and by sex)

Ad	All respondents M (SD)	Male	Female	t	P
Ad 1	3.27 (1.58)	3.71 (1.20)	2.96 (1.74)	-3.88	.000
Ad 2	0.57 (2.06)	1.09 (1.81)	0.19 (2.15)	-3.57	.000
Ad 3	0.74 (2.31)	1.23 (2.43)	0.41 (2.19)	-2.82	.005

they do not drink alcohol, and thus were excluded from any analyses of PI. Further, 68 respondents (8 males and 60 females) reported that they do not drink light beer, 19 respondents (12 males and 7 females) reported that they do not drink liqueur and 64 respondents (12 males and 51 females) reported that they do not drink full-strength beer. These participants were respectively excluded from the following individual comparisons.

Table 3 shows the proportions of the remaining respondents who were more or less likely to purchase the brand (by sex). Advertisement 1 was clearly the most successful, with 37% of respondents reporting increased PI. Advertisement 3 (full-strength beer) was the only advertisement for which there were more overall viewers who reported decreased than increased PI (25 vs. 16%) although this partly reflected the high number of female respondents reporting decreased PI. For all advertisements, males were more likely than females to report increased PI.

Qualitative analysis – why did they (dis)like the advertisements?

The qualitative analysis resulted in a taxonomy of like/dislike reasons:

1. Humour;
2. Sexist/demeaning (contains sexist/demeaning comments or behaviour);
3. Sexual/sensual (contains sexual/sensual overtones);
4. Feminist empowerment (plays up empowerment of women);

5. Other Stereotypes (depicts the image of Australian cultural and male stereotypes – note that this category was distinct from that referring to sexist or sexual stereotypes);
6. Product promotion and
7. Advertisement structure (this category was mentioned by very few participants – the music/soundtrack for Advertisements 1 and 2 and the swimming pool, pool table and the beach/tropical/island setting were each mentioned in relation to liking each advertisement).

Advertisement 1

Overwhelmingly, the most common reason given for liking the advertisement – explicitly stated by 194 respondents – was the use of humour. Although the majority of respondents just stated that the advertisement was ‘funny’, ‘damn funny’ or ‘humorous’, many of the respondents expanded on why they found it so amusing:

‘It is funny - nearly cried with laughter when I saw it for the first time. I would do the same thing as the guy in the ad’ (male, age 29)

‘I like the fact how it can be sexy and funny, it appeals in two ways...Funny - ads we remember, and retold to friends’ (male, age 18)

‘The girl is all proper, relaxed, the guy sees the beer and jumps, it’s hilarious’ (female, age 18)

Table 3. Proportions reporting increased and decreased purchase intention (by sex)

Ad (Remaining respondents)		Ad 1 (N = 169)	Ad 2 (N = 214)	Ad 3 (N = 173)
Males	Increase PI	43%	25%	23%
	Decrease PI	4%	18%	19%
	No effect	53%	57%	58%
Females	Increase PI	31%	21%	8%
	Decrease PI	8%	8%	31%
	No effect	61%	71%	61%

A key component of the humorous effect was the unexpected twist – it starts out appearing like a typical alcohol advertisement with beautiful women in a sophisticated setting and then introduces an element of slapstick:

'The ending was a funny surprise, attention grabber' (male, age 20)

'I like how the viewer is led to believe that the advertisement is based on sensual feelings, but there was a sharp twist and a quick change of mood which grabbed my attention and made me laugh' (female, age 18)

The presence of a sexual appeal in the advertisement was identified by a sizable proportion of respondents (predominantly male) as a reason for liking the advertisement. The majority of these comments were single-word descriptors such as 'sexy', or referred to the appearance or attire of the models:

'Plenty of flesh shown' (male, age 18)

'Hot chicks' (male, age 19; female, age 20; male, age 26)

Two of these respondents explicitly stated that the sexual appeal was a marketing ploy:

'The advertisement is using sexy women to attract customer' (male, age 23)

'Using sex appeal to get people's attention to advertise product' (female, age 20)

The third most common theme identified in reasons for liking this advertisement was the positive use of other stereotypes, particularly the perception that the male character in the advertisement represented the stereotypical Australian male:

'Has an Australian element to it when the man jumps on the couch – larrikin' (female, age 20)

'The depiction of the 'typical' male attitude towards a relationship' (female, age 19)

Three themes were identified in the reasons given for disliking Advertisement 1: sexist/demeaning content, sexual/sensual content used for selling and product promotion. These were only mentioned by a small number of respondents, which is not surprising given the very small proportion that did not like the advertisement. The majority of those who referred to the advertisement as sexist prefaced the word with a qualifier: 'possibly sexist' (male, age 22), 'can be seen as being sexist' (female, age 19), although some clearly felt that it was demeaning to women:

'Was degrading to women, made them look snooty and slutty' (female, age 21)

'Makes the woman look silly, inferior, as if she can't take a joke' (female, age 18)

Comments categorized as sexual/sensual tended to refer to the advertisement as typical of the general approach to alcohol advertising, in the use of sex to sell products.

'Why [do] beer ads always have to appeal to the lowest common denominator with girls scantily clad' (female, age 20)

'I didn't think it was too creative – the use of women to promote sex appeal is pretty much the norm' (female, age 19)

There were also a number of respondents – predominantly female – who objected to the physical characteristics or attire of the woman in the ad:

'That the girl is too damn skinny, tanned and beautiful' (female, age 18)

'Hate the woman's swimming costume' (male, age 44)

A small group of respondents commented that the advertisement did not really promote

the product, or that the audience may not remember what the brand was:

'Message/product took too long to be advertised' (male, age 19)

'I don't think I would remember whose advertisement it was (the brand) because I was paying more attention to what was going on' (female, age 20)

Advertisement 2

Feminist empowerment was the most commonly identified theme in reasons given for liking Advertisement 2. Respondents liked the perceived empowerment of the main female character, and particularly the fact that she appeared to be more powerful than the male characters:

'It shows a woman in control who can play pool and celebrates doing something risqué' (female, age 19)

'The female is depicted as the powerful character which is a very modern thing' (female, age 19)

The second most common theme was the sensual nature of the imagery:

'If only it would happen to me! It's very seductive' (male, age 26)

'It's sexy and playful' (male, age 19)

Several of respondents specifically referred to the combination of sex and humour as adding to the advertisement appeal. There were also a number of comments in relation to the attractiveness of the characters:

'Chick was hot' (male, age 22)

'The girl and all the guys are attractive' (female, age 20)

A relatively small proportion of respondents mentioned the use of humour in the advertisement, describing it as 'funny' or 'humorous', and those who expanded on this response referred to the unexpected or unlikely nature of the woman's actions:

'It's humorous in a way by the fact of what the female does to find out who drank her drink' (male, age 18)

'The humour - unbelievability of someone doing that' (female, age 18)

This advertisement was the only one of the three where product promotion was a significant theme in reasons for liking the advertisement. Respondents commented favourably on the advertisement's emphasis on the product and presentation of the product as appealing:

'Promotion for Baileys - makes the drink look like a mature person's beverage' (male, age 17)

'I like the chilled Baileys in the glass as it engaged the senses' (female, age 18)

Three themes were identified in the reasons given by respondents for disliking Advertisement 2: sexual/sensual imagery, sexist/degrading content and humour. A sizable proportion of respondents, predominantly females, commented negatively on the overt nature of the sexual imagery in the ad:

'Oversexed. Unnecessary. Sleazy' (female, age 19)

'Sexual imagery a bit too overt' (female, age 18)

'It seems like everyone is sexual - is that necessary?' (female, age 19)

A similar proportion of respondents reported that they felt the advertisement was sexist, or degraded women by making the

female character act in an apparently promiscuous fashion:

'Portrays women as promiscuous; degrading for women' (female, age 19)

'It brought the girl down by making her kiss all the guys' (female, age 21)

A number of respondents specifically described the female character as a 'tart' or a 'skank' (that is, sexually promiscuous). One respondent expressed the view that the overt use of sex as a source of power had a negative connotation for feminism:

'The sexual element is very marked. Women can be powerful without being overly sexual' (female, age 19)

A small number of respondents stated that they didn't like the advertisement because it wasn't funny, or because they saw the attempt at humour as 'corny' or 'lame'.

Advertisement 3

As with Advertisement 1, the most commonly identified reason for liking Advertisement 3 - explicitly stated by 112 respondents - was the use of humour. Again, the majority of respondents just stated that the advertisement was 'funny' or 'humorous'. Those that explicitly stated the reason they found the advertisement amusing referred either to the punch line or to the slapstick nature of the men's actions:

'The guy's comment on why he's going out with her - it's stupid but funny' (male, age 21)

'The slap-stickle (sic) comedy when the man pushes the other man off the boat' (female, age 18)

Again similar to Advertisement 1, one of the main themes apparent in reasons for liking Advertisement 3 was the use of Australian male stereotypes:

'General Aussie-bloke tomfoolery' (male, age 19)

'The concept of the fishing boat and weekend away, very Aussie' (female, age 20)

Interestingly, several respondents - both male and female - commented favourably on the portrayal of the male character as a typical dumb male. Two males liked Advertisement 3 because it was 'about beer'.

A number of respondents (all male) referred to the sexual attractiveness of the female character, and particularly to the focus on her breast and cleavage:

'The chick, she was hot' (male, age 19)

'The chick showing her cleavage' (male, age 19)

Four themes were identified in the reasons given by respondents for disliking Advertisement 3: sexist/demeaning content, humour, sexual/sensual content and other stereotypes. Overwhelmingly, the most common theme in respondents' reasons for disliking the advertisement related to it being perceived as sexist - with 76 respondents giving reasons in this category, including 36 respondents specifically using the words 'sexist', 'demeaning' or 'degrading'. Many other respondents expressed the same view using related terminology:

'It plays only on the woman's sex appeal and insinuates that she is less intelligent than the rest' (female, age 18)

'The portrayal that girls shouldn't speak me' (female, age 20)

'Women are being objectified to sell a product aimed at men' (female, age 19)

Another common response was that the attempt at humour was ineffective, boring and not funny:

'The humour was pretty bad' (male, age 21)

'The pun about the girl is lame - the advertisement is about beer' (female, age 18)

Only a small group of respondents commented on the sexual/sensual content, identifying the focus on the woman's breasts as inappropriate. However, as discussed above, the objection appeared mainly to be to the overall portrayal of the woman. A small number of respondents expressed the view that the advertisement overdid the 'Aussie male' stereotype, and two commented that they felt the advertisement was racist, presumably referring to the fact that the woman couldn't speak English and was the focus of laughter.

Discussion

The qualitative data indicated that in regard to sexual appeals, participants generally interpreted the advertisements to portray: Advertisement 1 - strong humour that was not generally seen to be sexist using an attractive sexy woman; Advertisement 2 - humour showing an overtly seductive, sexy woman who could be either (a) powerful and in control or (b) promiscuous in a degrading manner; and Advertisement 3 - humour showing a woman in a sexist/demeaning/degrading/objectifying manner. The interpretations validate that a range of sexual appeals and stereotypes were present in the research stimuli, particularly with regard to including the new stereotype in which the woman is strong and active while provocative and desiring, and including a traditional passive sex-object stereotype. While there is a range of variables on which the advertisements differ, the qualitative data suggest that the nature of sexual imagery is one key aspect - alongside humour - driving attitudes towards the advertisements.

In all of the three advertisements shown in this study, males clearly liked the advertise-

ments significantly more than females did (in line with most previous research). While two of the advertisements were for beer (and may have thus been liked by males for the product itself, which is typically a male drink), this importantly remained the case even for the liqueur advertisement (Advertisement 2) that advertised a traditionally female alcoholic drink. This indicates that the trend towards women embracing 'raunch' has not translated into our female participants liking alcohol advertisements containing sex appeals as much as males do, even with the powerful/promiscuous stereotype included. That the mean scores for females were positive even slightly could be interpreted as women 'liking' alcohol advertisements generally, as in the study by Polonsky and colleagues (2001), however we believe the important issue is that they are liked less by women compared to men, and the large difference in scores between Advertisement 1 and the other two underline how much less overt sexuality is liked, regardless of stereotype.

The advertisement which was overwhelmingly popular with both males and females was Advertisement 1 (sexy/non-offensive). Advertisement 1 did clearly make use of a sexual appeal, portraying a sexually attractive woman (including the use of camera focus, camera angle and background music); supporting this, the respondents did use words such as 'beautiful', 'sexy', 'sensual' and 'sex appeal' in reference to the advertisement. However, the advertisement was less sexually overt with regard to behaviour or innuendo. It is important to note that the woman in this advertisement had more of her body exposed than the woman in Advertisement 3 (sexist/objectifying) - this is consistent with the study that found that it was sexism rather than nudity that offends women (Waller, 1999). Responses to Advertisement 1 suggest that the mere presence of a sexually attractive female stereotype does not provoke dislike of an advertisement among women.

The first advertisement was not perceived to be sexist, even though one could argue that the

man was disrespecting the woman by knocking her into the pool. It was viewed as particularly funny by our sample; this is because it was seen to send up the attractive female appeal at the same time as showing a cheeky, irreverent 'larrikin' male stereotype, which is a key aspect of Australian culture and humour. If any women did feel envious or threatened by the attractiveness of the girl in the advertisement (suggested by the comment '*the girl is too damn skinny, tanned and beautiful*'), they may also have found it funny that she and her image were drenched. The larrikin male stereotype, along with the 'dumb male' stereotype (identified by participants) and the Australian cultural stereotype of males 'hanging out together having a beer' in Advertisement 3, highlights the fact that advertising stereotypes are not restricted to women, although these were not of a sexual nature.

A key finding of this study is that Advertisement 2 (powerful/promiscuous) was the least liked by women, despite the advertisement being for a product primarily drunk by women. The result is surprising and has important implications for the advertising industry as this stereotype has been promoted as a way of reaching young women. If it is indeed the sexual stereotype that is driving attitudes towards the advertisement, this challenges the assumption that using this stereotype is an effective way to make use of overt female sexuality in advertising while avoiding complaints of 'sexism'. Despite the rise of 'raunch culture', it appears that not all women have embraced the stereotype (which one participant explicitly referred to as a 'modern thing') as a sign of equality like the advertising industry would have us believe. Over 70% of women stated that this advertisement had no effect on their PIs; however, it was still interesting that this advertisement was actually successful in causing more women to increase than decrease their PI. This is in stark contrast to Advertisement 3 for full-strength beer, a product primarily consumed by males, and further research is needed to examine reasons for this finding.

The qualitative responses also confirmed that, similar to Lass and Hart (2004), there were some women who reacted favourably because the women appeared to be in control, and there were others who disliked the overt sexuality and thought it was degrading in its portrayal of women as promiscuous. That male participants evaluated the advertisement containing this stereotype more highly than females did supports the view that this stereotype exists for a male gaze, and it could be seen to portray a male fantasy (supported by male comments like 'if only it would happen to me'! It's very seductive). However, it is interesting to consider whether a double standard exists in that, had the advertisement portrayed a male character kissing several women instead, would women see the advertisement as showing a degrading portrayal of the male, and would he be seen as promiscuous?

It could be argued that the female response to Advertisement 2 (and 3) supports the notion that women are offended by all overt female sexuality in advertising, regardless of the nature of that sexuality and stereotype. It is difficult to disentangle the question of whether it is sex or sexism that offends, as identifying an image that is clearly sexual but in which everyone agrees the woman is not portraying a degrading patriarchal stereotype is nearly impossible - firstly because some people argue that all sex in advertising is sexist, and secondly because such advertising images are rare if used at all. Advertisement 1 was liked, but while it was considered sexy, it was not overtly sexual enough to answer this question. We suggest that an advertisement that portrays a woman sexually but with connotations of love and romance would be better received by women, consistent with Rossiter and Jones' (2003) research on perfume advertising.

The male ratings of Advertisement 3 (sexist/objectifying) were interesting: while males on average liked this advertisement more than females, a substantial number of males reported decreased PI - even if a larger number reported an increase. This suggests that using this stereotype is only going to

appeal to a portion of the male market and may risk alienating the rest. The main reason given for liking this advertisement was the humour; and in this case a key part of the humour was sexual innuendo that involved a degrading sex object stereotype (as described by many of the respondents as a reason for disliking the ad). Van Zenton (2005) warned that humorous appeals in general can be an effective but risky approach for marketers, because they provoke idiosyncratic responses from viewers, and this appeared to be the case for this advertisement. La France and Woodzicka (1997) stated that jokes can be construed as a vehicle for the transmission of prejudice and that women experience a number of negative effects from humour they regard as sexist – women in their research reported feeling angry, hostile and disgusted. We have learnt in this study that both males and females appear to prefer advertisements containing humour that they do not associate with sexism.

Advertisements that use the demeaning/sex object stereotype obviously do affect PIs negatively for women (although they are not the target audience so this may be of little consequence for advertisers), but they also can negatively affect PIs among a substantial portion of males. Clearly the most successful advertisement in terms of PI intention, for both males and females, was Advertisement 1, which did not make use of overt sexuality, so one might ask why is overt sexuality so pervasive in alcohol advertising? Is it merely easier than creating other scenarios? Another possibility is that differences between PIs and actual behaviour may be larger for alcohol than other products, given its disinhibiting nature; attitudes about the appropriateness of certain sexual themes while sober may be altered when a consumer is under the influence of alcohol (Abbey *et al.*, 2003) and importantly likely to be buying the product in a pub or club.

Societal implications

As a society we must consider the impact of seeing sexually attractive females continuously

in the advertising landscape, even if they are liked by women, as in Advertisement 1. MacKay and Covell (1997) reported that seeing advertisements with sexual images reduced support for gender equality among *both* men and women; future research could examine the effects of different stereotypes. In the case of alcohol, criticisms of sexual appeals are inflamed due to concerns that these images imply that certain irresponsible sexual behaviour (or behaviour towards women) is appropriate in the context of drinking. This concern is unfortunately supported by strong evidence of associations between alcohol consumption and unsafe sexual behaviour (Coleman and Cater, 2005; LaBrie *et al.*, 2005). The effect of multiple images on youth who are developing their sense of self and 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.

Limitations and future research suggestions

The most important limitation is the number of possible confounding variables; the advertisements differ from one another on many elements other than sexual stereotype, such as the 'dumb male' stereotype and executional elements of the ad (e.g. the appearance of the specific models, music). The qualitative comments do not separate which elements and stereotypes are driving responses, but they do clearly suggest that sexual imagery is a key aspect. It is a limitation that we considered a sample of only three television advertisements; future research could employ multiple exemplars of advertisements for each of the sexual stereotypes and appeals. However, these advertisements are fairly representative of the types of advertisements to which young Australians are exposed – and all were aired repeatedly over an extended period of time (in fact, Advertisements 1 and 2 were still being broadcast more than 12 months after the data were collected).

Respondents may have had a purchase history with the products; future research could address the possibility of product/brand confounding by manipulating the style of sexual appeal within one fake brand. Alternatively, prior brand/advertisement familiarity and prior PI intention could be measured and co-varied out of effects on advertisement responses. A strength of the present study is that there was some control for the possible confounding effects of prior behaviour and PIs by (a) wording the PI question to directly ascertain the effect of the advertisement on *changing prior PI*; and (b) excluding from the analysis respondents who did not drink alcohol or did not drink the type of alcohol advertised.

Future research could incorporate explicit ratings of level of sexiness and level of sexism (which would enable a better understanding of how many women regard the new powerful/promiscuous stereotype as sexist). These were not included in this study because we did not want participants alerted to the research purpose. The manipulation check, in which none of the students suggested that this was a study of attitudes to sex (or sexism) in advertising, implied that participants were not claiming to be offended by aspects of the advertisements because it is considered as a socially desirable response.

An important limitation is that Advertisement 2 may not portray the new sexual stereotype adequately: the woman was not dressed in a sexually explicit manner on one hand, and on the other, she was shown kissing more than one man, which may have led to exaggerated promiscuity comments and dislike compared with other advertisements using this stereotype. In the present study, the order of the advertisements was not counterbalanced across sessions, and advertisement liking and PI were asked via single item measures only. Future research could obtain responses in very small groups, or individually, to stop the possibility of 'talking' about reactions.

It is also possible that university students do not constitute a representative sample of

young Australians, however, Pollay and Lysonski state that, 'their general attitudes towards advertising are not much different from those of the population at large' (Pollay and Lysonski, 1993, p. 38). The participants were marketing students, who may be trained to look at advertisements more analytically than the typical consumer; a broader cross-section of the community should be included in future research. More importantly, one third of our sample was not from Australia. As cultural differences in responses to sexual appeals do exist (Lass and Hart, 2004) the possibility that this may affect results cannot be dismissed. However, Australian society is uniquely multicultural and many residents have a non-English speaking background - so the attitudes of our sample may not differ so widely from the general population.

This study focused only on alcohol advertisements because the reliance of female sexual appeals in this product category means that consumers are used to this product being associated with female sexual images in advertising, and because comparisons between advertisement style can be better made without the confounding issue of product congruence. It is possible that women would have different reactions to the new female stereotype if it were presented in a lingerie or make-up context - although there is no reason that the liqueur in Advertisement 2 would be viewed as not relevant to females. We included a range of alcohol products specifically in order to avoid picking one that was marketed predominantly to males or females. Future research could either incorporate other products such as perfume or hold the alcohol brand and product constant while varying sexual stereotype. The advertisements were projected on a large classroom screen in a somewhat artificial 'forced' exposure manner - possibly inflating the amount of reflection or impact of advertisements. In real-world exposure, the advertisements are typically embedded within TV program material within a distracting environment; future research could incorporate a more naturalistic context.

Conclusions

The key contribution of this study to the literature was that it explicitly examined different female sexual stereotypes. Surprisingly, an advertisement using the new active powerful/promiscuous stereotype was actually liked *less* on average by females than an advertisement using the traditional passive demeaning/sex object stereotype, challenging the assumption that this is an effective way to reach females while avoiding dislike of sexism. Participants were divided as to whether the new stereotypical female character was 'sexually powerful' or degraded because she was a 'slut'. Females still liked all alcohol advertisements significantly less than males, showing that the 'raunch culture' phenomenon has not changed this trend. The most popular advertisement for both sexes (and that which increased PI the most) contained the least amount of sexual suggestiveness, suggesting that the use of overt sexual appeals in alcohol advertising is unnecessary.

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 advertisements (Pollay and Lysonski, 1993). 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 attempting to explain the reason for the apparent increase in stereotypical gender role portrayals in Australian advertising, Milner and Higgs (2004) suggest that the results may be explained by changes in the regulatory environment. They point out that when data were collected in 1985 for the only one of the three Australian studies which found minimal gender stereotypes (Gilly, 1988), television advertising was regulated by the Federal government. Subsequent studies which found an abundance of sexual stereotypes were conducted in 1989 when Australia was trialing industry self-regulation (Mazzella *et al.*, 1992); and in 2002 when industry self-

regulation was fully in force (Milner and Higgs, 2004).

However, there is increasing public scrutiny of alcohol advertising - and particularly advertisements which present an association between alcohol consumption and sexual activity. In summary, there are two important cautions for the alcohol industry (and, by broader implication, the advertising industry), as well as for policy makers. First, advertisers and policy makers need to be aware that a substantial proportion of consumers are offended by such portrayals; the fact that these concerns are not evident in complaint data suggests that the self-regulatory system is ineffective in identifying and responding to the concerns of the general public. Second, given the current debate over the regulation of alcohol advertising and increasing concerns from consumers and advocates about the ineffectiveness of this system, the fact that advertisers continue to utilize advertising messages that offend a proportion of the general public suggests that policy makers need to consider the introduction of an independent and enforceable regulatory framework.

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