

Beer, Boats And Breasts: Responses To A Controversial Alcohol Advertising Campaign

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Abstract

Over the last 30 years there has been a notable increase in the use of sexual appeals in advertising. In 2003, as with previous years, approximately 30% of all complaints to the Australian Advertising Standards Board related to portrayal of sex/sexuality/nudity and for the past four years this has been the most common issue prompting complaints. The stimulus for this study was a current television commercial for a full-strength beer which used an overt sexual/sexist appeal. The ad has been the subject of a large number of complaints to the ASB, which were rejected as the ASB deemed that the ad did not breach community standards. We found that the ad was particularly disliked by female respondents and was interpreted to be offensive to women. The results of this study suggest that the ASB may not be a good judge of 'prevailing community standards'.

Introduction

Sex in advertising

The trend first noted in the 1980s toward increasing portrayals of sexuality in advertising has continued into the 1990s and beyond, with eroticism and nudity in magazine advertising becoming more prevalent and increasingly blatant (Reichert et al., 1999). 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; and in both years, female models were three times as likely as males to be dressed this way, with 40% of female models in 1993 dressed provocatively.

Englis, Solomon and Ashmore (1994) emphasise that physical attractiveness is not a unidimensional construct and that perceivers distinguish multiple types of attractiveness. Solomon, Ashmore and Longo (1992) assembled a set of photographs of models employed by major U.S. fashion agencies and presented them to a sample of U.S. fashion magazine editors who were then instructed to sort the models into piles based on similarity of looks. The results yielded relatively distinct beauty types (Classic, Feminine, Sensual, Exotic, Cute, Girl-Next-Door, Sex Kitten, and Trendy), and the authors suggested that certain beauty types are more appropriately paired with specific advertised products than with others. Such subtle yet important distinctions between types of attractiveness may be used by advertisers to 'position' products with a particular target audience. Solomon et al. give the example that in alcohol advertising, a premium Scotch might fit with 'Classic beauty', while beer commercials rely heavily on association with the Sex Kitten type. Understanding what these looks 'mean' to target audiences and well as to other, non-target audiences, is critical to ad planning and execution (Englis et al., 1994).

Gender differences in responses to sex appeals: There appear to be gender differences in response to sex appeals. One study that included male and female respondents (LaTour, Pitts and Snook-Luther, 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.

Many authors have argued that differences in responsiveness to sexual appeals in advertising are due to underlying biological differences (see, e.g., Taflinger, 1996). Men are said to be biologically driven to be aroused by any female capable of becoming impregnated, despite being socially conditioned not to act on this arousal, and thus are more responsive to sexual appeals. On the other hand, women are said to be biologically driven to choose a genetically superior mate, and are socially conditioned to choose a financially and emotionally superior partner, and thus are more responsive to “romance” appeals, rather than sex appeals. Consistent with this view, the results of studies which find an absence of gender differences in attitude exist when “attractive” (but not “sexy”) models are used suggests that it is likely that “sexiness” (or provocation) is responsible for this effect (Jones, Stanaland and Gelb, 1998). Further, it has been suggested that, as females engage in more elaborative processing than males (e.g., Meyers-Levy, 1994), women may be more likely to elaborate on the sexual appeal in the advertisement, including considering the underlying motives of the advertiser, whereas men may be more likely to simply focus on the visual appeal itself (Pope, Voges and Brown, 2004).

Sex appeals in alcohol advertising: Anecdotal evidence suggests 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 and Taylor, 1988). Given that these two products are predominantly marketed to men, such appeals are consistent with this hypothesised biological and social conditioning. An extensive search of the literature on advertising appeals identified only one study specifically relating to reactions to the use of sexual appeals in alcohol advertisements (Polonsky et al., 2001), although there are several experimental studies on the impact of sexual appeals in women’s fragrance advertisements (e.g., Rossiter and Jones, 2003).

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. Complaints regarding advertisements to the ASB have increased since 2001, with complaints relating to alcohol products increasing from 2.42% in 2001 to 11.62% in 2003 (ASB 2005). In 2003, as with previous years, approximately 30% of all complaints related to portrayal of sex/sexuality/nudity and for the past four years this has been the most common issue prompting complaints. ASB’s statistician, Neale Apps was recently quoted as saying “It’s quite obvious that the main issue that concerns the public is the portrayal of sexuality and/or nudity...[and] the second major issue is discriminatory portrayal of people on the basis of gender, religion or race,” (Dasey, 2004).

This study was designed to examine responses to a current televised alcohol advertisement which was regularly aired on evening television during the study period and which had been the subject of numerous complaints to the Advertising Standards Board for its portrayal of the female character. As this was an exploratory study, and sought to elicit reasons for the underlying attitudes towards the ad, there were no specific hypotheses as to the nature of these reasons. The relevance of this research problem stems primarily from the fact that the ASB is in the position of having to make judgements about whether such advertisements breach “community standards” without any objective evidence as to what these standards are,

and without an indication of what proportion of the population is offended by such portrayals.

Method

Participants: The participants were 181 undergraduate students taking a first-year introductory marketing course. The mean age of the participants was 19.9 years (range 16 to 44). Sixty-one percent of the participants were female, and 64% were born in Australia.

Stimuli: The stimulus was a current television commercial for a full-strength beer. It is the second in a series (the first ad showed a group of men off 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 for the duration of the “trip”). In this ad, 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 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.”

Study design: Participants were shown the ad once, in a classroom setting, on a projection screen. They were asked 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). To reduce the possible confounder of prior intention to purchase, the purchase intention questions was “Did this ad 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 “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. The open-ended responses were analyzed by a research assistant, blind to the purpose of the study, using NVIVO. As a coding check, the data were also manually coded by another research assistant blind to the purpose of the study (respondents’ comments were “cut and pasted” verbatim into a series of Word documents based on key themes). As the manual coding identified the same major themes, the presentation of the results focuses on the NVIVO analysis.

Results

Attitude toward the ad: The mean ad liking score for the ad was mildly favorable (0.95). As hypothesized, this ad was rated more favorably by male than female respondents (1.76 versus 0.41, $t = -2.57$, $p = .01$) (H1 supported).

Purchase intention: Thirty of the respondents (10 males and 20 females) reported that they do not drink alcohol, and 64 respondents (12 males and 51 females) reported that they do not drink this type of alcohol, and thus they were excluded from the analysis of purchase intention. Among the remaining 173, 28 stated that the ad made them more likely to purchase this brand, 44 less likely, and 101 no effect on purchase intention. Males were more likely to report increased purchase intention (23% vs 8%) and less likely to report decreased purchase intention (19% vs 31%).

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

Five themes were identified in the reasons given by respondents for *liking* the ad.

- Humor – The most-commonly identified reason for liking the ad – explicitly stated by 112 respondents – was the use of humor. Again, the majority of respondents just stated that the ad was “funny” or “humorous.” Those that explicitly stated the reason they found the ad 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 – its stupid but funny” (#007, male, 21)*
 - *“The stupidity of the guy’s remark about why he’s going out with a non-English speaking girl” (#103, female, 18)*
- Stereotypical – One of the main themes apparent in reasons for liking the ad was the use of Australian male stereotypes in the portrayal of the characters:
 - *“General Aussie-bloke tomfoolery” (#024, male, 19)*
 - *“Very Australian, i.e., boat, boys, beer” (#201, female, 18)*
 Interestingly, several of respondents – both male and female – commented favorably on the portrayal of the male character as a typical dumb male.
- Sexual/sensual – 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” (#021, male, 19)*
 - *“The chick showing her cleavage” (#136, male, 19)*
- Ad structure – A small proportion of respondents gave reasons in this category, and they primarily related to the beach setting. Responses in this category referred to the setting in general terms, such as “the beach,” “tropical setting” or “island setting.”
- Product promotion – There were virtually no comments about the product promotion, other than a few (male) respondents who stated that they liked the ad because it was “about beer.”

Four themes were identified in the reasons given by respondents for *disliking* the ad, although only two of these were expressed by a large proportion of respondents:

- Sexist/demeaning – The overwhelmingly most common theme in respondents’ reasons for disliking the ad 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” (#114, female, 18)*
 - *“Women are being objectified to sell a product aimed at men” (#274, female, 19)*
- Humor – The next most common response was that the attempt at humor was ineffective, making the ad boring and not funny:
 - *“The humor was pretty bad” (#140, male, 21)*
 - *“The pun about the girl is lame – the ad is about beer” (#146, female, 18)*
- Sexual/sensual – A small group of respondents commented on the focus on the woman’s breasts as inappropriate but, as discussed above, the objection appeared to be to the overall portrayal of the woman.
- Stereotypical – A small number of respondents expressed the view that the ad overdid the “aussie male” stereotype, and two commented that they felt the ad it was racist.

Discussion

This ad, which was particularly disliked by female respondents, used overt sexual appeals that were interpreted by the audience to be offensive to women. In describing their reasons for disliking the ad, respondents frequently used words like “degrading” and “demeaning” –

suggesting that it was the portrayal of the woman as an object that was offensive, rather than her level of attractiveness or degree of undress.

These findings are somewhat in conflict with the view of Jones, Stanaland and Gelb (1998) that it is “sexiness” in ads per se that females dislike. However, it is consistent with Pope, Voges and Brown’s (2004) view that gender differences are partly due to differences in elaborative processing – that is, females elaborate on the sexual appeal in the advertisement whereas males focus on the visual appeal. We note that our female respondents were more likely to comment on the motive of the advertisers (e.g., “*Women are being objectified to sell a product aimed at men*”) and elaborate on the gender portrayals and overt use of sexual inferences; and that our male respondents were more likely to comment on the “visual appeal” of the ads (e.g., “*The chick showing her cleavage*”) – although neither of these responses were exclusive to a single gender.

The advertisement analysed in the current study was referred to the ASB in 2004, with the unnamed complainant quoted in the case report as stating: “I find this ad offensive because it is sexist. The woman in this ad is treated by the group of men as a sex object...” (ASB 18/04). The Board considered whether it breaches section 2 of the Advertiser Code of Ethics and found “...in the context of prevailing community standards the majority of people would find this advertisement humorous rather than offensive” (ASB 18/04). However, the results of this study suggest that the ASB may not be a good judge of ‘prevailing community standards’. Although a large proportion of the respondents stated that the thing they liked about the ad was its humour; 42% of respondents overall (and more than half of the female respondents) stated that they disliked its use of sexist imagery, with 20% specifically using the words “sexist,” “demeaning” or “degrading.” The managerial implications for beer advertisers are two-fold. First, advertisers need to be aware that a substantial proportion of consumers are offended by such portrayals (although the extent to which this 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 utilize advertising messages that offend a proportion of the general public may – in the long-term – result in the introduction of a regulatory framework which is out of the hands of the industry.

Limitations: An obvious limitation of the current study was the use of only one advertisement – this was due to time and space constraints which prevented a sufficiently in-depth analysis of more than one ad. The author is currently conducting a series of studies utilizing a broader range of portrayals of gender roles and varying degrees of sexuality and sexism (two distinct, but related, constructs). An additional limitation was the use of an undergraduate student sample, as they are not representative of the population as a whole. There is a need for further research to explore more generalisable and current “community standards” which could potentially assist the ASB in objective adjudication of future advertisements.

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