

## The moral ambiguity of advertising: spreading sexism under the mask of humor

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### **Abstract**

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the perception of sexist humor in advertising. Specifically, it investigates whether there is a positive or a negative aspect to the inclusion of humor and sexism in an advertising discourse, and examines the receiver's attitude and perception of sexist humor. Data from 38 students enrolled at the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona* revealed that sexist humor in advertising was perceived as funny and harmless. Both women and men enjoyed sexist humor in advertising and perceived it as less offensive when it was directed at the opposite gender.

**Keywords:** TV advertising; sexist humor, sexist attitude

### **Introduction**

Postmodern society has witnessed an unprecedented increase in sexist humor in day-to-day communication, especially in advertising. Despite being accompanied by a particularly high level of aggression towards women, this phenomenon has still not been investigated. Starting from this basis, this study focuses on the perception of sexist humor in advertising. More specifically, it investigates whether the inclusion of humor and sexism in an advertising discourse has a positive or a negative effect, and to examine the receiver's attitude with regard to the perception of sexist humor. Drawing on Greenwood & Isbell (2002) and Thomas (2004), for the purpose of this study sexist humor is defined as an aggressive form of humor that contains sexist beliefs, stereotypes and attitudes used to create comical effects through a perspective by incongruity. In previous research into sexism and humor in advertising, specialists have interpreted sexism as stereotypical judgments that present women as inferior (Royo, 2001; Causa, 2004; Moshe Cohen-Eliya, 2004), while humor has been seen as an esthetic or a cognitive experience which requires expert, sophisticated knowledge of language and multiple meanings (Cunningham, 2005; Alden, 2000), the appreciation of which is expressed by laughter. The findings of this investigation make a valuable contribution not only to the theoretical framework of advertising literature but also to understanding how stereotypes can spread under the mask of humor.

## Research framework

### Sexism in advertising

A subject of investigation in all the social cognition fields, sexism has been explained as the consequence of the fact that even if people have internalized the values of equality on a cognitive level, on a subconscious level they continue to rely on stereotypical assumptions about the place of minorities and women and are prejudiced with regard to these groups (Royo, 2001). Studies in various media indicate the extent to which the media portray men and women differently (McArthur, 1975; Furnham, 1993). Lovdal (1989) observes that by promoting traditional roles, television and advertising influence sex role values and perceived life options. Women are portrayed in a limited number of narrowly defined roles: unemployed or employed in traditional female occupations (Gilly, 1988) such as a wife or mother (Pingree, 1976), reliant on others and tied to the home (Brett and Cantor, 1988) in largely “decorative” roles (Courtney and Whipple, 1983; Prendergast (2002). The “housewife” type of woman is characterized as submissive, dependent, nurturing, tidy, gentle and unconfident while the “sexy” type is characterized as young, slim, smiling, provocative and sexually available. Citing scientific investigations, Tilleui (2002) notes that even if women have recently been shown in more and more working roles (Hollman, Murray and Moser, 1985), they are still portrayed more often in traditional roles (Klassen, Jasper and Schwartz, 1993). Jacobsen (1995) claims that women are often shown in a sexual or vulnerable position to sell a product and other investigations have noted the tendency to present woman as a sex object rather than a domestic attendant (Howard, 1999; Prendergast, 2002). Using the scale of identification of sexism developed by Pingree, Hawkins, Butler and Paisley (1976), Ford (1998) notes that studies carried out in Eastern countries found that women continue to be shown as decorative and sexual objects more often than men. When analyzing the relationship between gender and product, most studies found women were more likely to appear in advertisements for home products – products used in the kitchen, bathroom and household (Dominick, 1972), – and cosmetics (Stern, 2004). Conversely, men were linked with cars and cameras (Courtney, 1987). Specific products with which women have been more frequently associated include pain killers (Criag, 1992), body products (Kaufman, 1999), personal products and clothing. Male characters have been found significantly more often in ads for cough and cold products (Criag, 1992), and computers and electronics (Kaufman, 1999). In his investigation into the effects of sexism in advertising, Jacobsen (1995) states that the major concern with sexism in advertising is the fact that it has become so normalized that it is not even noticed (either because it is subconscious, disguised as artistic or because it is so widespread). Researchers have long commented that repeated exposure to advertising stereotypes leads to the appearance of sexist beliefs, sexual harassment, violence against woman, eating disorders and stereotypical perceptions of behavior toward men and women (Cohen-Eliya, 2004; Kilbourne, 1987). While discussing the influence of advertising on the formation of sexist prejudice, Moshe

Cohen-Eliya (2004) compares it with pornography and concludes that the influence of advertising is greater because most people are exposed to the former far more than to the latter. Even if advertising is an apparently inoffensive channel of communication, the rapid pace at which stereotypes are shown leaves the viewer no time to critically analyze all the information. An investigation led by Ryan O'Rourke (2003) and cited by Cohen-Eliya (2004) shows that women exposed to sexually suggestive advertisements experience lower rates of body satisfaction than women exposed to non-suggestive advertisements.

### Humor in advertising

Humor is one of the most widely used techniques in advertising around the world, with about one out of every five television commercials containing humorous appeals (Alden, Hoyer and Lee, 1993; Weinberger and Spotts, 1989). Alden (2000) states that despite its popularity, there are clear risks associated with using humor as a central message strategy. For example, humorous treatments are more effective than non-humorous ads for low involvement products (Weinberger, 1992), but for other products this is only the case when the target audience already has a positive attitude toward the brand (Chattopadhyay, 1990). In an analysis of 1600 radio commercials, Weinberger and Campbell (1991) found that the use of humor with high involvement products (fashion, clothes, perfume) was only 10%, compared to 39.6% with low involvement ones. This investigation also revealed that the degree of recall was very closely related to involvement with the product. Used with high involvement goods, the recall score for humorous commercials was significantly higher than for those with unrelated humor or no humor. Furthermore, studies by McCallum (1982) and Stewart (1986) showed that humorous commercials are more successful for existing products than for new ones. Other research (Speck, 1991, Zhang, 1991) has shown that humor enhances attention, credibility, recall, evaluation and intention to purchase. It also appears to reduce counter arguments by introducing lower irritation, a favorable attitude toward the sponsor (Gelb, 1985) and audience distraction (Scott, 1990), as well as boosting comprehension (Stewart, 1986) and increasing the transfer of the positive affect from the commercial to the brand (Gelb, 1985; Alden, 2000). Researchers have begun building theories that help explain how advertising content affects levels of perceived humor. For example, Speck (1991) identifies incongruity resolution, arousal-safety and humorous disparagement as methods used in advertising to generate humor. Alden and Hoyer (1993) report that in trying to produce humor, most of the television commercials from their national sample used "incongruity from expectations". More recently, Alden, Mukherjee and Hoyer (1999) have found that incongruity type also influences feelings of surprise which, in turn, are positively related to perceived humor. Surprise is elicited by unexpected events that deviate from the norm. One construct that is likely to serve as a moderator of the surprise-humor relationship is playfulness (Barnett 1990; Costa 1988). Speck (1991) applies the predicted association of novelty and humor in another theoretical model to suggest that the humorous appeal of an ad is potentially greater when the product is new. This idea is derived from Freudian

theory concerning jokes, where a joke is interpreted as a way to reduce anxiety. In Speck's application, anxiety is associated with the unfamiliar.

### Sexist humor in day-to-day communication

In reference to sexist humor, Legman (1956) says that society allows infinite aggression under the mask of jokes. Citing Sousa (1981), Bergmann (1986) asserts that laughing at sexist humor may suggest to others that it is acceptable to hold the beliefs that are presupposed by the humor, and that these beliefs are just harmless stage-props for the fun of the moment. Zillmann (1983) analyzes the perception of sexist humor in cartoons and predicts that if females see other victims of sexism as sympathetic characters, they will rate the cartoons as less funny than if they see the victims as antipathetic characters. Male subjects, on the other hand, may have so little experience of being victims of sexism that they are less aware of sexist content in the cartoons. In their research, Robert Priest and Paul Wilhelm (1974) claim that "groups which are in a moderate phase of conflict should enjoy hostile jokes about the opponent group more than they enjoy hostile jokes about their own group" (1974, 247). The conclusion of this study was that males appreciated anti-female jokes more than anti-male jokes and females reacted in the opposite manner. Glick and Fiske (1996) claim that women are unlikely to accept hostile sexism aimed at them and more likely to accept it when it is aimed at men. This conclusion indicates that women are easily able to recognize hostility aimed at them, which in turn makes it easier for them to reject and overcome it. At the same time, women are more likely to accept benevolent sexism in countries where inequality is clearly evident and hostile sexism is more obviously marked. Ryan and Kanjorsky (1998) found that men who enjoy sexist humor were more likely to endorse rape myth acceptance, acceptance of interpersonal violence, adversarial sexual beliefs, and acceptance of interpersonal violence and self-reported likelihood of forcing sex. The enjoyment of sexist humor in women was associated with adversarial sexual beliefs and the acceptance of impersonal violence.

### **Hypotheses**

Advertising is a huge and pervasive industry. Its function in society is to sell products as well as ideas of how society "should be". It also informs audiences about what is new and the latest fashions. It transmits messages about desirable lifestyles and the superiority of consumer culture. Despite its image, advertising can also have negative effects. Facing ever greater competition, advertisers strive to attract receivers' attention by using suitable tools to achieve their objective. Sexist humor is one of the tools frequently used by copywriters to persuade, inform and entertain the audience. Without solid research into its effects, advertising can turn into a "double-edged sword" with serious consequence for our postmodern society.

**Hypothesis I:** A mixture of humor and sexism used in advertising is perceived to be more amusing and less sexist than humor and sexism used separately.

**Hypothesis 2:** Each gender considers sexist humor in advertising less offensive and/or sexist when it is directed at the opposite gender.

## **Methodology**

### Sampling and data collection

To obtain a preliminary measure of attitudes towards sexist humor in advertising, a fifteen-minute questionnaire was distributed to a probabilistic, simple, random sample of 38 undergraduate students (19 males and 19 females) enrolled at the *Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona*. The data were gathered during May and June 2007 on the university premises. In the instructions respondents were invited to participate in research on the perception of advertising in Spain. Approximately fifteen minutes was needed to complete the questionnaire, and it was made clear to the students that their participation was voluntary.

### Procedure

The survey instrument included a list of five commercials that the students were asked to watch; they then had to reply to a six-point Likert questionnaire. The five categories of commercials used in the investigation contained the following combination of elements: humor, humor and sexism, sexism, sexism and humor, and a control commercial. On the assumption that the first group of ads contained the same quantity of humor and the second group the same quantity of sexism, the ads were joined in two pairs (humor / humor + sexism and sexism / sexism + humor). Also, to make understanding the investigation easier, a synopsis of each commercial used was introduced:

1. Orange (humor): to the surprise and amusement of train travelers, a girl starts imitating the gestures of a boy.
2. Marcilla (sexism + humor): in a kitchen, a man who looks as if he has just got out of bed starts counting while preparing his coffee. A woman's voice presents the coffee and adds: "Congratulation boys, now you can do two things at once".
3. Axe (sexism): after spreading deodorizer on a coat hanger, a girl starts dancing in a sexy manner while a man's voice is heard saying: "Axe, show them the way".
4. Morreti (humor + sexism): a husband comes back home drunk and finds his wife (a slim, fair-haired young woman) watching TV. By showing how drunk he is plus the affection he has for her, he succeeds in convincing her to give up watching TV and to leave the room. Once on his own, he recovers from his inebriation and starts watching a football match.
5. Coca Cola (no humor or sexism): an active eighty-year-old sportsman kills time drinking Coca Cola.

### Pre-test

The first step in the process of selecting the pre-test commercials included content analysis. The following common features were found:

1. The first pair of ads: incongruity from expectations (Alden and Hoyer, 1993), surprise (Alden, Mukherjee and Hoyer, 1999; Holbrook and Batra, 1990), used with low involvement products (Weinberger and Campbell, 1991), serving as a distraction agent (Speck, 1991) and novelty (Speck, 1991). In addition, two different features were found in the second commercial: stereotypical judgments presenting each gender as inferior (Goffman, 1979; Furnham, 1993), and appreciation of the commercial being dependent upon identifying with the aggressor (McCauley, 1983).
2. The second pair of ads: stereotypical judgments presenting one gender as inferior (Rohlinger, 2002), imposing standards of beauty (Wolf, 1991), appreciation of the ad being dependent upon identifying with the aggressor (McCauley, 1983; Courtney and Whipple, 1987), and using a woman as a decorative object (Jacobsen, 1995; Howard, 1999; Prendergast, 2002). Additionally, two other distinct features were found: a form of aggressive humor linked to sexist beliefs, stereotypes, attitudes (Schadron, 1997; Andrés del Campo, 2005), and incongruity from expectations (Alden and Hoyer, 1993)

The selection of the commercials containing sexism and sexist humor was based on the four themes proposed by Crawford (1989): sex is very important to men; all women are sexually available to men; women are objects who exist to meet men's needs; and women must be silenced. The degree of sexism was established using the scale of sexism proposed by Pingree in 1976.

### Measures

1. Perception of humor was measured using a six-point scale and was taken from Thomas W. Cline, James J. Kellaris (1999).
2. Perception of sexism was measured using the same six-point scale adapted from Thomas W. Cline, James J. Kellaris (1999).

## **Analysis and results**

**Hypothesis 1** - A mixture of humor and sexism used in advertising is perceived to be more amusing and less sexist than humor and sexism used separately.

The first hypothesis was analyzed through two variables: examination of humor and perception of sexism. The data was analyzed with a t-test for paired samples.

### A. Humor perception

As expected, the results of the t-test showed that at a descriptive level an audience exposed to a commercial containing humor + sexism and one containing only humor

perceived the commercial that contained sexist humor to be more amusing (the ratio of means was 2.92 vs. 3.27). The value of  $\alpha = 0.28$  does allow us to generalize this result. The same audience exposed to the other pair of ads considered the commercial that contained sexism + humor more amusing (the ratio of means was 1.82 vs. 2.26). The value of  $\alpha = 0.23$  means that this conclusion cannot be extended to the whole population. Although limited by the small numbers of the sample, the information obtained through this descriptive analysis marks a step forward in the investigation of sexist humor in advertising.

### B. Sexism perception

An analysis of the perception of sexist elements shows that the audience exposed to humor and humor + sexism considered the ad that mixed humor and sexism to be more sexist (the ratio of means was 1.54 vs. 3.16,  $\alpha = 0.00$ ). As expected, when exposed to sexism and sexism + humor, the Axe commercial containing only sexism was perceived as being more sexist (the ratio of means was 3.58 vs. 4.13). Even if the value of  $\alpha = 0.09$  does not confirm the validity of this result, the information obtained through the descriptive analysis is valuable.

**Hypothesis 2** - Each gender considers sexist humor in advertising less offensive and/or sexist when it is directed towards the opposite gender.

The results for the second hypothesis were obtained using an analysis of a t-test for independent samples. As at the descriptive level, there was a slight difference between the means of gender-based feelings about the humorous ad (4.21 vs. 5.05) but this cannot be confirmed by the  $\alpha$  significance as it was greater than 0.05. In the case of the second commercial (sexism + humor), a significant difference can be observed between its means (10.36 vs. 6.26). In addition, the value of  $\alpha = 0.01$  confirms that women felt better about watching an ad containing sexist humor directed at men. The value of  $\alpha = 0.034$  for the third ad (sexism) confirms the validity of the difference in the means: 8.26 vs. 11.42. This hypothesis is sustained in the case of the most sexist ad: men felt better when watching a sexist ad directed at women. The difference between the means of this and the second ad (humor + sexism) is a significant one (5.33 vs. 9.36). An  $\alpha$  value of 0.03 indicates that what men enjoyed watching most was an ad containing sexist humor directed at women.

## **Discussion**

### **I. The first hypothesis: sexism + humor → more amusing, less sexist.**

The confirmation of this hypothesis proves that the criteria proposed by W. Cline and James J. Kellaris in 1999 for analyzing the perception of amusement and offensiveness can be successfully applied to sexist humor in advertising. The application of parametric and descriptive tests also proved that the participants in the investigation perceived sexist

humor in advertising as being amusing and less offensive. This information confirms that audiences perceive an ad containing sexism and humor to be more amusing than one containing humor only. The same audience, when comparing an ad containing sexism plus humor with one containing sexism only, perceived the first to be less sexist. These results show that sexist humor in advertising succeeds in being perceived as funny and harmless, a finding which confirms the theory that humor changes the manner in which a message is interpreted. Thomas Ford (2008) shares this view and asserts that under the veil of humor, sexist humor is perceived as benignly amusing and creates a tolerant climate that promotes and justifies behavioral expressions of sexism without fear of disapproval. By affecting the perception of those in the immediate social context, sexist humor in advertising can attain a social acceptability. When presented with a joke, people do not evaluate the underlying message with their usual critical, literal mind-set; they abandon their standard mode of information processing (Attardo, 1993; Berlyne, 1972; Mulkey, 1988). As society does not treat sexism as either completely unacceptable or completely acceptable and free to be expressed openly, humor offers the opportunity to express it without fear of sanction. Perceived as amusing and harmless, sexist humor in advertising creates a "norm of tolerance" and leads to discrimination that harms women indirectly. Against this background, the contribution of these findings is that humor conceals sexism and makes it difficult to see the presence of stereotypes. The consequence of this is that sexist humor is perceived as more humorous and less offensive.

## 2. **The second hypothesis:** gender vs. appreciation of sexist humor.

Our second hypothesis focuses on the acceptance of sexist humor in advertising. The results support Glick and Fiske's conclusion (1996) that women are unlikely to accept hostile sexism aimed at them and more likely to accept it when it is aimed at men. They also confirm the results of the investigation of Johnson (1991), who found that men and women were equally likely to tell sexual and aggressive jokes, although men were more likely to blend sexual and aggressive themes. However, they do not confirm the findings of many researchers who have come to the conclusion that men like sexual and sexist humor more than women (Chapman, 1976; Love, 1989). The results show that the difference between the perception of sexist humor as offensive or less offensive tends to depend on the gender at which it is directed. Similarly, both women and men enjoy sexist humor in advertising and perceive it as less offensive when it is directed at the opposite gender. The conclusion is that it can serve to unite as well as to divide. This finding is important not only for the advertiser at the point of designing a marketing strategy, but also for researchers trying to understand how stereotypes succeed in spreading at a subliminal level and perpetuate themselves as the norm inside a society.



## Conclusion

This research helps us understand the perception of sexist humor in advertising and identifies the receiver's attitudes after being exposed to it. The results demonstrate that when exposed to a commercial that contains sexist humor, the audience perceives it as funny and inoffensive, and that whether the ad is accepted and succeeds in entertaining depends on whom it is directed towards. Sexist humor is not inoffensive amusement. Loaded with sexist beliefs, attitudes and stereotypes, sexist humor in advertising can nevertheless succeed in being perceived as simply a joke and appreciated when it is directed at the opposite gender.

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**Topics for debate:**

1. How is sexist humor in advertising perceived?
2. Why is the use of sexist humor in advertising increasing?
3. What is the danger of the use of sexist humor in advertising?
4. Do males and females react differently to sexist humor in advertising?