
Are negative reactions to sexist appeals in alcohol advertisements a function of feminism or gender?

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Abstract

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the use of sexual appeals in alcohol advertising is increasing. It has been shown that the use of sex appeals may result in a more negative attitude towards the brand, particularly among female consumers. This study investigates the proposition that this is the effect of feminist ideology rather than, or in addition to, biological gender. The results show that female respondents have more negative attitudes towards alcohol advertisements utilizing overt (or demeaning) sexual appeals than males and more positive attitudes towards alcohol advertisements utilizing feminist (empowering) appeals than males; and that there is no consistent independent effect of self-reported feminism.

INTRODUCTION

Sex in advertising

Studies in the 1980s found that sexual images in advertising had become more overt over time (Soley & Kurzbard 1986), and that models were wearing more suggestive clothing (Soley & Reid 1988). This trend continued into the 1990s and beyond, with eroticism and nudity in magazine advertising becoming more prevalent and increasingly blatant (see, for example, Reichert et al. 1999). Eroticism and nudity have increased for both male and female models (Kolbe & Albanese 1996). A recent study of U.S. primetime television commercials (Lin 1998) found that 12% of models were partially-dressed or nude and that three-quarters of “sex-object” appeals used female models.

Reichert et al. (1999) compared magazine ads from 1983 and 1993, and found that in 1993 both female and male models were more likely to be dressed in a sexually explicit manner. Nevertheless, in both 1983 and 1993, female models were three times as likely as male models to be dressed in a sexually explicit manner – with 40% of female models in 1993 dressed provocatively. They also found that ads in 1993 were far more likely to display “intimate” or “very intimate” physical contact between male and female models (53% of ads containing a female and a male model, compared to 21% in 1982), and that this type of ad appeared largely in gendered (i.e., men’s or women’s) magazines rather than general interest magazines.

Gender differences in responses to sex appeals

It has been shown that the use of sex appeals may result in a more negative attitude towards the brand (Simpson, Horton, & Brown 1996) and lower purchase intention (LaTour & Henthorne 1994) than non-sex appeals.

However, there appear to be gender differences in response to sex appeals. One study that included male and female respondents (LaTour et al. 1990) found that males reported a more positive response to ads with nude models and females a more negative response, which, as the investigators pointed out, would result in little net effect if the target audience contained equal numbers of males and females.

Sex appeals in alcohol advertising

Anecdotal evidence suggest that the use of sexual appeals in alcohol advertising is increasing, in Australia and many other countries, although there are no empirical studies of the proportion of alcohol ads which use sex appeals. A U.S. study found that beer and malt liquor advertisements were often connected with sex and power (Moore et al. 1988). Given that these two products are predominantly marketed to men, such appeals are consistent with this hypothesised biological and social conditioning.

In Australia, section 2.3 of the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) Code of Ethics specifies that advertisements shall “treat sex, sexuality and nudity with sensitivity to the relevant audience and, where appropriate, the relevant program time zone.” Of the 419 complaints lodged with the Advertising Standards Board (ASB) between 1999 and 2001 under this section, only three (0.7%) were upheld (ASB 1999a; 1999b; 2000a; 2000b; 2001a; 2001b). Of the 33 complaints about alcohol advertisements lodged during this period, 14 (42%) were under section 2.3 – none of these were upheld.

Attitudes to sex in alcohol advertising

An extensive search of the literature on advertising appeals failed to identify any studies specifically relating to reactions to the use of sexual appeals in alcohol advertisements, although there are several experimental studies on the impact of sexual appeals in women’s fragrance advertisements (e.g., Rossiter & Jones 2003).

A recently-published Australian study (Polonsky et al. 2001) 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 ads for beer than ‘non-feminist’ women. The study concluded that, while the women felt that the ads portrayed women in a “less than flattering” manner, this did not have a negative impact on purchase intentions. Further, they found that the women did not wish the ads to be modified in order to target female consumers. However, this study left a number of unanswered questions relating to: the inclusion of only female participants; the use of only beer advertisements which, as reported, women saw as targeted only at men; the use of the BSRI, which measures gender role identity, as a proxy measure of feminism; and the use of ads which were sexist in their implied attitudes towards women rather than their portrayal of women and which were fairly mild compared to many current campaigns.

This study was designed to investigate the independent, and interactive, effects of biological gender and feminism on both purchase intentions and ad liking for alcohol products that use visuals portraying women in an overtly sexual (demeaning) fashion as opposed to empowering or neutral portrayals.

HYPOTHESES

As discussed above, there appear to be gender differences in response to sex appeals. It is argued, therefore, that women will find overtly sexual (demeaning) portrayals of women more offensive than will men, thus:

- H1 females will have more negative attitudes to overtly sexual alcohol advertisements than will males

Similarly, if we accept the argument that men and women are subconsciously programmed as discussed above, it is likely that men will react negatively towards advertisements which present women as powerful, independent entities (particularly where the appeal may be taken to imply that men are not necessary for a women to be happy and successful). Thus:

- H2 females will have more positive attitudes to feminist (empowering) alcohol advertisements than will males

Given the rationale behind H1 and H2, advertisements which present women neither as subservient (sexual objects) nor as dominant (empowered) should not specifically appeal to, or against, gender-specific conditioning. Thus:

- H3 females and males will not differ in their attitudes toward neutral alcohol advertisements

Feminism is defined by the Oxford dictionary as “advocacy of women’s rights and sexual equality.” This is a distinctly different construct to gender role identification; it is an ideological perspective, as opposed to a self-identity. Feminists, by definition, should have more negative evaluations of messages which portray women in a demeaning fashion (independent of biological gender). Thus:

- H4 participants who are higher on feminism, regardless of biological gender, will have more negative attitudes to overtly sexual alcohol advertisements than will participants who are lower on political feminism
- H5 participants who are higher on feminism, regardless of biological gender, will have more positive attitudes to feminist alcohol advertisements than will participants who are lower on political feminism
- H6 high-feminism and low-feminism respondents will not differ in their attitudes toward neutral alcohol advertisements

METHOD

Participants

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). 59% of the participants were female, and 74% were born in Australia.

Measures

Feminism was measured using 10 items from the Attitudes toward Women Scale (Spence & Helmreich 1978). This scale was designed to “assess attitudes towards the rights, roles, and privileges women ought to have (Bailey et al. 1992; p.315); and includes items such as “women should assume their rightful place in business and all the professions along with men” and “a woman should be as free as a man to propose marriage.” Respondents answered each item on a 4-point Likert scale (“agree strongly,” “agree mildly,” “disagree mildly,” or “disagree strongly”), and responses were then converted to a 0 – 4 scale.

Stimuli

The stimuli were 9 print advertisements for alcohol brands. The ads were selected from a group of thirty-five magazine advertisements 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 left a group of 16 suitable advertisements which were pretested with a separate group of 10 males and females to classify them as either ‘sexist’, ‘empowering’, or ‘neutral’.

The sexist ads:

Ad 3 – 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".

Ad 5 – 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".

Ad 8 – 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."

The empowering ads:

Ad 2 – 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?"

Ad 4 – 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."

Ad 7 – 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?"

The neutral ads:

Ad 1 – 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."

Ad 6 – 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."

Ad 9 – 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]."

Study design

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 for the ad (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); and their purchase intention (How likely is it that you will buy this brand next time you buy alcohol?) on a 10-point scale, from 0% (definitely won't) to 100% (definitely will). They then completed an unrelated task (a questionnaire on health status and health behaviour). Finally, they completed the above-described measures of gender role identification and feminism.

RESULTS

Attitude toward the ads

The mean ad liking scores for the ads are shown in Table 1. As can be seen from the table, the mean scores for all of the ads were not far from the neutral point on the scale, with eight of the nine mildly favourable.

Table 1: Mean ad liking scores (all respondents combined)

	Mean	SD
ad 1 (neutral)	-.07	2.02
ad 2 (empowering)	.86	1.95
ad 3 (sexist)	1.38	2.41
ad 4 (empowering)	1.08	1.20
ad 5 (sexist)	.62	2.83
ad 6 (neutral)	.97	2.48
ad 7 (empowering)	.84	2.41
ad 8 (sexist)	.01	2.44
ad 9 (neutral)	.40	2.10

Attitude by Biological Gender

As shown in Table 2, female participants reported significantly lower levels of ad liking for all three of the sexist ads than did male respondents (H1 supported).

Table 2: Ad liking by gender (sexist ads)

	Male	Female	T	Sig
ad 3	2.10	0.89	-4.71	.000
ad 5	2.08	-0.39	-8.60	.000
ad 8	1.16	-.76	-7.58	.000

As shown in table 3, female participants reported significantly higher levels of ad liking for two of the three empowering ads than did male respondents, with the third being directionally consistent (H2 largely supported). 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 3: Ad liking by gender (empowering ads)

	Male	Female	T	Sig
ad 2	.43	1.15	3.14	.001
ad 4	.90	1.21	1.37	Ns
ad 7	-.57	1.8	9.76	.000

As shown in table 4, there were no differences in ad liking between males and females for two of the three neutral ads, with the third being preferred by females (H3 largely supported). Interestingly, Ad 6 (the one which was preferred by females) was the only ad in this category that pictured a woman without a man.

Table 4: Ad liking by gender (neutral ads)

	Male	Female	T	sig
ad 1	-.02	-.12	-.44	ns
ad 6	.64	1.22	2.05	.04
ad 9	.19	.55	1.49	ns

Attitude by Feminism Score

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). Respondents were then dichotomised into either low feminism (score at or below the mean, n = 131) or high feminism (score above the mean, n = 172).²

As shown in Table 5, high-feminism respondents reported: significantly lower levels of ad liking for all three of the sexist ads than did low-feminism respondents (H4 supported); 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 (H5 partly supported); and no differences in ad liking from low-feminism respondents for any of the three neutral ads (H6 supported).

However, when these results were analysed by gender, there was no independent effect of feminism on ad liking (i.e., all apparent ‘feminism’ differences were simply caused by biological gender differences).

Table 5: Ad liking by feminism (all ads)

	Low feminism	High feminism	T	Sig
ad 3 (sexist)	1.78	1.22	2.09	.04
ad 5 (sexist)	1.31	0.15	3.62	.000
ad 8 (sexist)	0.59	-0.45	3.72	.000
ad 2 (empowering)	0.76	0.99	-1.04	ns
ad 4 (empowering)	0.99	1.12	-5.38	ns
ad 7 (empowering)	0.41	1.20	-2.88	.004
ad 1 (neutral)	0.05	-0.05	0.43	ns
ad 6 (neutral)	0.92	1.03	-0.37	ns
ad 9 (neutral)	0.19	0.56	-1.50	ns

Purchase intention

The mean purchase intention scores for the ads are shown in Table 6. As can be seen from the table, the mean PI scores for the brands ranged from 16.6% (ad 3 – a blended whisky) to 31.7% (ad 7 – a sparkling wine).

Table 6: Mean purchase intention scores (all respondents combined)

	Mean	SD
ad 3 (sexist) – blended whisky	16.55	21.53
ad 5 (sexist) – scotch whisky	21.70	23.14
ad 4 (empowering) – sparkling wine	23.49	25.18
ad 9 (neutral) – liqueur	23.84	25.75
ad 8 (sexist) – liqueur	24.21	24.97
ad 6 (neutral) – liqueur	25.26	25.96
ad 1 (neutral) – wine	26.56	27.45
ad 2 (empowering) – wine	26.60	25.89
ad 7 (empowering) – sparkling wine	31.72	28.35

² 14 respondents could not be categorized as they did not complete all of the items on the feminism scale.

Purchase Intention by Biological Gender

As shown in Table 7, female respondents reported significantly higher purchase intentions than male respondents for six of the nine alcohol brands (four wines and two liqueurs), and males reported significantly higher purchase intentions for two (a scotch whisky and a liqueur).

Table 7: Mean purchase intention scores by gender

	Male	Female	t	sig
ad 3 (sexist) – blended whisky	25.27	23.54	-.600	ns
ad 5 (sexist) – scotch whisky	30.44	18.72	-3.981	.000
ad 8 (sexist) – liqueur	27.83	21.21	-2.183	.03
ad 2 (empowering) – wine	12.81	27.94	6.248	.000
ad 4 (empowering) – sparkling wine	16.82	33.57	6.189	.000
ad 7 (empowering) – sparkling wine	11.82	36.92	9.606	.000
ad 1 (neutral) – wine	12.81	19.19	2.593	.01
ad 6 (neutral) – liqueur	24.92	36.66	3.679	.000
ad 9 (neutral) – liqueur	21.47	28.01	2.200	.03

Purchase Intention by Feminism Score

High-feminism respondents reported significantly higher purchase intentions than low-feminism respondents for ad 4, sparkling wine (28.9 vs 22.8, $t = -2.03$, $p = .04$), and significantly lower purchase intentions for ad 5 (sexist), scotch whisky (19.7 vs 28.8, $t = 3.15$, $p = .002$). However, when these results were analysed by gender, there was no independent effect of feminism on purchase intention.

DISCUSSION

As hypothesized, we found that female respondents reported more negative attitudes towards alcohol advertisements utilizing overt (or demeaning) sexual appeals than did males; more positive attitudes towards alcohol advertisements utilizing feminist (empowering) appeals than did males; and did not differ from males in their evaluation of advertisements utilizing neutral appeals.

As hypothesized, we also found that female respondents reported higher purchase intention for brands utilizing feminist (empowering) appeals and lower purchase intention for brands utilizing overtly sexual appeals. The former finding may be confounded by the fact that these products, particularly the two sparkling wines, are more likely to be purchased by females regardless of advertising appeal (an argument supported by the fact that female respondents also reported higher purchase intentions for the three brands utilizing neutral appeals, which were also products predominantly consumed by women). However, the finding in relation to overtly sexual appeals is more conclusive – of the only two brands for which females reported significantly lower purchase intentions (both utilizing sexual appeals), one was for a scotch whisky (targeted at male consumers) but the other was for a brand of liqueur which is predominantly consumed by women, and it is evident from the wording in the ad that it is targeted towards women. This finding is consistent with previous research on the use of overtly sexual appeals in women's fragrance advertising, which also found reductions in purchase intentions (Rossiter & Jones 2003).

We found no consistent effect of feminism on ad liking independent of biological gender. However, these findings need to be interpreted with caution given the small differences between male and female respondents on this variable as measured.

There is a need to future studies to investigate the independent, or interactive, effects of sex role identification, feminism and gender; and to identify the reasons behind women's dislike of apparently sexist advertising.

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