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An analysis between two generations

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Table of contents

Chapter 1: What is offensive advertising?

1.1 “Cutting through the clutter”	pag. 1
1.2 Consumer attitude towards “unmentionables”	pag. 3
1.2.1 Acceptability of products	pag. 4
1.3 From controversial to offensive	pag. 6
1.3.1 The dimensions of offensive advertising	pag. 10
1.4 Ethical judgment and moral philosophy	pag. 16
1.5.1 The components of culture	pag. 18
1.5.2 Global consumer culture	pag. 20
1.5.3 National Culture and offensive advertising	pag. 22
1.6 The twofold effect of offensive advertisements	pag. 27
1.6.1 Attitudes and purchase intentions	pag. 28
1.7 Existing national regulations of offensive advertising	pag. 32

Chapter 2: Sexism vs. female empowerment in advertising

2.1 Gender stereotypes in advertising	pag. 35
2.1.1 Female stereotypes and roles in advertising	pag. 37
2.2 Sexism in advertising	pag. 41
2.3 Evolution and consequences of third wave feminism	pag. 47
2.4 Research propositions	pag. 51

Chapter 3: Focus group

3.1 Research methodology and design	pag. 54
3.1.1 Participant selection	pag. 56
3.1.2 Questionnaire design	pag. 57
3.1.3 Measurements	pag. 59
3.2 Data analysis: comparison between the two focus groups	pag. 60
3.3 Quantitative data analysis: survey questionnaire	pag. 70
3.3.1 Results of Section 1: Beliefs regarding role portrayals in advertising	pag. 70
3.3.2 Results of Section 2: Attitudes towards the ads	pag. 73
3.3.3 Results of Section 3: Attitude towards women’s portrayal in the media	pag. 77
3.3.4 Results of Section 4: Purchase behavior	pag. 80

3.3.5 Results of Section 5: Final reflections pag. 85

3.4 Conclusion and limitations of the study pag. 88

Chapter 1: What is offensive advertising?

1.1 “Cutting through the clutter”

The evolution of advertising has followed over the centuries the technological and cultural development of societies, starting from the use of trademarks, sign-boards and town criers in pre-modern times, to the first print advertisements due to the technological improvements of the printing press during the 19th century. The applications of the second industrial revolution and the development of mass production, at the beginning of the 20th century, contributed to the emergence of mass marketing (Tellis et al., 2007). Over the years, the development of new technologies implied a change for advertising techniques that had to take into consideration new and powerful means to communicate with customers in order to send a relevant message. Between traditional, digital and on-line media, advertisers now possess a variety of channels and techniques to reach and attract new customers, retain the ones they have already acquired or to communicate messages, values and information to target segments. Nowadays, consumers are constantly bombarded with advertising messages and information related to products and services in the form of television ads, newsletters, pop-ups, transit ads, billboards, printed ads and many others. On Instagram, for example, for each three posts that appear on the user’s home page, one is an advertisement.

Given the quantity of information that they receive, it frequently happens that consumers do not pay much attention to all the ads they are exposed to, or try to avoid them by changing channel or skipping the ad when possible. One of the critical aspects of advertising in this digital era is that it has to be able to “cut through the clutter”, which means to manage the emergence from the cloud of noise and confusion created by the infinite number of advertisements that follow people in their everyday life. Brands need to distinguish themselves, by trying to propose something new to their target market or also by changing the way in which a product or service is delivered. Advertising can create touch points, that represent “a customer contact point, or a medium through which the firm and the customer interact” (Neslin et al., 2006). Touch points are important in order to locate brands in the initial consideration set in the customer journey, which is a circular model that describes the processes which consumers go through when deciding which products or services to purchase. Advertising is though important through all the customer journey process, because most customers hold their decisions until the very moment of purchase, hence there are a lot of occasions to influence their buying behavior.

Controversy or controversial advertising is a particular field of advertising that was first recognized in the 1970s (International Advertising Association, 1977). Controversy advertising is defined as “any kind of paid public communication or message, from an identified source and in a conventional medium of

public advertising, which presents information or a point of view bearing on a publicly recognized controversial issue” (IAA, 1977). The Merriam-Webster dictionary describes controversy as “a discussion marked especially by the expression of opposing views”, so it implies by definition a situation or issue that has multiple facets. The use of controversy in advertising has a long history; one of the first examples is JWT’s campaign for Woodbury’s facial soap that appeared for the first time in 1911 in the US. The print ad showed a man caressing a woman from behind and it was the first time that a product and its user were showed in such a sensual way. Helen Lansdowne Resor came up with the slogan “*a skin you love to touch*” (McFall, 2004), introducing sex appeal in advertising for “women’s goods”. The soap advertising campaign had the aim to educate women about beauty and skin care, portraying a modern attractive woman. According to the study *Controversy Advertising: How Advertisers present Points of View in Public Affairs* (IAA, 1977), controversy advertising started to increase from 1973, due to a period of economic expansion of corporations that enabled advertisers to experiment and create innovative ideas, often socially and politically committed.

A company that can be considered a pioneer in the use of controversy advertising is Benetton. The company was founded in Ponzano Veneto, in the north-east of Italy, in 1965 as a small, family-owned artisanal workshop producing classical-cut coloured sweaters. At the end of the ‘70s, Benetton reached a saturation in the Italian market and started to expand abroad. During the ‘80s the company spread all over Europe, Japan and in the US (Favero, 2006). The advertising campaign of 1984, “All the colours of the world”, by the international photographer Oliviero Toscani, explicitly defined the company’s international strategy as multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and peaceful, leading in 1989 to the slogan *United colours of Benetton*. In this campaign, Toscani photographed young models of different ethnicities wearing coloured clothes, smiling and sharing a message of peaceful harmony. Despite Benetton’s pure and authentic intentions, some criticism arose; the world that the company had depicted was too precise and ideal and did not reflect the climate of racial conflicts of the period, it was actually commodifying it (Giroux, 1994). In the following campaigns during the ‘90s, products were no longer the protagonist of Benetton’s ads, instead the main focus was on social and political issues of the time. The intent of the company was to promote a shift in its corporate brand identity, in order to be able to reflect changes in the social, political and cultural landscape worldwide and bring about social and cultural responsibility, rather than unity. Toscani’s work was marked as “shock campaigns”, showing compelling, but controversial and provocative images, like a priest and a nun kissing, a baby covered in blood still attached to its umbilical cord, soldiers in the Bosnian war or a dying AIDS activist. This unconventional way to do advertising wanted to bring awareness on important issues and also connect customers all over the world with different cultures, lifestyles, ethnicities and religions. A lot of diverging opinions emerged from Benetton’s communication strategy under Toscani’s lead, but when he left the company,

in 2002, after the negative outcomes of his *We on Death Row* campaign picturing mainly black US inmates awaiting for execution, the company's sales were 20 times greater than they were when he arrived (Lyman, 2001). Given that the boundaries for what is considered acceptable advertising vary from one country or society to another, Benetton's campaign were praised and favourably acknowledged in some countries and considered distasteful or offensive in others. Benetton faced also retaliation from its retailers, that were refusing to sell its products because they were afraid of the consequences on consumers of their controversial ads and underwent also some legal suits.

Controversial advertising can have therefore contrasting results; on one hand it can attract attention and create awareness, but on the other it can also cause a negative reaction and can lead to a negative publicity, increasing complaints by customers to regulatory bodies, product boycotts and a decrease in sales (Crosier et al. 2001). Advertisers then, need to take care when deciding to opt for a controversial advertising campaign, because it is in their social responsibility towards the general public not to offend anyone by the message that they try to communicate.

1.2 Consumer attitude towards “unmentionables”

Research conducted mainly in Western countries has analyzed different categories of products and services that have been defined as controversial when being advertised. Early studies about controversial advertising were mainly centered on the attitudes of consumers towards the advertising of products that created controversy, legal limitations on advertising and a number of feasible strategies for sensitive products. These products have been defined as “unmentionables” (Wilson and West, 1981; Katsanis 1994; Norrie 2005), “socially sensitive products” (Shao and Hill, 1994a; Fahy et al. 1995), “indecent products” (Shao, 1993), “controversial products” (Rehman and Brooks, 1987; Fam, Waller, and Erdogan, 2005) or “offensive products” (Prendergast, Ho and Phau 2002; Prendergast and Hwa 2003).

Wilson and West (1981, p. 92) described them as: “[...] products, services, or concepts that for reasons of delicacy, decency, morality, or even fear tend to elicit reactions of distaste, disgust, offence, or outrage when mentioned or when openly presented”. Unmentionable products cannot be publicly supported because of the possible offense or legal problems they could create. The two authors defined then three possible categories of unmentionables giving some examples related to each category:

- “products” like birth control, personal hygiene articles, drugs for terminal illnesses and germ and chemical warfare;
- “services” for abortion, sterilization and vasectomy, venereal disease, treatment for mental illnesses, funeral arrangements or wills and artificial insemination;
- “concepts” for political ideas, unconventional sexual activities, emotional preparation for death, terrorism or religious/racial prejudice.

In the study conducted by Tinkham and Weaver-Lariscy (1994) ethical judgements of political advertising were analysed, focusing on their *controversial status*; according to them, the field of political advertising is “one of the least regulated form of marketing communication”. This is due to the fact that political advertising, unlike commercial advertising, is not subject to strict regulatory surveillance.

Fahy et al. (1995) created a sample of more than 2,000 people and questioned them about their attitudes towards advertising seen on television. They divided the products into three groups that were:

- alcoholic beverages;
- products directed at children;
- health and sex-related products.

They successively compared the attitudes of the sample with six variables (sex, income, age, region, education and race) and discovered that women, in particular those aged 50 or more, had a stronger level of disapproval for the ads considered.

Moreover, Fam, Waller and Erdogan (2002) defined four categories of controversial products using factor analysis:

- *gender or sex-related products* like condoms, birth control, male/female underwear and female hygiene products;
- *social or political groups* as political parties, racially extreme groups, guns and armaments, funeral services and religious denominations;
- *addictive products* like alcohol, gamble, cigarettes;
- *health and care products* like weight loss programs, sexual illnesses prevention or charities.

1.2.1 Acceptability of products

Regarding the level of acceptability of products when being advertised, Wilson and West (1981) proposed a further categorization of “unmentionables”, distinguishing between *desirable* and *undesirable*

unmentionable. A *Desirable Unmentionable* is a product or service that is socially accepted by society, people need these products and also seek them, but they are not willingly openly discussed in the public. Examples of unmentionables that are desirable are condoms, products for personal hygiene, birth control, funeral related services or special medical treatments. An *Undesirable Unmentionable* is a product or service that has a limited market demand and tolerance, and may be harmful or dangerous. Examples include alcohol, guns, pornography and prostitution. However the degree to what constitutes an unmentionable product or service depends on many factors, such as the time period in which the product is analyzed, the personal characteristics of people judging the product, like culture, religion, and many others. For example in both Judaism and Islam there is the food practice of avoiding pork and pork related products¹. For some countries, it is totally normal to eat pork meat, and usually the advertising of the latter would not create any problems of negative reactions, while for others it would be seen as something illegal or forbidden. Another case is that of toilet paper that was considered for years as being an unmentionable product in the Victorian age. The Scott Paper Company was founded in 1874 in Philadelphia in the US, and was the first company to sell toilet paper on a roll. The company had to create a unique strategy to get druggists and consumers to purchase the toilet paper, so they gave each druggist a proprietary interest and enabled them to create their own custom rolls. Only after purchasing the “Waldorf” trademark, which was the company’s first branded toilet paper in 1902, the Scott company decided to include its name on its products that was starting to become publicly accepted.²

Wilson and West (1981) created also an *Unmentionable Matrix* in order to classify unmentionables; on the vertical axis there is the society’s attitude and on the horizontal axis we find the buyer’s attitude. On both axis attitude is defined on three levels: accepts /indifferent / rejects. Each square in the matrix defines the task that better suits the level of acceptability of a given product, service or idea, ranging on nine levels from *not marketable* to *normal marketing*. For example, the authors marked contraceptives as being *indifferent* for both society and buyers, and in this case they suggested that they should be promoted in an active way by suppliers, on various levels. When marketing a desirable unmentionable product, like condoms, advertisers should follow a certain strategy (Wilson and West, 1981):

- ensure the social value of the product;
- try to shorten the process of change that reduces the level on unmentionability of a product;
- find channels of communication that do not suffer from unmentionability impositions;
- focus marketing efforts towards the targeting of consumers who do not perceive the product as unmentionable.

¹ Ruane N. J., “Focus on: Why does the Bible prohibit eating pork?”, Oxford biblical studies online

² Further information on Scott company website, www.scottbrand.com/en-us/about-us/ourstory

Further preliminary research by Rehman and Brooks (1987) investigated the acceptability of certain controversial products when being advertised on television. Female hygiene products were the focus of the study, but also pregnancy tests, alcohol, underwear, medications, contraceptives and VD services were included. A sample of college students was used and results showed that only two products were seen as being unacceptable, contraceptives for men and for women.

Shao's studies regarded the attitudes of advertising agencies when handling accounts about *sensitive* products. Cigarettes, male and female underwear, alcohol, condoms, pharmaceutical products and sexual illnesses like STDs and AIDS were used as objects of the research (Shao, 1993; Shao and Hill, 1994a,b).

As already mentioned before, the definition of what constitutes a controversial product or what determines the level of personal and social acceptability of a product when being advertised is a mutable issue. For years, sex related products or issues like homosexuality or sexually transmissible diseases were considered as taboo. However, due to the spread of the AIDS epidemic at the end of the last century, and the huge amount of deaths that it caused, there was the need to spread awareness about a topic that was considered before as *unmentionable* (Wilson and West, 1995). This fact contributed also to an increase in the openness of the public towards topics and products about sex, sexuality and the body and its advertising. Another example are birth control pills, that constitute a classical unmentionable product, but became a socially acceptable matter for large part of the society in the mid-twentieth century (Wilson and West, 1981).

Shackel (1991) proposed a model about product acceptance that is based of four variables that the user considers when deciding to adopt a product: *utility* (which matches user needs and functionality), *usability* (the ability to use functionality in practice), *likeability* (which is an affective evaluation), and *cost* (both the early costs of buying the product and its social and organizational).

1.3 From controversial to offensive

Controversy advertising has the potential of allowing companies to gain customer's attention and cut through the clutter, but has also a negative side effect. The provocative and unusual tones of controversy advertising can often create misunderstandings or actual offences to those for whom they are created, but also for people outside the target segment, who, for some reason, feel to be personally involved with the product advertised or the advertising itself. *Offensive advertising* is a type of controversial advertising that produces negative effects (Waller, 2005) or that can elicit reactions of

embarrassment, distaste, disgust, or outrage from one or more segments of the population (Alwitt et al., 1994 ; Waller, 2007). According to Day (1991) advertising, as a social object, is based and evaluated on norms, and is therefore defined as offensive in the moment in which the content of the advertising breaks these norms of decency, aesthetic propriety, good taste or personal moral standards. Also humor (both satire and sexual), is considered to be potentially offensive (Beard, 2008; Flaherty, et al., 2004).

A similar definition of offensive advertising is that of *shock advertising*, which deliberately, rather than inadvertently, startles and offends its audience (Gustafson and Yssel, 1994; Venkat and Abi-Hanna, 1995). The offense is created when advertising violates a certain norm. Dahl et. al (2003) define offensive advertising as advertising that transgresses laws or customs (e.g., indecent sexual references, obscenity), breaks a moral or social rule (e.g., profanity, vulgarity), or outrages the moral or physical senses (e.g., gratuitous violence, disgusting images). With this definition of offensive advertising, the literature started to go on a path more focused on consumers and the contents and ways in which advertisements are created and developed. Social norms are the invisible and often implicit rules that govern human behavior in groups and societies and by violating a norm or rule, people violate shared expectations developed through the process of social learning (Dahl et al. 2003).

Starting from the exposure to an offensive message or ad, when analyzing television advertising, Barnes and Dotson (1990) identified two distinct dimensions that are crucial to understand an offence: *offensive products* and *offensive execution*. Products involved in their study included condoms, female hygiene products and male and female underwear. Even though preliminary studies about the topic tended to focus on controversial or offensive products and consumers' attitudes towards them and possible ways in which to deal with this matter, in order to minimize a possible offence, there are other studies that showed how it is actually the creative execution of an advertising that may result as offensive, rather than the controversial product itself (Waller, 1999; Waller et al. 2005). In a study aimed at understanding the attitudes towards offensive advertising, Waller (1999) sampled 125 students (70 male and 55 female) between 19 to 43 years old. Samples of university students have been used extensively in past studies because researchers are in close contact with their environment and students represent an homogeneous group (Calder et al., 1981). In the first part of the questionnaire students were asked to indicate the level of perceived personal offence using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1= "not at all" offensive to 5 "extremely" offensive. In Exhibit 1.1 we can see that results are pretty similar among male and female respondents and the most offensive type of advertising resulted to be that for "racially extremist groups", following "religious dominations" and "female hygiene products".

Product		Total		Male		Female	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1.	Racially extremist groups	3.44	(1.45)	3.39	(1.51)	3.52	(1.37)
2.	Religious denominations	2.67	(1.42)	2.66	(1.39)	2.69	(1.45)
3.	Female hygiene products	2.49	(1.24)	2.48	(1.22)	2.51	(1.25)
4.	Cigarettes	2.47	(1.32)	2.27	(1.29)	2.73	(1.33)
5.	Political parties	2.35	(1.35)	2.39	(1.38)	2.31	(1.31)
6.	Gambling	2.14	(1.21)	1.99	(1.17)	2.33	(1.22)
7.	Funeral services	2.04	(1.20)	2.09	(1.23)	1.98	(1.16)
8.	Female contraceptives	1.98	(1.11)	1.97	(1.10)	1.98	(1.14)
9.	Weight loss programmes	1.88	(1.06)	1.87	(1.13)	1.89	(0.95)
10.	Sexual diseases (AIDS, STD, prevention)	1.83	(0.92)	1.89	(1.01)	1.76	(0.93)
11.	Condoms	1.77	(0.859)	1.77	(0.93)	1.76	(0.76)
12.	Alcohol*	1.73	(1.04)	1.54	(0.98)	1.98	(1.06)
13.	Male underwear*	1.70	(0.98)	1.86	(1.09)	1.51	(0.76)
14.	Female underwear	1.65	(0.99)	1.60	(0.93)	1.71	(1.06)
15.	Pharmaceuticals	1.51	(0.72)	1.51	(0.71)	1.51	(0.74)

Note: * $p < 0.05$

Table I. Products with offensive advertising

Exhibit 1.1 from Waller's study (1999)

Ads for “sexual diseases”, “condoms”, “alcohol”, “male and female underwear” were perceived as being the least personally offensive. *T*-tests were used to compare male and female attitudes towards the list of controversial products and results showed that at the 0.05 significance level, the categories number 12 and 13 were statistically different. More precisely, the study showed that females are more offended than men by advertisements about alcohol, and males are more offended than females by advertisements on male underwear (Waller, 1999).

As for the second part of the questionnaire, six reasons for offensiveness were presented to respondents who were asked again to express their level of offence on a 5-point Likert scale.

Reason		Total		Male		Female	
		Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)
1.	Racist*	3.69	(1.40)	3.37	(1.57)	4.09	(1.01)
2.	Anti-social behaviour*	3.01	(1.25)	2.70	(1.21)	3.41	(1.19)
3.	Sexist*	2.89	(1.43)	2.11	(1.17)	3.89	(1.07)
4.	Subject too personal	2.55	(1.16)	2.37	(1.17)	2.77	(1.09)
5.	Indecent language*	2.51	(1.28)	2.11	(1.12)	3.02	(1.30)
6.	Nudity*	1.94	(0.98)	1.63	(0.90)	2.34	(0.93)

Note: * $p < 0.05$

Table II. Reasons for offensive advertising

Exhibit 1.2 from Waller's study (1999)

From Exhibit 1.2 we can see that women were generally more offended by the reasons, with respect to men. As first reason for offensiveness there is “racist” with a mean score of (3.69) among both male and female respondents, in accordance with the previous section of the study. Surprisingly “nudity” resulted as the least offensive reason with a total mean score of (1.94). Using *t*-tests, male and female responses to the reason for offensiveness were compared, and all reasons resulted to be statistically significant at the 0.05 level, except from “subject too personal” (Waller, 1999). Interpreting these results, it is clear that women appear to be more offended than men when exposed to advertisements with sexism, indecent language and nudity; this may be due to the fact that they are more often portrayed in situations related to sexuality and nudity than men. Further preliminary research by Waller (2004) conducted on condoms, female hygiene products and male and female underwear on a sample of 150 students with average age of 21.87 years old, confirmed his previous study, resulting in a perceived level of offence of the controversial products ranging from 2 to 3 points on a Likert scale going from 1= “not at all offensive” to 5= “extremely offensive”. The list of reasons for offensiveness was enlarged to include “violence”, “stereotyping of people”, “hard sell”, “concern for children” and “health and safety issues”. Final results of a more extensive research confirmed again Waller’s findings (1999) showing that respondents felt that the reasons, so the creative execution techniques, rather than the controversial products themselves, indicate why an advertising can result to be personally offensive (Waller, 2007).

An example of offensive creative execution is the advertising that Unilever released in South Africa in 2013 for Flora margarine. The margarine commercial showed a sort of bullet made by the words “*Uhh dad I'm gay*” going in the direction of a china made heart. At the bottom of the ad, near the Flora logo, there was a tagline saying “You need a strong heart today”. The message was implying that finding out that you have a gay son or daughter is like being shot at the heart, and this is why you need a *strong heart*, to cope with this fact. Even though Flora had long promoted its product to help consumers maintain a healthy heart, with this ad they were accused of homophobia and the company itself declared that it was offensive and unacceptable, successively apologized for it and renewed its support to the LGBTQ community.³ Although margarine is not considered to be a controversial product per se, in this case it is the creative execution of the ad that makes it offensive for the public.

³ Smith D., “Unilever apologizes for ‘homophobic’ Flora advert in South Africa”, The Guardian, 2013



Exhibit 1.3 Flora Margarine ad

1.3.1 The dimensions of offensive advertising

Defining the offensiveness of an advertisement is not a simple matter because, as many studies have shown, offensive advertising is structured on multiple dimensions (Barnes and Dotson, 1990; Waller, 1999). Prendergast and Phau (2001) defined the “*three Ms*” of offensive advertising: the matter, the manner and the media. The matter refers to the categories of products or services advertised that are considered as controversial, unacceptable or unmentionable, as we have already discussed in the previous sections.

The manner goes back to the reasons why consumers feel offended by advertising and its executions techniques and refers to the way in which information, concepts and beliefs are conveyed through advertising. A study on Hong Kong consumers (Prendergast et. al., 2002) showed that the manner of advertising is actually more important than the matter. The manner or the appeal used is considered to be the part of advertising that should be in the hands of advertisers, under their direct control, so from a consumer perspective, it becomes an inexcusable factor if for them is considered to be the cause of the offense (Chan et al., 2007). Racism and sexism are two of the most offensive appeals that concern Western literature (Boddewyn, 1991; Ma, 1996), but often people respond negatively to appeals that are based on consumer anxieties (Phau and Prendergast, 2001). Fear appeals are used by advertisers in order to increase interest and persuasiveness. Advertising for products for personal hygiene like

dandruff shampoos, deodorants and mouthwash received criticism because they tried to provoke anxiety and a resulting fear of being rejected socially in order to sell more (Belch et al., 1998).

Finally, the media represents the advertising medium or vehicles used to propagate the message. In a study by Christy (2003), media like billboards or television, that are exposed to broader audiences, are more likely to offend consumers when certain products and advertising execution strategies are displayed. In general, the more a medium is considered to be public, the less tolerance it attracts for offensive advertising (Chan, 2016). Billboards for example, are very public as a medium, because given their placement and dimension they can reach a large number of viewers, compared to an ad in a newspaper. Magazines and cable televisions are also relatively considered as safe places to test the offensiveness of an advertising, so if by using this type of media, the ad is already subject to complaints, it would not be a good idea to spread it using a more public media vehicle. Results from Phau and Prendergast (2002) on Hong Kong consumers showed that there was more tolerance among interviewees with advertising placed in magazines; this may have been due to the fact that in the past there were some legal restrictions for advertising content in magazines in Hong Kong, than in other media categories. This higher tolerance may be the result of experience, consumers learned with time and already expect to be offended by print advertising, so now it does not produce the same effect anymore, it has become in a way ineffective in that particular media.

Another dimension affecting the level of advertising offensiveness is the context. According to Ma (1996), the word *offensive* is highly connected to the fitness of the relational and situational context. This means that the perceived offensiveness of an image, word or phrase is influenced by the association of the parties involved and the situation, place or moment in which it is exposed. The *congruity theory*, or cognitive consistency theory, investigates the role of persuasive communication in attitude change.⁴ Christy and Haley (2008) studied the influence of the advertising context on the level of offensiveness and found out that consumers' perceptions of offensiveness depend in large part upon the *level of congruity* between different advertising elements that may be internal or external to the customer. Comparing a product like soap with an advertising execution involving nudity, researchers found that the combination resulted in a low level of perceived offence. Because soap, by definition, involves the body, especially naked skin, it is likely that consumers found the product and the execution technique as congruent. This consistency confirms the belief that perceived congruency between a product and a benefit will often result in a more likeable advertising (Johnson et al., 1978). Another example regarding instead the sexual dimension, shows that for a product that is considered to be sexual in nature or is used for sexual attraction, an advertising created using a sexually suggestive execution will be

⁴ According to the APA (American Psychological Association) dictionary of psychology

considered indeed less offensive and result to be more effective, due to the congruence between product and execution (Boddewyn et al., 1991).

Demographic variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, education, income, employment and religion can exert influence on the perceived level of offence of an advertising too. Fahy et al. (1995) suggested that age is one important variable that can affect the perception of offensiveness and that in general, older people tend to be more offended than younger one. Evidence of the effect of this variable was found analyzing Australian university students and gender related offensive products, with older students being more offended by advertisements containing violence, hard sell, concern for children and anti-social behavior (Waller, 2007). These results confirm the fact that older students (age range was from 18 to 53 years old) tend to be more conservative so they may be more worried with the protection and safety of children and violence related events. In previous studies Shavitt et al. (1998) found that 57% of individuals, from 35 to 54 years old, are often or sometimes offended by advertisements; only about 40% of people from 18 to 34 years old feel offended. Younger people show altogether a greater level of acceptance towards offensive advertising (Barnes et al., 1990; Grazer et al., 1995; Waller, 2007; Zimmerman et al., 2008), so this is why marketers and advertisers may try to attract younger segments using more offensive and controversial techniques, with respect to older segments. Further research should then be conducted to understand weather this move results to be actually effective when directing a message to younger customers, if it is stressing too much the degree of what can be tolerated even by them, or if it may results to be even ineffective nowadays.

Gender has been one of the first variables to be investigated in preliminary studies about the topic (Waller 1999, 2004, 2007) and has actually being a more determinant of offensiveness than age, with women being usually more offended than men (Waller, 2004).

Sin et al. (1984) argued that there is a positive correlation between the education level of respondents and concern over the potentially negative effects of advertising. The education level is another relevant variable that has been considered in the studies by Phau and Prendergast on the Asian context involving consumers from Hong Kong (2002) and Singapore (2001). In Singapore, results showed that respondents ranked chat-line services, sexual diseases and dating services as the three most offensive products, and their attitude were different according to demographic variables, particularly gender and education. The sample was divided between consumers with *tertiary education* and *non-tertiary education*, with tertiary education for respondents in possession of college, polytechnic diploma or a higher level certification. When asked to express their opinion regarding purchase intentions of an offensive product, in response to the statement “If the product or service which I use adopts an advertisement

campaign which I find offensive, I will discontinue using it.”, *t*-tests indicated that consumers with tertiary education are more likely to stop using and buying the products in comparison with consumers with non-tertiary education.

As mentioned before, also time and place are factors which affect the perception of offensiveness of consumers, and what is considered to be offensive at some point in time, may not result to be offensive for generations to come, and vice versa. An example were *chat-line services*, that were discovered to be considered an offensive product in the study by Phau et al. (2001), but had not been included in the list of offensive products by previous literature.

The range of variables potentially affecting offensiveness still lacks research, and further studies should investigate the relevance of other demographic variables in relation to the level of offence perceived by customers, their purchase intentions, and attitudes in general towards the product category and brand.

1.4 Ethical judgment and moral philosophy

As regards the topic of what is considered ethical in advertising and what is not, a large amount of literature has investigated the ethicality of political advertising (Tinkham et al., 1994), advertising using fear appeals (Benet et al., 1993), lottery advertising (Stearns et al., 1995), stereotypes against minorities (Taylor et al., 1997), sexual appeals (LaTour et al., 1994), the use of spam and cookies (Stead et al., 2001) and many other issues. The perceptions of offensive advertising are subjective in most cases and depend on individuals' interpretation, values, beliefs and conceptions. The theoretical constructs used as starting point to understand the potential offense of an advertising are defined by the concepts of individuals' or society's ethical judgment and moral philosophy (Arthur and Quester, 2003; Dean, 2005). In general, ethics concerns the understanding of whether the conduct of a single individual or a group or society is good or bad and defines ethical judgment as "the degree to which an individual believes that a specific behavior is morally acceptable" (Snipes et al., 1999). Some philosophers think that there are no moral facts, and that morality is not something objective, instead others take the opposite position, defining it as something subjective; this debate is actually a very controversial topic within philosophy, but there are no dominant views (Knobe et al., 2014).

However, going back to the field of marketing and advertising, when consumers judge an ad, they do it on the basis of three different theories: idealism, pragmatism and relativism (Treise et al., 1994). Idealism (or deontology) is an ethical theory which universalizes the concepts of right and wrong.

According to this system of belief, the morality of actions should be judged on the intrinsic rightness or wrongness of the actions themselves, and not on the basis of the consequences caused by those actions. The focus is then on the reasons that guide action, intentions and the character of the agent, rather than the outcomes produced. As a consequence, this ethical theory seems to suggest the transparent and truthful nature that advertising should adopt, avoiding the exploitation of human weaknesses like lust, greed or vanity, and the targeting of weaker groups that need social protection like the poor and children, elders, women and racial minorities. As deontology comes from the Greek word *deont*, which means “being needed or necessary”⁵, deontology-based ethics focuses on the notions of duty and principle. From a philosophical perspective, this concept is connected to Kant’s universal principles and categorical imperative, so the ethical order in relation to duty. The origins of the categorical imperatives are found in the concepts of universality and necessity and deontology-based ethical value in advertising is the same context as idealism (Kim et al., 2017). Arthur and Quester (2003) suggest that, according to this theory, people have an obligation to satisfy others’ legitimate needs. Following this theory then, fear appeals, for example, would not be considered as ethical. This type of advertising leverages human fears and anxiety, which cause harm and intends to scare the audience by describing something that for them represents a sort of threat. Snipes et al. (1999) found that fear appeals may not be perceived as unethical if consumers personally feel that they can eliminate the threat or the fear showed in the advertising, by using the product.

The second belief system is pragmatism or teleology which says that an action is right if it leads to the greatest good for the greatest number of people. This theory is fundamentally opposed to deontological ethics and implies that “the end justifies the means”, so if a goal is morally high enough, any kind of action, whether good or bad is acceptable. In this case is not the action in itself that is under scrutiny, rather the results of action or of inaction, in order to understand what is the best outcome for all. Two discussed theories of teleology are egoism and utilitarianism. According to ethical egoism, people should focus just on the consequences for themselves, when morally deciding whether to perform an action. On the contrary, if an evaluation takes into consideration the welfare of society as a whole, then the theory is called utilitarianism (Reidenbach et al., 1990). Examining the use of fear appeals, for example in antismoking advertising messages, they would be ethical if they resulted to be effective (Arthur et al., 2003). For example, if a fear appeal helps to stop an individual from consuming cigarettes, he will get a benefit, improving his health by eliminating the consequences that smoke has on many organs. Society would benefit as well, because there will be less costs associated with the health care of this individual in particular.

⁵ Definition from Lexico online dictionary, powered by Oxford, www.lexico.com

The last theory about ethical judgment is relativism, according to which there is no universal rule of ethics that can be applied to individuals and societies, decisions and actions depend rather on time, place and culture⁶. As a consequence, the values, beliefs, norms and behavior of people in one culture would not necessarily determine the conduct of people in another (Reidenbach et al., 1990). So, from a relativistic point of view, a moral standard or belief, is regarded as custom defined by history and not a set of principles that can be justified in an objective way (Dean, 2005). Current research about the topic of moral relativism appears to suggest that it is actually widespread and that people nowadays seem to deny moral objectivity in favour of an individualist and culture-based forms of relativism (Pözlér et al., 2019). An example of ethical relativism in advertising could be that of an ad featuring a woman showing her bare skin that has to be modified in order to be released also in Islamic countries. Such advertising would not necessarily be considered unethical in many Western countries, but the same ad, without corrections, would probably be considered unethical and banned as illegal in Islamic cultures (Dean, 2005). An example was the album of the American singer Ariana Grande, titled *My everything*, that was released in 2014⁷. In Exhibit 1.4 we can see how the photo for the album cover was censored in Eastern countries to cover the legs and arms of the singer as much as possible in order not to cause possible offenses Islam devotees.



Exhibit 1.4 Album cover, boredpanda.com

⁶ According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

⁷ “49 Examples Of How The Same Products Look In The West VS. Middle-East”, on www.demilked.com

However, consumers do not use clearly defined ethical theories when they evaluate advertising (Reidenbach and Robin, 1988), and these theories are not mutually exclusive, which means that individuals can combine elements of each of them when deciding the ethical value of a controversial ad and also use socio-demographic variables (Fam et al., 2003; Fam, Waller, Erdogan 2004).

From the point of view of a business, ethical judgment and moral philosophy should also be taken into consideration when assessing the potential costs and benefits of conducting a controversial advertising campaign. Stakeholders are “those groups and individuals who can affect or be affected” by the actions connected to value creation and trade (Freeman, 1984). When planning its activities, organizations should be aware of how its actions and decisions may impact its stakeholders, including customers, community members, suppliers, employees or creditors. Corporate social responsibility means that a business should be able to mitigate and minimize possible negative effects of its corporate behaviour and this includes any possible controversies and offenses that may arise.

1.5 Cultural perception of the level of offensiveness

The definition of the term *culture* has changed over the centuries, because of the difficulty of finding a universal meaning, in fact “despite a century of efforts to define culture adequately, there was in the early 1990s no agreement among anthropologists regarding its nature” (Apte, 1994). Culture is a social force which includes an ensemble of ideas, values, beliefs, attitudes that are learned and shared by the members of a community or group. To be considered as *cultural*, ideas, things or behaviors, must be shared among a group or a society (Ferraro, 1998). Anthropologists and sociologists generally define culture as a “way of living”, determined by human beings and as a social phenomenon based on the interaction among many people. One of the earliest definition of culture was given by Tylor (1871) to denote its *totality*:

"Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."

Tylor's definition is in contrast to Arnold's view (1869) in which only a small portion of a society possesses culture, which distinguishes them from the *popular culture* or *folkways* of common people. Tylor defines culture as a science, and argued that all societies develop and grow in the same manner, in an evolutionary way, from savage to barbarian, to civilized. According to his theory, culture is more a

synonym for civilization, rather than a particular characteristic of some society. Later, Boas posed a critique on this evolutionary view of culture by Tylor, talking about cultural pluralism, using the term *cultures*, in plural (1896). Other anthropologists proposed a cognitive definition of culture, more focused on the aspects of social life that are meaningful and communicative, like language, symbols, people, actions and events. Kroeber & Kluckhohn (1952) define culture in this way:

“Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, as conditional elements of future action”.

Another cognitive definition of culture was provided by Geertz (1973), as "[...] an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life".

All these definitions imply that the subject of culture encompasses different dimensions and concepts that have been defined and interpreted in many ways over the centuries as a depiction of societies and group's evolution.

1.5.1 The components of culture

Culture is made of many facets, each of which contributes to defining what a culture stands for, on which basis it builds its foundations, which concepts, forms of behavior, rules of conduct or moral principles describe its structure and essence. For Hofstede (2001) culture is the “collective programming of the mind”, that categorizes societies, distinguishing a group or a category of people from another one. The author depicts the manifestation of culture in four different layers that have various levels of depth in terms of intensity, starting from the weaker level we find: symbols, heroes, rituals and values. The first three components are gathered under the term *practices* and are all visible and evident from the perspective of an outside observer, on the other side, their cultural meanings are invisible and depend exactly on how these practices are interpreted by insiders. Cultural symbols are the gestures, pictures, objects, words or acts that mean something for the members of a group of individuals who share the same culture. Symbols evoke emotions and reactions and play an important role when conducting a cross-cultural analysis because different cultures may

attach different meanings and emotions to the same symbol.⁸ For example the thumbs-up sign is widely identified as a sign of agreement or approval, but it actually represents an insult in Bangladesh and is seen as highly offensive in some Middle East countries.⁹ So culture affects behavior and the interpretations that people assign to it. Heroes represent people, dead or alive, fictitious or real, who embody characteristics that are highly-valued by a culture, and become models of behavior. Rituals are collective activities that are socially essential, they can include a sequence of gestures, words or objects performed in a pre-defined way. Cultural rituals include social or religious ceremonies, like graduation ceremonies or baptisms, or customs like ways to greet people or paying respect to others. Values are the core element of culture and are intimately connected with moral and ethical codes (Brown, 1988). Cultural values are invisible until they become evident with individual's behavior, because they affect their attitudes and beliefs. Values can be held at an individual level, but also on a community level, and represent preferable modes of conduct or states of being over time (Rokeach et al., 1972). For example McDonald's menu in India does not include beef hamburgers in its restaurants, because the cow is considered a sacred animal by the majority of the population. They sell the *Maharaja Mac* instead, which is a Big Mac made with chicken patties as a substitute for beef.¹⁰

Another important component of culture is language, which embodies and expresses in verbal and written form the beliefs, meanings and values shared by members of a society. Language is a product of the thought and behavior of a society, it represent an expression of culture, its values and beliefs, and the specific association of words or phrases with artifacts, historical events or actions. When an individual speaks a foreign language, its effectiveness in being correctly understood is directly related to his understanding of the culture of that language (Taylor, 1979). For example, the cold and cough medicine Vicks' brand name, common in the United States, in Germany is actually read as *Ficks*, because the letter V is commonly pronounced as F, which can be roughly translated as "sexual penetration". This is why Vicks in Germany is actually written as *Wicks*, but is pronounced in the same way. Marketers need to pay attention, when conducting a global campaign to the meanings that words and also figures and pictures can have for different cultures, because it could be the cause of misunderstandings or also generate negative and offensive reactions in consumers.

There is however a difficulty in differentiating in a strict way between cultural factors and other macro-level influences. The concept of culture is intrinsically diverse from other macro-environmental factors, like economic, political, legal, religious, linguistic, educational, technological or industrial factors (Sekaran, 1983). But isolating these macro-environmental influences might be impossible, because there

⁸ Kerin, Hartley, "Marketing", 13th edition, 2017

⁹ Cipolla, "Hand gestures in different cultures (and what they mean)", 2018, www.blog.busuu.com

¹⁰ "McDonald's to beef up in India with meatless menu", 2012, www.cbsnews.com

are no clear boundaries between all these factors, that actually influence each other. As Sekaran (1983) argues, “Culturally normed behavior and patterns of socialization could often stem from a mix of religious beliefs, economic and political exigencies and so on. Sorting these out in a clear-cut fashion would be extremely difficult, if not totally impossible”.

A recent cross-cultural study examined the attitudes towards the advertising of controversial products and services and the reasons for its offensiveness across four countries: Malaysia, United Kingdom, New Zealand and Turkey (Waller et al., 2005). These countries were chosen because they have some elements in common and others that are not; the UK and Turkey are both situated in Europe, while New Zealand and Malaysia are part of Australasia, but are completely different regarding their culture, language, religion and also history. Moreover Malaysia and Turkey are countries where people are mostly Muslims, thus may present cultural similarities too. One of the most important findings in this study is that the variable of geography or location is not a major determinant of attitudes, but factors relating to religion, culture, language and history are more important. Racism was found as the highest scoring reason for offensiveness among the four countries, with the exception of the Turkish sample which ranked it as second, putting gambling first, confirming previous researches. This is due to the fact that in each country there are some racial tensions, for example in Australasia, there are some tensions between the indigenous Maori and the dominant European population (Waller et al., 2005). Moreover the Advertising Code in Malaysia promotes cultural sensitivity and social harmony and bans advertisements which “contain statements or suggestions which may offend the religious, racial, political or sentimental susceptibilities of any section of the community”¹¹. Gambling may have resulted as more offensive for the Turkish sample because Islam prohibits gambling, and 99% of the sample affirmed to be Muslim (Waller et al., 2005), so advertising should respect the Islamic values and principles. We can see how the intensity of the religious belief can influence the attitude of people towards offensive advertising.

In relation to religion, a study conducted by Waller et al. (2013) in order to spot differences in the attitudes towards advertisements with a violent image appeal among students coming from six different countries, revealed that the intensity of religious belief does not depend on any religion, but actually on the intensity of the belief in any religion in general. According to the authors this may be due to the fact that religions are based on values like peace, so the use of violent images would go against these principles and could be perceived in a negative, offensive way.

¹¹ Ministry of Information (1990), Advertising Code for Television and Radio, Ministry of Information, Kuala Lumpur.

Each component of culture is a vivid expression of an aspect of a society or population, so trying to assume that what is good for one culture is good also for another one, may be effective for some components of culture, but may be wrong for some others and these differences can have a great impact on how advertising is perceived in different countries.

1.5.2 Global consumer culture

There is a general belief that consumers around the world are growing similar needs and wants and that markets are going towards the direction of being always more homogeneous worldwide. According to Robertson (1992), globalization became a common term used in media, intellectual, business and other fields, due to the modernization theories of the 1960s which proposed the idea of a single, unique world culture. This trend was caused by the spread of capitalism, Western imperialism and the emergence of a global media system and a global attachment to Western goods as a sort of status symbol like McDonald's, Nike, Levi's or Barbie dolls and also to the consumption values of Western consumers. In the article "The globalization of markets", Levitt (1983) argued that new technology would lead to a homogenization of consumer wants and needs because consumers were expected to prefer standard products of high quality and low price with respect to more customized, higher priced products. This argument is based on the assumption that consumer behavior is rational, derived from the classical microeconomics theory of cardinal and ordinal utility¹². Literature has found though, that consumers are often irrational, and not always make choices that maximize their expected utility, so the assumption of rationality is considered to be unrealistic and places consumers outside a cultural context (Antonides, 1998).

Ignoring the influence of culture, when conducting an international global campaign, has led many companies to a centralization of operations and marketing that, instead of increasing efficiency, has caused a lower profitability (De Mooij, 2003). An example is the multi-national company Coca-Cola, that before the year 2000, was a highly centralized company selling a global and unique type of soft drink, leveraging universal cultural values. Yet it decided in the year 2000, to modify its strategy because the profitability was declining, adjusting its global strategy to account for local needs.

In a study on convergence and divergence in consumer behavior, De Mooij (2003) studied their implications for global advertising and found that the assumption that the homogenization of the

¹² The neoclassical theory of decision-making is based on the concept of expected utility first defined by Bernoulli in 1738 and developed by Neumann and Morgenstern in 1944. The theory imposes rationality axioms on the decision maker's preferences, which are: completeness, transitivity, reflexivity and insatiability of preferences.

economic system will contribute to the homogenization of consumer behavior worldwide, is supported just by anecdotal evidence. Empirical evidence instead, is usually based on macro-developmental data, like the number of telephones, TV sets or cars per 1000 people. Results of this research found only a few cases of convergence across European countries, showing a large difference in consumptions between stable countries or countries that are actually diverging. Moreover, if products converge across countries, convergence is weakest in economically heterogeneous regions and strongest in economically homogeneous regions. For the Author, these differences can be related to culture and an analysis on the influence exerted by culture or income on consumption over time demonstrates that when countries converge, with respect to national wealth, cultural variables increasingly explain the differences in country-level behavior. This evidence of a cultural difference among countries implies, according to the Author, that an advertising strategy, which resulted successful in one country may not automatically lead to success in others.

Because advertising is a type of communication, understanding the way in which different cultures communicate should allow advertisers to structure advertising in a way that will be correctly understood and eventually perceived in a positive way by the audience. In any communication process, the message and the consumer's *schemata*, that includes the structures of knowledge a person has about objects, events, people or phenomena, are both influenced by people's culture, and this means that it would be difficult to use the same advertising message among different cultures, without first understanding how different cultures work and whether there are some differences or similarities among them (De Mooij, 2004).

1.5.3 National Culture and offensive advertising

Global advertising campaigns have developed also thanks to the expansion of global media and thanks to this speed of information, caused by technology, it is common for advertisers to use global advertising strategies to reach the target market before competition (Kaplan, 1994). Standardized advertising involves a campaign which implies the use of the same strategy, execution or language (Duncan et al. 1995), but recently advertisers are becoming more careful when using these kind of techniques, because sensitivity should be considered when thinking that consumers from different cultures and social backgrounds are exposed to a standardized message (Frith et al., 2003). Negative views of standardization hold that differences in cultural values and beliefs, as well as business environments, should be considered when planning a global advertising campaign. Moreover, with standardization, different market conditions and cultural uniqueness can compromise the success of an

advertising campaign. Some empirical studies imply that advertising messages should be based on local cultural tastes, to facilitate their acceptance by consumers (Cheng, 1997; Ramaprasad et al., 1992).

Because of all the reasons listed, advertising campaigns, in particular standardized and global ones, can be a cause of offense for consumers with different cultural and demographic background. A recent example of an international advertising which caused a strong backlash from the public was a promotional video from the Italian luxury fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana published on November 19th of 2018. Three short video were published on the Chinese micro blogging site *Weibo* to promote its upcoming Shanghai runway event, on November 21st. The advertising featured a Chinese model Zuo Ye, wearing elegant D&G clothes while trying to eat typical Italian dishes, precisely pizza, spaghetti and Sicilian cannoli. Chinese folk music was playing in the background while a male Mandarin-speaking voice explained to the model how to “properly” eat the dishes with chopsticks. The all ad seemed like a mockery of the Chinese culture and traditions; the model in the ad seemed shocked and showed disbelief when asked to eat the dishes with the chopsticks, but was eventually delighted and satisfied by the their tastiness. The male voice in the background also mocked her by saying "Is it too big for you?", referring to the giant cannoli and also said "Let's use these small stick-like things to eat our great pizza margherita". The ad was condemned by Chinese consumers first, but also worldwide for being racist and culturally insensitive; the show in Shanghai was cancelled and people started to protest on-line. Chinese consumers expressed their outrage on the Web saying that the videos “were offensive and had racist overtones”¹³ and the whole campaign was blamed of trivializing Chinese culture and promoting derogatory stereotypes.

¹³ “Dolce & Gabbana Faces Backlash in China After an Ad Prompted Accusations of Racism”, 2018, Time, www.time.com



Exhibit 1.5 Image from D&G promotional video

There are many studies that try to explain the differences in consumers' reactions to offensive advertising which use culture as the central variable to analyze, because offensiveness is also culture specific (Boddewyn, 1991). The belief that underlies these studies is that cultural values will exert an influence on consumers' responses to advertising executions, in particular the ones that are defined as offensive (Chan et al., 2007). The theories used as basis to conduct these researches are the cultural theory of information context by Hall (1976) and the theory of cultural dimensions by Hofstede (1984).

Hall (1976) distinguishes between *high-* and *low-context* cultures depending on the importance given to communication message elements in providing meanings. In a high-context culture, information is implicit and can be understood fully only by the members of a society who share assumptions, experiences and verbal codes. The result is that much is taken for granted and there may be problems when people do not understand the *unwritten rules* of a culture. Hall et al. (1990) define Korea, Japan, Taiwan, China and southern European countries as having a high-context culture. Low-context cultures instead are defined by clear and explicit information where mass information is embedded in messages. This type of cultures are composed by people who are more psychologically distant, this is why they use more explicit information to communicate with each other. Hall et al. (1990) consider Americans, Germans and northern Europeans countries to be low-context cultures.

In his original work, Hofstede studied natural cultural differences establishing four dimensions of national culture: power distance, individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/femininity, adding then a fifth category, long-/short-term orientation (1991).

Power distance is “the extent to which the less powerful members of ... organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unevenly” (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). This dimension influences hierarchy and dependence relations among family members and in organizational contexts. There is a difference in how countries distribute authority and power and how people perceive this distribution. Large power distance countries are France, Arab countries, Mexico, Portugal, and low power distance countries are Great Britain, Germany, the Netherlands and Australia.

Individualism/Collectivism is related to the integration of individuals in primary groups. Individualistic cultures individuals tend to look after themselves and their immediate family only, so there are very close ties. These cultures emphasise the individualism, meritocracy and an individual’s responsibility for his place in life, and place high value on competitiveness, autonomy and achievement. High individualistic cultures are those of North America, North Europe, Australia, Great Britain and Canada. Collectivist cultures people belong to groups or collectivises that look after each other in exchange for loyalty. High value is place on harmony among people, solidarity and obligations towards the group. Examples of collectivistic cultures are South America, Asian countries and Africa.

Uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which people feel threatened by ambiguous and uncertain situations, therefore try to avoid them. Cultures with a strong uncertainty avoidance strive for rules and a formal lifestyle, like South and East Europe, Japan, Korea and Latin America. Other countries instead are comfortable with ambiguity and the use of initiative and improvisation, like in Singapore, Great Britain, Denmark and Sweden.

In a *Masculine* culture, societal gender roles are clearly defined and the dominant values are achievement and success. Product and brands are important means to show success. Examples of masculine cultures are the USA, Germany, Austria, Japan and China. In *Feminine* cultures, social gender roles overlap, both men and women are believed to be modest, tender and care for the quality of life (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). Examples of feminine cultures are the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries, Spain and Thailand.

Long-/Short-term Orientation relate to people’s choice of focus for their effort, being the future or the present. Long-term oriented cultures are about perseverance and thrift, and is common in Asian countries like China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan. Short-term oriented cultures are more concerned with the observance of traditions and social obligations, like USA, Canada, New Zealand, Britain, Australia.

Another relevant study about these topics is the study about leadership and societal culture GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research Program), by House et al. (2004). The study involved 62 nations and outlined nine cultural dimensions: performance orientation, humane orientation, future orientation, uncertainty avoidance, assertiveness, power distance, gender egalitarianism, and two types of collectivism, institutional and in-group collectivism. In specific, “in

group collectivism”, reflects the degree to which people have loyalty to and pride in their families; this dimension is similar to the dimension of collectivism in past literature (Hofstede, 2001). Globe also defines a clear distinction between *societal values* and *societal practices*. Societal practices include what is visible in a culture, so, products, behaviors and processes that reflect the “as is”. Societal values instead represent an individual’s or society’s sense of what ought to be, distinguishing from what is.

According to An and Kim (2006), Hall’s theory of information context (1976) and Hofstede’s (1984) cultural dimension of *individualism/collectivism* are the most relevant for the study of offensive advertising and its comparison across cultures.

For Shao and Hill (1994) high-context societies use more social norms than laws and regulations in order to restrict marketing communication. Their study on the television advertising regulations for *socially sensitive* products, like cigarettes, condoms, sexual diseases and hygiene products, are in favor of the hypotheses that there are harder advertising regulations for sexually oriented products in high-context, with respect to low-context countries. This rigidity regarding advertising regulations confirms the fact that in high-context cultures, communication is influenced by a well-structured social hierarchy and strong behavioral norms (Kim et al., 1998).

Fam and Waller (2003) compared the acceptability of potentially offensive products among four Asia-Pacific countries, New Zealand, Taiwan, Malaysia and China. The outcome of the study highlighted an influence of individualism on the perception of offensiveness, in fact New Zealand consumers found the four groups of products analyzed, which were healthcare, sex-related, addictive and political products, less offensive than the other three countries that have a more collective culture.

An and Kim (2006) in their study on the attitudes towards offensive advertising among Korean and US consumers, found that products connected to addictions or sexual connotations, were considered more offensive by Korean rather than US consumers. Moreover, as regards the reason for offensiveness, Korean consumers were less accepting of three different execution techniques which involved: anti-social behavior, sexual execution and nudity. The explanation given by the authors is that high-context societies, like Korea, tend to have more strict moral attitudes about the topic of sex, so probably these products are considered to have a negative impact on society, thus are less accepted by consumers. So, consumers belonging to collective societies will find the products less acceptable, according to the authors, because of the importance of harmony, and the importance of not violating social norms. Both sexually oriented products, appeals and executions are less accepted in high-context societies. Low-context countries instead tend to have a more liberal attitude towards pornography and sex related topics (Shao et al., 1994).

Chan et al. (2007) conducted a study on Chinese and German consumers to understand how they react to potentially offensive print advertisements. Germany was selected to represent a low-context culture, and more individualistic society, with individualism score of 67 (Hofstede, 2001), as previous studies affirm. China instead represents a high-context culture and more collectivistic society. Chinese people then are more likely to gather information from the context in which the product or brand is shown. Also GLOBE scores on societal practices support that China is a more collectivistic country than Germany.¹⁴ Results showed that Chinese consumers perceived the ads are more offensive, uncomfortable, disgusting and impolite than the German ones, who actually considered them as irritating and ridiculous, as expected. Moreover, Germans found the ads more creative, interesting and clever, but also less convincing and informative. According to the authors, this result seems to suggest that Germans are more likely to appreciate the creative appeals of offensive advertisements, than Chinese consumers, who actually appreciate more the informative elements rather than German ones. An ad is perceived as informative in China if it aids product and brand understanding, thus advertisers should pay special attention to the context in which the ad is shown, when targeting Chinese consumers. For an ad to be considered informative in Germany, it should include objective and straightforward information (Chan et al., 2007).

As it emerges from these studies, cultural variables contain some of the most important insights in order to understand the degree of offensiveness of an advertisement, nonetheless much research still should be conducted to further investigate cross-cultural dimensions of offensive advertising. Even though Waller et al. found that there is a considerable level of consistency in the range of products that are generally considered as offensive by consumers of various cultures, it seems evident, from more recent studies, that the cultural make-up of a certain country or population has an impact on attitudes and behaviors of consumers (Waller al., 2015). What is even more important to understand is the effect that offensive ads have on different cultures and the impact on brand and product attitudes and ultimately on purchase intentions.

1.6 The twofold effect of offensive advertisements

The majority of literature on offensive advertising examines the subject as it if were a negative and undesirable concept. Controversial advertising campaigns can create embarrassment, distaste and disgust or offend part of the audience. This general dissatisfaction can lead some consumers to

¹⁴ House, R.J., Hanges, P.J., Javidan, M. and Gupta, V. (2004), "Culture, Leadership, and Organizations: The Globe Study of 62 Societies", Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 9-28.

complain to regulatory bodies (Waller et al., 2013) or to other consumer initiated actions like complaints to the company hot-lines, negative word of mouth, a drop in sales levels for the particular product or service advertised or the brand, or also boycott the products and even the firm selling them (Crosier et al., 2001; Tilles, 1998). Bartos (1981) stated that “there is clear evidence, however, that dislike of ads correlates with negative attitudes towards the industry”, thus offensive advertising can contribute also to the creation of a negative firm image (Ford et. al, 1997). Other researches examined the effect on consumer’s perception of offensiveness related to the effects on sales and found that offensive advertising can also cause a decrease in the firm’s sales (Chan et. al, 2007; Van Hellemonst et al., 2012). According to Prendergast et al. (2002) offensive advertising can also potentially damage the brand image and customer base. Burke and Edell (1989) found that offensive advertising can negatively affect both brands and products because the feelings that consumers experience during the advertisement are transferred to the consumer’s evaluation of the brand. In fact An and Kim (2006) concluded that consumers are less likely to purchase products from a company that uses offensive advertising, if they can access a similar product or brand which does not use it in its advertising campaigns.

On the other hand some researchers claim that offensive advertisements can actually have a positive, rather than negative effect. The use of offensive appeals or offensive images when advertising can lead to an increase in consumers’ attention regarding the product advertised or the brand or help to stand out and “cut through the clutter”, creating a sort of “buzz” (Phau et al., 2002; Chen et al., 2013). Offensive advertising which contains shock appeals increases attention, benefits memory, because ads are remembered for a longer time and positively influence consumer behavior (Dahl et al., 2003). Waller (2006) in his “Proposed Response model for Controversial Advertising” affirmed that a positive response to controversial advertising, like attention, liking or humor might lead to a positive consumer reaction like an increase in purchase intention or positive word of mouth. A popular saying says that “any publicity is good publicity”, meaning that it does not matter which execution techniques are used, or which social or moral norms are violated by an advertising, as long as it makes people talk about it, and about the brand, increasing awareness. A study by Berger et al. (2010) used positive and negative book reviews by the New York Times in order to understand the potential offensiveness of bad publicity, and found that a negative book review, which implies according to the authors, a bad publicity for it, can actually increase the awareness for that book, increasing also sales as consequence, in particular for brands that consumer are not familiar with or that are not well-known.

1.6.1 Attitudes and purchase intentions

The way in which consumers define an advertising as offensive depends first of all on the process of attitude formation towards the advertising in general and consumers' underlying beliefs. Starting from this concept it is also important to understand whether the advertising of a product which is considered offensive or the offensiveness of an advertising execution, can have an impact on the attitudes that the consumer has towards the product or the brand. Psychologists and behavioral researches have come to different definitions of the concept of attitude. Breckler's (1984) study confirms the belief that attitude consists of three different components that are *affect*, *behavior* and *cognition* in relation to an *attitude object*. The *affective* component refers feelings or emotions linked to an attitude object and affective responses exert an influence on attitude in many ways. For example, if a person has a negative response to an object, like a spider, it is likely that he will have also a negative attitude towards it. The *behavioural* component of attitudes refers instead to the way in which attitudes influence how we act or behave. Finally the *cognitive* component consists of beliefs, knowledge, attributes or thoughts that we associate with an object. For Azjen et al. (1980) attitude is "a person's favorable or unfavorable feelings toward an object". Attitudes are shaped by values or beliefs which are learned. Schwartz (1992) defines values as: "a desirable trans-situational goal varying in importance, which serves as a guiding principle in the life of a person or other social entity". Allport (1963) states that "a value is a belief upon which a man acts by preference". From these definitions, a value then, reflects the desirability of sort of end-state, values are ordered in a system of priorities and transcend specific situations, so evaluate people, events, ideas, objects and situations. Beliefs are instead specific statements about the attributes of objects, and they precede attitude (Pollay et al., 1993).

Going back to the relationship between attitudes and advertising, Kirmani et al. (2009) define the *attitudes towards an ad (Aad)* as the thoughts and emotions that consumers feel in relation to an ad. According to Lutz (1985), *Aad* is described as "a predisposition to respond in a favorable or unfavorable manner to a particular advertising stimulus during a particular exposure occasion". For Mehta (2000) the effectiveness of an ad will depend, among many factors, also on consumer's attitude towards advertising; this comes from the fact that the cognitive abilities of consumers are shown in their feelings and thoughts, which will eventually influence their attitude towards the advertising (Mackenzie and Lutz, 1989). Many studies affirm that (*Aad*) depends actually on the attitude towards the advertising in general, also defined as (*AG*) (Lutz et al., 1983; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989; Mehta, 2000). MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) developed the "Structural model of cognitive and Affective Antecedents of Aad" suggesting that (*AG*) exerts an influence on (*Aad*) together with other factors like ad credibility, ad perceptions, attitude towards the advertiser and mood. (*AG*) seems also to differ

across countries (Durvasula et al., 1999), so the standardization of global advertising campaigns may result as ineffective.

According to Shimp (1981) when consumers are exposed to an ad, there are different degrees of involvement with it depending on the level of attention and the processing strategy. To create a favorable attitude towards the brand, denoted as (Ab) the author suggests that the design of the advertising should focus on the beliefs and the evaluations that consumers make with respect to what is their desired outcome, from purchasing and consuming a given brand. The formation of a positive and favorable attitude towards the brand increases also the probability of product trial or repeated purchases of the brand advertised. But the main goal of advertising is not to drive and influence consumers' beliefs towards the benefits or advantages of a given brand, it is rather to try to create a positive and favorable attitude towards the ad, to leave the customer with a positive feeling about it, after they process the whole thing (Shimp, 1981).

The attitude towards the brand (Ab) is moreover moderated by some cognitive structures called *brand cognitions* (Cb), which represent the audience's perceptions about the advertised brand (Lutz et al., 1983, MacKenzie et al., 1989). Against all previsions, the relationship between (Cb) and (Ab) has proven to be not so strong in different empirical studies (Lutz et al., 1983, MacKenzie et al., 1989). This weak relation may be due to flaws in the research design (Homer, 1990) or in the measurement of (Cb) (MacKenzie et al., 1986), but the most logical explanation seems the domination of the peripheral route through (Aad) over the central route through Cb (MacKenzie et al., 1986). This reasoning is connected with studies on information processing, from the "Elaboration Likelihood Model" (ELM) by Petty and Cacioppo (1981a) and the "Dual Mediation Hypothesis" by MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch (1986). According to the ELM, people can process information according to two different "routes": the *central* route is characterized by controlled, systematic and deep thinking, instead the peripheral one involves a more heuristic, superficial and automatic way of thinking. Empirical data show that the influence of (Aad) on (Ab) actually dominates the influence of (Cb) on (Ab), independently of involvement conditions (Lutz et al., 1983; Muchling et al., 1988; Homer, 1990; Brown et al., 1992). The difference between these two models, DMH and ELM, lies in the fact that DMH considers central and peripheral routes as *intertwined processes* instead of substitutes for each other (MacKenzie et al., 1986).

A recent research about online environment has discovered that DMH is the superior model (Sicilia et al., 2006); (Aad) has a direct influence on (Ab), and (Aad) influences in an indirect way (Ab) through its impact on brand cognitions (Cb). This means that consumer's attitude toward the advertising has an impact on their attitude towards the brand, and this happens either with a simple affect transfer (i.e., the consumer likes the brand since the ad appeals to him or her) or a more complicate cognitive

processing (i.e., consumers like the brand because of the effective tactics used by advertiser) (Kirmani et al., 2009). Moreover the relationship between (A_{ad}) and (A_b) results stronger when the brand in question is new and so less familiar to the consumer exposed to the message (Brown et. al, 1992), so brand familiarity seems to negatively affect the effect of (A_{ad}) on (A_b).

Relationship between attitude towards the ad and attitude towards the brand

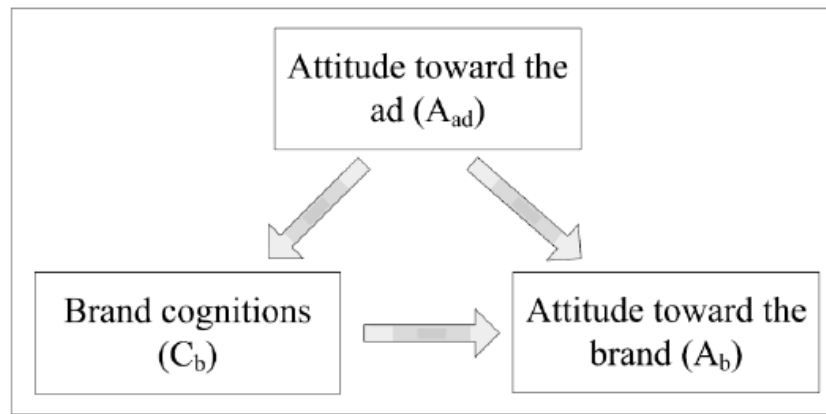


Exhibit 1.6 Najmi et al. (2012)

The “Theory of reasoned action” (TRA) was developed by Ajzen and Fishbein (1975; 1980), and explains how behavioral intentions, which are the antecedents of behavior, depend on beliefs and information regarding the probability that performing a certain behavior will lead to a particular outcome. Authors divide beliefs into *behavioral beliefs*, which represent attitudes towards the behavior and *normative beliefs* that influence the individual’s subjective norm about performing the behavior. Later Ajzen, to improve the predictive power of this theory, added a third category of beliefs with the “Theory of Planned Behavior” (TPB) (1985). *Control beliefs* express the perceived behavioral control which has both a direct effect on behavior and an indirect effect on behavior through behavioral intention, because perceived behavioral control has a motivational implication for behavioral intentions. The aim of advertising is also to influence consumer behavior, attitudes towards the product and purchase intentions (Chu, 1996; Belch and Belch, 1998; Kotler, 2003). Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) concluded that attitude can influence purchase intentions.

In reference to offensive advertising, past researches have already studied its effect on the attitudes of consumers, and the different reasons for offensiveness. In relation with the attitude towards the brand, results of the study conducted by Chan et al. (2007) about Chinese and German consumers, reports

that perceptions about the advertisements has an impact on consumer's behavioral intentions, more precisely in this case, the more negative the ads are perceived, the higher is the intention to reject both the product and the brand, leading to lower purchase intentions. In a survey among advertising experts, Pirowsky (1993) found that Benetton controversial advertising campaigns, led to an increase in brand awareness in Germany, but also to a great decrease in brand sympathy.

In the study of Phau et al. (2001) on Singaporean consumers, results regarding consumer's purchase intentions in relation to offensive products or advertising executions and appeals, show that consumers with tertiary education will stop buying new brands or products which use offensive appeals in their advertising. Surprisingly though, if the product in question is familiar and it possesses favorable attributes, consumers below 40 years old and with tertiary education, are likely to continue to buy the product. These results seem to imply that there may be differences when targeting consumers of different age groups and education levels. Moreover marketers should also pay attention when conducting potentially offensive advertising campaigns, to brand or product familiarity, and should use, according to the authors, more conventional messages and executions in cases where brand or product awareness is still low. This also implies that controversial messages that can potentially be perceived as offensive, should be used when the product or brand has a favorable image which is already consolidated in the mind of the public. Another finding from this research is that for consumers with tertiary education who found the ad for a product offensive, the offensive image does not transfer over other products of the same brand. This may imply that the effects of the use of offensive appeals or executions may just limit to the single product, but not impact so much other products of the same company, so, in case of a negative reaction to a particular ad, the negative attitude of consumers would not transfer as consequence to other brand-related products.

In another study from Phau et al. (2002) on Hong Kong consumers, results show that female respondents have a higher probability of boycotting a company which uses offensive ads, compared to male respondents. Furthermore, consumers were unlikely to buy products from a brand using offensive ads if a similar product was available and was advertised without offensive appeals.

Again, in relation to sexual and violent appeals, some studies show that consumers are more likely to remember the offensive images rather than the product or the brand name (Bushman, 2007; Bushman et al., 2002, 2001).

It is still not clear whether the positive effects of offensive advertising are more than the negative ones or vice versa, what is certain is that advertisers must know well their audience and keep in mind that controversial advertising executions can have twofold effects that may affect also consumers outside

the target market and impact purchase intentions, brand, product and advertising attitudes. They should pay attention also to the regulations that are present in each country they do business in, because there may be differences that relate to the moral, religious or cultural norms in place.

1.7 Existing regulations of offensive advertising

Apart from moral norms and personal judgment in defining offensive advertising as something appropriate, decent or socially acceptable, there are also some international and State-level regulations in place which define the guidelines for advertisements in all kinds of media. Regarding regulations about advertising and advertising standards there are mainly self-regulatory bodies. The ICC Marketing Code or ICC Advertising and Marketing Communications Code is a globally accepted self-regulatory framework introduced by the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) in 1937. Since then, it has been updated many times to reflect changes in legal and business practices and the emergence of new technologies. 42 countries all over the world have or are developing national codes based on the ICC Marketing Code and 52 countries have advertising self-regulation in place¹⁵.

The International Council on Ad Self-Regulation (ICAS) was set up in 2008 by the European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA) to provide a forum to make information exchange and discussion of best practices between advertising easier and at an international level. ICAS members include Self-Regulatory Organizations (SROs) across the Americas, Europe, Asia-Pacific, Africa and the Middle East, as well as international industry associations committed to responsible advertising.

But there are also self-regulatory bodies at a national level, like the (ASA) which is the Advertising Standard Authority in the UK, the (FTC) Federal Trade Commission in the USA or the (AANA) Australian Association of National Advertisers in Australia. In other countries there are advertising regulatory bodies under government control; in Japan for example, there is the Consumer Affairs Agency (CAA) which works together with prefecture governors and are responsible for issuing advertising regulations and enforcing rules on advertising in accordance with the AUPMR (Act against Unjustifiable Premiums and Misleading Representations)¹⁶. In China there is the (SAIC), the State Administration of Industry and Commerce which has legal power granted by the State and is responsible for advertising administration. Advertisements about certain product categories must be pre-approved in China, like health products, food, cosmetics, medical equipment or services and

¹⁵ According to ICC (International Chamber of commerce), www.iccwbo.org

¹⁶ Advertising & Marketing: in 19 jurisdictions worldwide, 2014, published by Getting the Deal Through

agricultural chemicals (Li, 2016). Regulations also differ across media, product categories, or also target markets, like advertising directed at children, for example. Given the controversial nature of offensive advertising and the difficulty and subjectivity in defining what constitutes an offence in advertising, the regulation of offensive advertising can be perceived also as a sort of censorship. For example, in the past, South Africa applied legal restrictions generally related to sex, nudity, bad language, violence, and religion¹⁷. In Malaysia women must be portrayed as having a “good behavior acceptable to local culture and society”¹⁸. Female models must also comply with the Malaysian Advertising Code’s which states that female models must be “covered until the neckline, the length of the skirt worn should be below the knees, the arms may be exposed up to the edge of the shoulder but armpits cannot be exposed”. An international ad containing images showing parts of naked female bodies can then be perceived as offensive in a country and be banned as result, or censored by local advertising bodies in order to be in line with national guidelines and moral and legal standards. According to Boddewyn et al.(1991), the law usually mirrors religious and moral standards of a country.

All Advertising Standard Codes should be based on these basic principles¹⁹: social responsibility of the ad, ads should be legal, honest and truthful and conform to the principles of fair competition. However, as consumers from different countries and cultures react in different ways to offensive advertising, self-regulations and laws regarding advertising, should differ across countries in order to better take into account differences in the offence perceived by consumers, and what should be permitted or not. Advertisers should be aware of these differences among countries and cultures in order not to create a possible offence or also break the law. Regarding in specific to the dimension of offensiveness, the (ASA) in the UK states that: “ads must not contain anything that is likely to cause serious or widespread offence, and specifies that special care must be taken to avoid causing offence on the grounds of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability and age”²⁰. In New Zealand (ASA) *Rule 1 (c) Decency and Offensiveness*, the grounds for offence include, but are not limited to: gender, race, age, sexual orientation, marital status, disability, employment status, the use of stereotypes, objectification and many more.²¹ When ads receive complaints from consumers or violate norms or standards, they can be banned by the ruling authorities. In 2019 the ASA in UK banned an ad of Volkswagen for the electric eGolf which was showing different scenes like a man on a tent after an adventurous hike, a male para-athlete and a woman sitting on a bench with her child on a stroller, with the slogan “When we learn to adapt we can achieve anything”. The ad received many complaints

¹⁷ Van der Westhuizen , “Do we have to be Calvinist puritans to enter the new South Africa? (A review of current trends in the Publications Appeal Board)”, *SA journal on human rights* (1990) 425-439, 425.

¹⁸ Ministry of Information, 1990, p. 7

¹⁹ According to ICAS, www.icas.global/standards/

²⁰ According to ASA, www.asa.org.uk/issue/offensive.html

²¹ See more on www.asa.co.nz/codes

regarding gender stereotypes, because men were depicted in adventurous and dynamic activities, while women were depicted as passive or just in a role of care-giving. ASA concluded that “the ad presented gender stereotypes in a way that was likely to cause harm” and so it was banned²². Sometimes companies, after receiving complaints by consumers, or assisting to backlash on Social Media, decide themselves to pull ads that received negative or offensive complaints. In 2017 the fast-food company McDonald’s decided to pull a commercial of its Filet-O-Fish burger, that was showing a mother talking with his son about his dead father and finding similarities between the two because they both liked the same type of burger. The ad received 256 complaints in UK claiming that it was trivializing grief and could cause offence or distress to families going through a similar situation²³.

Advertising regulation regarding offensiveness is still evolving and continuous effort should be put by regulatory bodies in order to ensure that rules and standards are respected. Regulations should also be up to date in order to align with current issues and should take into consideration different cultures and lifestyles.

²² “First ads banned for contravening UK gender stereotyping rules” on The Guardian, 2019, www.theguardian.com

²³ “Top 10 most complained about ads from 2017”

Chapter 2: Sexism vs. female empowerment in advertising

2.1 Gender stereotypes in advertising

Women's portrayal in advertising, especially print, television or outdoor, has been under scrutiny over the past century and has been subject to controversies, public criticism and extensive research. In the past, but still nowadays, women are depicted as inferior, in respect to men, usually in traditional housewives roles, taking care of the house or children. Women are also often objectified and represented in a stereotypical manner, exploiting gender roles. On the contrary, men have always been showed on a higher level, in their working environment, in important job positions, while making adventurous activities like driving a sport car, almost never in a home environment, taking care of their family or their house.

For Barker (1999) a stereotype implies constraining people to a set of exaggerated, usually negative, character traits to reduce, naturalize, and fix differences. Stereotypes are not necessarily negative, even though they may lead to the simplification of conceptions and expectations that devalue and limit the potential opportunities of subjects belonging to a social category (Eisend, 2010; Tsihla et al., 2013 a,b). Stereotypes are defined as beliefs about a social category (Vinacke, 1957) and there is a well-known debate, the *mirror* versus the *mold* debate, between sociologists and advertisers regarding the mission and the social nature of advertising, in particular when talking about stereotypes. According to the *mirror* view, advertising is representative of dominant and existing societal values, which are the result of multiple, intertwined factors, and the best thing that it can do is to amplify these values, offering an extrapolated picture of reality (Pollay, 1987). As consequence, men and women would be depicted in advertising according to the main beliefs present in society regarding gender roles and the effect of advertising would be merely insignificant. So, gender roles in advertising reflect cultural expectations towards gender, according to this view.

For the *mold* view instead, advertising is as a reflection of society and its main cultural values, so it has an impact on its audience (Pollay, 1987) and *cultivation theory* argues that the perception that people hold about social reality are actually created by the media (Gerbner, 1998). People see stereotypes presented by the media and integrate them into their personal system of values and beliefs about life (Zotos et al., 2014). Gender roles are however socially constructed (Wolf, 1991) and advertising is a form of communication which offers examples of lifestyles and ideas of one's self that people use in order to build roles in society (Plakoyiannaki et al., 2008). Many advertisements appeal to consumers' gender identity, using as basis the stereotyped images of masculinity and femininity (Schroeder et al., 2004). Advertising is then a visual representation which both reflects and contributes to culture (Albers-Miller

et al., 1996), so the mirror and mold view seem to be a sort of continuum and the answer to this debate lies in the middle between the two views; however Eisend's empirical study (2010) supports the mirror view over the mold one.

In the past decades, advertising has shown men and women according to conventional and stereotypical gender interactions and sex roles. Gender stereotypes are beliefs that certain attributes differentiate women and men (Ashmore et. al, 1981). They are generalizations about attributes of men and women and can have *descriptive* and *prescriptive* proprieties (Eagly, 2002). Descriptive gender stereotypes define what attributes are thought to characterize men and women, while prescriptive gender stereotypes delineate expectations of how women and men should be. The main problem of stereotypes is that they create expectations regarding social categories or also diminish and limit opportunities. Past research argues that gender stereotypes include four independent factors that have both a feminine and masculine component: *trait descriptors* (e.g., self-assertion, concern for others), *physical characteristics* (e.g., hair length, body weight), *role behaviors* (e.g., leader, taking care of children), and *occupational status* (e.g., constructor, housewife) (Deaux et al., 1984). According to most scholars, the term *sex* refers to the male and female connotation, instead the term *gender* has a more sociological meaning, and relates to masculinity and femininity (Patterson et al., 2009). For Nixon (1997), gender identities are “invented categories”, the result of cultural meanings connected with attributes, abilities, dispositions and norms on conduct, in a certain historical period.

The investigation of gender stereotypes in advertising was augmented by changes in the economic, social and cultural environment of the last century, in particular the rise of women's rights movement in the 1960s which challenged equal opportunities for men and women and contributed to a slow, but gradual change in the domestic structure and also the occupational dimension (Zotos et al., 1994; Plakoyiannaki et al., 2009; Tsihla et al., 2013a). Moreover, changes in the work force, women's higher education levels and as consequence, social status, contributed also to a change in how gender roles were portrayed in advertising (Zotos et al., 1994). The problem with stereotypes, in particular gender stereotypes against women, is that they can have several implications and consequences for different spheres of their social and personal life. Physical characteristics' stereotypes, like the observance of beauty ideals, can lead to a reduced self-dignity and body dissatisfaction, stereotyping of role behaviors like the belief that women should take care of children, may lead to restricted work opportunities of self-development, and stereotyping of occupational roles can lead to disadvantages in women's careers (Eisend, 2010). Avoiding the use of such stereotypes in advertising and reaching the goal of equal life opportunities for both genders in different contexts, like occupational or personal, is a main preoccupation for gender policy in advertising and has become an objective in many societies.

2.1.1 Female stereotypes and roles in advertising

Despite stereotypes in advertising involve both men and women, the latter seems the category which has been hit the most by an inappropriate, offensive and discriminatory portrayals. At the beginning of the 20th century, in Western countries, women were considered as the main target for marketed goods, because they were the ones who had to take care of the house, children and their husbands, and had to take most of the decisions regarding home-related products and products for hygiene and personal care. Women were not only the target of advertising, but also the main protagonists at that time; many ads pictured the figure of the perfect housewife in advertisements for cosmetics, talcum powder or soap, and also other products like beverages like tea, coffee, chocolate and even sweets. In those years, the ideal woman was depicted as a “champion of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity,” a perpetuation of the Victorian era values of the nineteenth century (Adams et al., 2009). Many advertisements of the time suggested that women should stay within the boundaries of domestic life and take care of their home and their family, that they should obey to their husbands and to males in general as a category. Even though, there was this idealization of the domestic female figure, a growing number of women were starting to work in those years. In America for example, in 1900, 20 percent of American wage earners were women,²⁴ and the most common types of jobs for that time were domestic servants like nurses, maids or cooks, but also factory workers.



Exhibit 2.1 Examples of advertisements of the early 1900

Women's Suffrage in Western countries around the 1920s was starting to change the traditional and exclusively domestic connotation of female figure in societies. In those same years there was a change

²⁴ “Teaching the Wives and Mothers of the Future,” *New York Times*, February 6, 1910, <http://www.proquest.com>

in the traditional Victorian principles of the view of the female figure and its roles, in fact they were beginning to seem old-fashioned. But still, even if women were fighting for their rights and for equality, advertisements were still mocking women's qualities and exploiting their new sense of empowerment, coming from their early achievements, to capitalize on this fact. For example, the Lucky Strike cigarette campaign of 1928 was specifically targeting women with the tagline "Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet"²⁵. The series of ads showed attractive women in opposition to obese or unattractive ones, and suggested cigarettes as a healthier alternative than eating sweets or snacks, in order to maintain a particular thin and attractive body image. Advertisers were starting to leverage women's insecurities in order to sell more and promote wrong and unattainable ideas of how a woman should look and appear, that would then lead to serious problems regarding the female image in the next years. Another example is the advertisement for Heed's deodorant released in the '50s which was showing a sad woman left alone by her date because she was smelling badly because of a failure of her deodorant. The ad presented the phrase "He said goodnight, but he meant goodbye", implying that women should take care of their hygiene and odors if they do not want to be left alone. The idea of cleanness and hygiene was also connected at that time, with the idea one of women's worries should be that of looking beautiful and young for as long as possible. Another example is Palmolive's ad of 1933 that pictures a lady looking at a photograph of a man with a sort of nostalgia. The headline wants to give women a "lesson in confidence", suggesting that they should use the product to look clean, younger and appealing in order not to potentially lose the interest of a man.



Exhibit 2.3 Other examples of ads during the early 19th century

²⁵ "Reach For A Lucky: The Lucky Strike Cigarette Diet (1928)", www.djublonskopf.com

In the last sixty years a significant amount of research has been conducted in order to investigate the portrayal of women in advertising, especially with the use of content analysis. During the '70s and '80s, most of the studies about the topic were conducted in the USA and in Europe, where there is a body of literature which indicates the presence of stereotypical depictions of the female figure in advertisements, while other researches show that this practice was actually decreasing over time. One of the earliest studies by Courtney et al. (1971) analyzed 729 print ads on American magazines and found that only 9 percent of women were depicted in working roles, compared to 45 percent for men. Even though the researchers concluded that the ads analyzed did not comprehend all the social and working roles that women engaged in at the time, they suggested four stereotypes regarding women:

- *“A woman’s place is in the home”*: in reference to the fact that women were mainly depicted in situations involving house chores or their role as mothers and wives;
- *“Women do not make important decisions or do important things”*: as they are often shown in situations considered as inferior with respect to a man’s jobs and duties;
- *“Women are dependent and need men’s protection”*: suggesting that women need the presence of men to do activities more than men need them;
- *“Men regard women primarily as sexual objects”*: women were depicted mainly in decorative roles, objectifying their body and figure.

Belkaoui et al. (1976) conducted a longitudinal study on women’s portrayal in print advertisements and confirmed that women were mainly portrayed in decorative and traditional roles, and failed to mirror current changes in women’s place and achievements in society, due to the improvements of female education and occupation status, feminism and women’s sexual emancipation. For Sexton et al. (1974), women in ads were shown in domestic environments and focused on physical attractiveness. An English study confirmed again that women were shown in concern for their physical appearance, as housewives and in situations in which they were presented as objects of sexual gratification (Lyonsky, 1985). A study performed in Italy showed a decrease in print advertisements with women in professional roles and a frequent presence of physical attractiveness appeals (Zotos et al., 1996); another research in Greece claimed that Greek ads at that time did not reflect the changing roles of women for their career and social status (Zotos et al., 1994).

Contrarily, there have been several studies over the years which show the decrease in the use of female stereotypes in print advertising. Venkatesan et al. (1975) observed that in magazines of the period from 1959 to 1971, the portrayal of women as sex objects and housewives had decreased since 1961 and also Klassen et al. (1993) suggested that since the early 1980s there has been a downturn in the traditional

depictions of women. A cross-cultural study of Piron et al. (1996) between Germany and the US, proved that role portrayals of women in the two countries had become softer.

More recent research shows that, in general, gender stereotypes are still used in advertising all over the world. Eisend (2010), in a quantitative review of 64 previous studies about the topic, found that stereotypes still invade advertising, in particular those against women regarding occupational roles, but found also a decrease in the use of stereotypes, mostly because of cultural improvements in high masculinity societies, like Japan. Another interesting finding is that consumers' perceptions about gender stereotypes is also linked to humor. In a study by Eisend et al. (2014), gender role portrayals were found less serious when used as sources of humor, in particular female stereotypes were found prevalently in non-humorous ads, while male ones were prevalent in humorous ads.

Shao (2014) examined Chinese advertisers and how the Chinese culture has an impact on the creation of advertising. His findings show that in China, men are depicted in occupational roles and recreational ones more than women, who are portrayed in more decorative roles. Moreover Chinese advertisers seemed not to reflect or fully understand their role in continuing to present stereotypes, because for them, they simply mirror the Chinese reality, rather than faking a situation different from the one actually present in their country. Advertisers affirmed that they were just mirroring their culture, which is a masculine one (Hofstede, 1984).

From these finding it is evident how the use of stereotypes still pervades the advertising landscape, after decades of fights for equal rights and women's liberation from social injustice and male dominance. Gender stereotypes can have an influence on the perceived offensiveness of an ad and also on the attitude towards advertising in general, especially for women (Huhmann et al., 2016). In particular, sexism appeals used in advertising include female stereotypes (Fordet al., 1993) and sexual appeals (LaTour, 1990). A sexist advertising execution means that women are portrayed as sexual toys or objects, or victims of violence, thus reinforcing cultural values of subservience, domination and inequality between the sexes (White, 1990). So, it is important to understand the process of sexual objectification that women underwent in advertising over the past decades and its effect on how women's perception about the use of sexist images and sexist representation in advertising, may cause offensiveness and influence their attitudes and purchase intentions.

2.2 Sexism in advertising

The use of sexual appeals in advertising dates back to the beginning of the 20th century and has constantly been contested in terms of ethics and morality. Boddewyn (1991) described the use of sexuality in advertising as a "soft issue", which depends on complex, personal and socially and culturally constructed roots and values. There are many types of sexual appeals used in advertising, often they are present in visual elements like attractive models, or actors, and may show different degrees of nudity and suggestiveness (Severn et al., 1990). Sexual appeals can also include suggestive music or the environment or also taglines and slogans.

The continuous use of sexual images and appeals in advertising rests on the assumption that "sex sells", but what is still uncertain are the consequences and the effects of this use of sex-related stimuli have on consumers. According to a British Survey (ASA, 1990): "The strongest expressions of offence, among the public in general, relate to advertisements which exploited nudity, semi-nudity, or sex in a manner which could be said to be irrelevant to the product advertised". Past literature has repeatedly shown how nudity, sexist image, sexual connotation and the stereotyping of people constitute a reason for offensiveness in advertising (Waller, 2004; Waller et al., 2007, 2015, Phau et al., 2001), and how women result to be more offended than men in general. Research found consistent evidence that women are sexualized and objectified in advertising and mass media (Ward, 2016). In 2018 a survey of attitudes towards gender equality in Australia found that one third of respondents were convinced that sexism is still widespread in advertising (Evans et al. 2018). How women are depicted in advertisements affects the perception of women's role in society and how a woman should act and behave (Lafky et al., 1996; Lindner, 2004), so a sexist ad would work against equality among the sexes.

The word *sexism* refers to any attitude, behaviour, institutional arrangement, or policy that favours one gender over another (Cortese, 2004). Sexism in advertising involves the use of stereotypical portrayals of women, objectification and sexual objectification, degrading, offensive, abusive and sometimes violent portrayals in relationship with men. In particular, the term *objectification* is used to describe the process of separation of a person's body or body parts, so that they are reduced to the status of just being an object (Szymanski et al., 2011). The *Objectification theory* by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), argues that *sexual objectification* occurs when a woman's body or body parts are pointed out singularly, or separated from the woman as an integral entity, resulting in women be seen just as physical objects of male sexual desire and gaze (Bartky, 1990).

Examples of female objectification in advertising include the decorative portrayal as housewives and mothers, but also the idealized figure of the pure and beautiful woman, whose main preoccupation was just to be perfect and clean for her husband. It includes also the use of female figures as ornaments; an

example is an ad from the American brand of men's trousers Mr. Leggs by Dacron, of the 1970s. The ad shows the figure of a man wearing a business dress and standing confidently with one leg on the top of a woman's head attached to a tiger skin rug. The ad includes a humorous phrase on the bottom saying "It's nice to have a girl around the house", but it is a clear and accurate depiction of the sexism and objectification towards women that was pervading the United States during the seventies. The head of the women attached to a poached tiger's body is a symbol for the fierceness of women during the 1970s while the Women's Right Movement was taking place. The male model instead is a symbol for the dominance of the patriarchy and for the male power to reclaim their *trophy wife*.



Exhibit 2.4 Dacron ad for Mr Leggs, 1970

More recent examples on how sexism and objectification are still used in advertising can be seen in Exhibit 2.5,6,7. Exhibit 2.5 shows an ad for BMW's "The ultimate attraction campaign" of 2002 and is a clear example of sexism, gender stereotyping and sexual objectification of women. The ad shows a sexual intercourse between both attractive, thin and tanned man and woman. The male figure is on top of the woman and is in control of her, somehow keeping a distance, while she tries to reach him. What shocks the most is that the woman, apart from appearing submissive and grasping to have a sort of emotional connection with her partner, has a magazine opened on her head with the image of a BMW car, which covers her face completely. The ad explicitly objectifies women and depicts old, but always recurrent stereotypes about male dominance over women and unrealistic views of how male and female bodies should be.



Exhibit 2.5 BMW ad 2002



Exhibit 2.6 Pop Chips ad 2012



Exhibit 2.7 Tom Ford ad 2007

Exhibit 2.6 is an ad published by Pop Chips in 2012, for a campaign featuring the American singer Katy Perry. The ad shows the singer holding in her hands two packs of chips in front of her breasts. The text says “Nothing fake about ‘em”, sexually objectifying the singer’s breasts and implying that the chips are as genuine and “healthy” as Katy Perry’s breasts. Another example, in Exhibit 2.7 is Tom Ford campaign for a male perfume in 2007 called “Tom Ford For Men: The First Fragrance for Men from Tom Ford”. The campaign included a series of three ads featuring an oiled up, sun-kissed woman with the bottle of perfume strategically placed in provocative areas of her body. The face of woman is not completely shown, the observer can just see that she is wearing a red lipstick and red nail polish.

A new shift in the advertising landscape came in the ‘90s with the emergence of a new female figure, an attractive, young, heterosexual woman, sexually liberated and free to play with her sexual power. This new figure is known as the *Midriff*, due to the mode of that time of exposing that part of the body in advertising, between the mid-1900s and mid-2000s (Quart, 2003). Women in this period were also defined as fearless and powerful, a new, sexually assertive female construction (Macdonald, 1995). Central to Midriff advertising is the focus on the female body, which is portrayed as being thin, perfect, tanned, waxed and moisturized; owning a “sexy body” is presented at that time as the key source of female identity (Gill, 2008). A very prominent example is an ad for Wonderbra, a brand for bras, which features a young, attractive woman wearing just a black, cleavage-enhancing bra. Between her breasts there is the slogan “I can’t cook. Who cares?”, combined with a non-verbal message created by her body pose which suggest to consumers that by buying the product they could have amazing breasts like

that of the model, and also that having a seductive body is more important than possessing the stereotypical qualities of women, in specific housewives, like cooking.



Exhibit 2.8 Wonderbra ad 1999

In 1994 another ad for Wonderbra's "Hello boys" campaign, featured the model Eva Herzigova, with a quotation from Mae West saying "Or are you just pleased to see me?", with the first part of the quotation "Is that a gun in your pocket?", being left out, implicitly meaning that the male viewer had an erection after seeing the beautiful woman. This is an example of a woman which is not passive at all, but rather active, desiring sexual subjects, and able to play with her sexual power and engage in practices and forms of self-presentation that earlier generations regarded as connected to subordination.

Moreover, during the late '80s and early '90s, advertisers began to recognize the female discontent in being continuously objectified and presented with sexist images and idealized pictures of femininity, this is why they had to find new ways to engage with the female consumers. Goldman (1992) in particular, developed the term "commodity feminism", to describe the ways in which advertisers had to rethink advertising to incorporate the cultural power and energy of feminism sexual liberation, while domesticating and reducing its criticism towards advertising and the media. Commodity feminism tried to appropriate feminist desires, goals, fights and rhetoric, but ultimately reduced their political and social goals for freedom and equality to a female quest for personal desires (Douglas, 1994). Researchers also talk about *retro-sexism*, as it was observed that modern media seems to use retro-sexist

images of women (Gill et al., 2006; Plakoyiannaki et al., 2009) which is a social and stylistic phenomenon, based on the transmission of culturally sanctioned aspects of femininity related to notions of dependency, attractiveness, and adherence to household tasks, often combined with the use of humor and irony (Whelehan, 2000; Williamson, 2003). For some, retro-sexism in advertising is used to empower women, others think that is another move against feminism (Gill et al., 2006).

Central to Midriff advertising is also the concept of choice and pleasing one's self, following feminist female empowerment discourses. Yet this empowerment is tied to the possession of an attractive, thin body, which has the ability to attract male gaze and desire once again and sometimes also female envy (Goldman, 1992). Moreover this kind of empowerment excludes black women, older women, disabled women and everyone who is not able to live up to this tight, time-consuming and expensive standards of female beauty and sex appeal. Midriff advertising involves a shift in how power works, from an external male-judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic one (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993). According to Gill (2008) it represents a more advanced form of female exploitation, with respect to the previous objectification which encountered the objection of second-wave feminists. This type of advertising adds another layer of oppression according to the author, because women are further objectified through a sexual objectification which encourages them to think of their own objectification as something which is self-chosen and a source of pleasure and desire.

Despite the continuous fights of feminist movements and advertising regulation, it seems that the problem of sexism in advertising is still present. A study of television advertisements in the US found that women were less dressed in comparison to men which appeared more likely to be fully dressed (Prieler, 2015). A cross-cultural comparison of newspaper ads in the Netherlands and Italy concluded that in both countries women were more often dressed in a provocative and seductive way and objectified, but with more examples in Italian newspapers (Tartaglia et al., 2015). A review of magazines for teen and pre-teen girls found an increased sexualization of women by using sexualized clothing like low-cut tops or tights fitting clothes, make-up and heels, between 1979 and 2011 (Graff et al., 2013). Also in the sports field, advertisements regarding female athletes and women have become more sexualized (Sherry et al., 2015). In 2019 JD Sports removed from its website a sexist image of a female model wearing Scotland national football team shirt, after receiving complaints from the Scottish Football Association (SFA) and from social media users. Online there was a picture of a man and of a kid wearing the shirt and looking like professional athletes, while there was the image of a girl, wearing make-up and with her hair all done, clothed with the Scotland shirt and some ripped jeans, sitting with her legs opened. After the complaints JD Sports' spokesman apologized for any offence caused and substituted immediately the sexist picture.

Anyway, feminist ideas about women empowerment, surely affected the advertising industry with recent campaigns that are in favor of spreading a truthful and stereotype-free version of women in advertisements, following also recent feminist activism like the “Me Too” movement against sexual harassment and sexual violence against women and many others. For example the Australian Ad Standards Community Panel, which works in relationship with the Australian Association of National Advertisers’ Code of Ethics regarding the use of sexual appeals in advertising, stated that “Advertisements for fashion or perfume which depict women in stylized sexual poses may be considered exploitative, but are not considered degrading if the women are shown to be confident and in control” (Ad Standards 2018)²⁶. Understanding whether these type of female representation in advertising are actually effective or offensive and what are the effects on women’s behavior and attitudes, requires further research and studies about this type of female empowerment. It is important to understand whether it is helping women to achieve gender equality or it is further sexualizing and objectifying them, constructing their power and success just on physical attractiveness and fake images of the perfect female figure, once again linking its power uniquely to their sexual attractiveness and desirability to men.

Past studies have highlighted the potential negative effects of the use of sexist advertising appeals regarding women. For Jacobsen (1995) the main issue with sexism is that it has become normalized and intertwined in our every-day lives, or is so disguised and subconscious that it is not noticed anymore. A repeated exposure to advertising stereotypes, including sexist ones, can lead to the spread of sexist beliefs, sexual harassment, violence against woman, eating disorders and stereotypical perceptions of behaviour towards women (Cohen-Eliya, 2004; Kilbourne, 1987). For Fredrickson et al. (1997) self-objectification can increase women’s anxiety about their body and their physical safety (e.g., fears about being raped), which in turn can lead to disordered eating, depression, and sexual dysfunction. Sexist advertising creates distorted body images regarding beauty and slimness, creating unattainable standards for women to live up to (Lavine et al., 1999). There are also negative consequences for companies and brands, for example an Australian study examined male and female undergraduates’ reactions to sexist images of women in alcohol advertisements and found that females reported more negative attitudes towards advertisements which used demeaning sexual appeals and more positive attitudes towards empowering advertising images (Jones et al., 2011). In another study by Ford et al. (1991) which measured the attitudes of women when exposed to female role portrayals, was found that according to the female sample, the ads were considered as offensive and that an offensive advertising campaign would have a negative effect on company image and purchase intention.

²⁶ For a recent example see the Ad Standards case report from 7/3/2018, no. 0083/18 in relation to a Honey Birdette lingerie poster advertisement, available at <https://adstandards.com.au/cases/2018/March>

2.3 Evolution and consequences of third wave feminism

Useful to understand how women's portrayal has changed in advertising and what affects women's attitude towards their representation in the media, is the social and ideological landscape, in particular the evolvement of the feminist movement. Despite some common and fundamental concepts and ideas, the feminist movement has been divided over the years according to different periods, the so called *waves*. The movement originated in Western countries and the *first wave* occurred during the 19th and 20th century and was mainly focus on legal issues like the right to vote, but also education, employment and marriage laws were key concerns. The term *second wave* was coined by Marsha Lear, and was then used to indicate all the other periods²⁷. The second wave started in the 1960s and refers to an increase in the feminist movement which took place in the USA, then spread to Britain and soon to other Western countries. The second wave lasted roughly for two decades, until the 1980s and focus on issues of gender equality and discrimination. Women's liberation was centered on equality in the workplace, in politics and on the differences in the fields of reproduction and sexuality (Freedman, 2007). They also draw attention to issues like domestic violence and marital rape. Key player feminist of the second wave was Betty Friedan (1963) who in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, criticized the idea that women's fulfillment was exclusively related to raising children and taking care of the home and argued that women were victims of false beliefs, which lead them to find their own identity in life solely through husbands and children.

Third wave feminism began in the early 1990s, and was led by women belonging to the Generation X, born between 1960s and 1970s. Many feminist writers associate the beginning of the third wave to the publication of Naomi Wolf's book *The Beauty Myth* in 1991, where she argued that feminism needed to be reawakened. Others make reference to a statement made by Rebecca Walker in *Ms. Magazine* in 1992 where she said "I am not a post-feminism feminist, I am the Third Wave"²⁸. The third generation of feminists grew up with the benefits of the achievements of the first two generations, and in an environment that was already familiar with feminism's goals and ideals. The term *post feminism* is a very controversial one, and has also been used in association with the Third wave. Budgeon (2001) outlines two major uses of the term; the first approach is tight to authors like Faludi (1992), who associate post feminism with a backlash against feminism, meaning that the feminist goals had already been achieved, the new goals were constructed on individual problems and not political ones, so it is a sort of anti-feminism actually. Faludi (1992) uses the term "post feminism" to indicate the indifference towards feminism, suggesting that popular culture used a "post-feminist" attitude, which did not symbolize that

²⁷ HENRY, A. (2004) 'Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism' Indiana University Press. p. 58

²⁸ Walker, R. (1992). Becoming the third wave in *Ms* (pp. 39–41)

feminist equity objectives had been achieved, on the contrary it meant that women today do not seem to be concerned with this matter. The second approached according to Budgeon (2001) involves a vision of post feminism which does not sanction the death of the feminist movement, but implies “a process of ongoing transformation”. However, the third wave was clearly embedded in popular culture (Iannello, 2010) and influenced by globalization and a media saturated landscape. Heywood et al. (2007) argued that third wave feminism was born in a postmodern and neoliberal era of relative gender equality, globalization, deregulation and decentralization of power. Issues like racism, heterosexism, ableism, environmental protection, and economic justice have been of central importance for third wave feminism (Findlen, 1995; Garrison, 2000). Third wave’s use of activism through pop culture was evident in much of the music in the early to mid-1990s, especially with the *Riot Grrrl* movement (Richards et al., 2000), a group of bands that wanted to take part into the male-dominated punk rock landscape singing about rape, patriarchy, sexuality, female empowerment and other themes important for feminists. Third wave feminists reclaimed also the use of derogatory terms like *bitch*, *spinster*, *whore* or *cunt* and turned their use into a positive, empowering expressions as shown in the book by Elizabeth Wurtzel *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women* (1998).

The ideology of women belonging to the third wave wanted to challenge the definitions of femininity of the previous waves, arguing that they over-emphasized the experiences of upper middle-class white women. In fact second wave feminism was often accused of being elitist and ignoring groups such as women of colour and transgender women. Third wave feminism fought to include issues like race, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, and nationality into their battle and wanted to question and redefine the ideas transmitted by the media about womanhood, gender, beauty, sexuality, femininity and masculinity²⁹. Also the second wave notion of *sexual liberation* was expanded to understand how one's gender identity and sexuality have actually been shaped by society and be free to express its intrinsic and authentic self. The thematic of sexual objectification, to which the second wave fundamentally opposed, is seen as a challenge to defy, in order to struggle for empowerment and self-choice. Third wave feminist promoted sexuality as a positive aspect of female life, and argued that women are free to show their body, play with their sexual attractiveness and objectify themselves, if they wish, but under their own terms. Naomi Wolf (1993) defined the notion of *power femininity*, to express the fact that women have a great power both financially and politically. In those same years, the image of a strong, powerful woman started to appear in U.S. popular culture, on television, with shows like *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Charmed* (1998-2006), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) and *Alias* (2001-2006), that contributed to the spread of power feminism through the media. In these shows there was however a merely individualistic emphasis of feminism, expressed

²⁹ The third wave of feminism, Encyclopedia Britannica, www.britannica.com/topic/feminism/The-third-wave-of-feminism

primarily through the behaviours and actions of the protagonists, but without a clear engagement to feminist issues. Dow (1996) defined this period in television as “prime-time feminism” to describe how it reduced feminism to an individual cultural identity rather than a political movement with collective strategy. The consumer market successively adopted and transferred the language and visual codes of this new feminism after they were watered down and depoliticized, into the slogan of “Girl power”. “Girl power” has been made into a fashionable and marketable commodity and has been used to market fashion accessories, cosmetics and clothing (Zaslow, 2009) from the late 1990s onwards. Music also described this new female figure who is able to display her power, financial success and sexual self-determination, with artists like Destiny’s Child, The Spice Girls, Madonna and Christina Aguilera. Feminism was reformulated as girl power by the media and young women learnt that calling oneself a feminist does not require a commitment to ending sexist oppression for all women, but simply to declare a feminist identification and to wave the flag of self-determination (Zaslow, 2009).

Whether you call it Third wave or Post Feminism, it is evident how the feminist movement and its ideals had an impact on the socio-cultural environment during the shift from 20th to 21st century. Feminist rhetoric and symbolism were easy for the popular culture to adopt, and we can see how they have become intertwined in the media landscape, through advertising, television, music and in the commodity market, with clothing and cosmetics in particular. The feminist movement still goes on today, in fact in 2009 Jessica Valenti started to talk about the *Fourth Wave* of feminism saying that “maybe the fourth wave is online”³⁰. The Fourth Wave of feminism includes people born after 1990, mainly late Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) and Generation Z (anyone born after 1997)³¹. These two generations, in particular Generation Z, constitute a new political generation, they are digital natives, grew up in the era of Internet and Social Media (Milkman, 2017). Fourth Wave feminists share the same dilemmas of the Third Wave and probably got informed about feminism through Internet, blogs, rather than reading books. On-line is where the fourth wave activism takes place, facilitating interactions and peer-communication, with the propagation of ideas and slogans through hashtags, pictures and posts. An example is the #MeToo movement started in 2006 when the activist Tarana Burke founded a non-profit organization to help survivors of sexual harassment and abuse³². The #MeToo hashtag movement began then on Twitter after the storm that started a few years before due to news of sexual allegations in the show business, which eventually culminated in Harvey Weinstein, a cinema producer, becoming the international symbol the movement was against. With respect to the third wave, the fourth one has a greater interest for political activism, calling for equal pay, justice

³⁰ Solomon, D. “Fourth-Wave Feminism,” *New York Times*, 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/11/15/magazine/15fob-q4-t.html

³¹ According to the Pew Research Institute, 2018

³² Garcia, E. S. “The woman who created #MeToo long before hashtags,” *New York Times*, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html

regarding sexual harassment and assault, body shaming, rape culture and sexism in the media, but is still influenced, and as well influences feminist marketing and pop culture (Zeisler, 2016).

In recent years advertisers have become always better at branding themselves as supporters of feminist ideals and at defining themselves as feminist through catchy slogans and shareable hashtags to promote female empowerment by getting women and girls to share their social media campaigns. In 2004 Dove launched a global advertising campaign “Real Beauty”, whose main message was to celebrate women’s unique differences and that physical appearance should be transformed from a source of anxiety to a source of confidence, so it carried an important and empowering messages for women of all ages and ethnicity. This message was delivered through different communication means, like TV commercials, magazine, talk shows, and a worldwide conversation through the Internet. Despite its popularity and commercial success, the campaign has also been subject to criticism because it failed to account for all types of women in the world, including disabled ones, and promoted a distorted *ideal* of what real women look like. Moreover the company’s “femvertising” strategy has also been criticized because Dove’s parent company, Unilever, owns Axe, a men’s health company and over the years many of Axe’s ads have been degrading and sexist towards women, an example can be seen in Exhibit 2.9. It is clear that feminist advertising does not seem to pertain to the core ideology of the company, but is only used as an effective marketing tool.



Exhibit 2.9 AXE ad 2012

2.4 Research propositions

From a review of past literature regarding offensive advertising, it emerges that age is a factor that may influence consumers' perception about the offensiveness of a product or of an advertising execution. In particular, studies have shown that younger consumers seem to take less offense when exposed to offensive advertising, while older consumers were found altogether more offended (Barnes et al., 1990; Grazer et al., 1995; Waller, 2007; Zimmerman et al. 2008). Past researches have also shown how nudity, sexist image, sexual connotation and the stereotyping of people constitute a reason for offensiveness in advertising (Waller, 2004; Waller et al., 2007, 2015, Phau et al., 2001), and how women result to be more offended than men in general. Sexism in particular, is one of the offensive appeals of major concern in Western literature (Boddewyn, 1991; Ma, 1996) and there is consistent evidence that proves that women are sexualized and objectified in advertising still nowadays (Ward, 2016). The problem often is that sexist offensive appeals have become so normalized and part of our every-day life and culture that are not noticed anymore (Jacobsen, 1995). Retro-sexism has been also used, disguised as female empowerment, to promote female sexual liberation from past objectification and sexism in the media (Gill et al., 2006).

Younger generations, like *Millennials* and *Generation Z*, were born and grew up in a media saturated landscape where sex and nudity are constantly present in advertising, television, music industry and on social media. This continuous exposure is reflected in a premature sexualization of girls, which are the target of marketing campaigns that make them aspire to emulate “girly” and “sexy” images through clothing with adult sexual messages that they see on magazines or from their favorite celebrity or tight crop tops, tiny skirts and bras (Lamb et al., 2006). The recent consumer culture makes girls understand that “looking sexy is cool” or “hot” and makes them “cute” and desirable to boys (Lamb et al., 2006). Given the influence of third wave feminist movement on popular culture and media representation of women, younger consumers were born in a reality where female empowerment is shown through a free expression of nudity and self-objectification, and where sexism still appears, even if sometimes it is less evident or latent. At the same time, older consumers, who belong to the Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) and Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964)³³, were raised in a different cultural, social and political environment, where the female figure was presented in a different way by the media. Women belonging to these categories have witnessed the evolution of female representation by the media, from perfect housewives and mothers to the hard sexism and sexual objectification in the 1970s. Given this, and the influence of second wave feminism in the society of that time, older consumers

³³ According to the Pew Research Institute, 2018

may be more critical towards sexist and sexual depictions of women in advertising nowadays. Hence the current study will focus on these research questions:

H1: Younger female respondents are less offended by sexist-offensive advertising appeals than older ones.

Past literature has focus on “sexist images” as reason for advertising offensiveness (Waller, 2004, 2007; Waller et. al, 2015). Seeing sexist images or pictures portraying women as sex objects or in stereotypical gender roles has become something embedded in the media culture of the recent decades. Today’s girls are born and raised in a world dominated by sexualized content, which is claimed as freedom and sexuality by third and fourth wave feminism (Zimmerman et al., 2008). Sexual imagery is often used by marketers to target teenagers and young adults to sell whatever type of product (Reichert, 2003). Ryan and David (2003) argued that a consistent exposure to sexualized imagery might gradually lead societies to accept it more or find it less offensive. For these reasons it is possible that younger women may not feel that offended by sexist images and stereotypical pictures portraying women as sex object, but still could be offended for example, by the advertising copy, if it contained sexist appeals. Hence:

H2: Younger women are more offended by the words used in a sexist-offensive advertisement than the pictures used, with respect to older women.

Regarding women’s attitudes towards their portrayal in the media, as said before, due to the cultural environment in which they were born, younger girls may think that the sexy and provocative portrayals that they see in the media are something to aspire to. This may lead to them wanting to be, also at a young age, already grown-up and be able to look and dress like the women they see on television or in magazines. Sexist appeals or stereotypical depictions of women may then be mistakenly seen by younger girls as something empowering and sexually liberating. Hence:

H3_A: When women are shown in sexy and provocative attitudes in ads, younger women want to be like them more than older ones.

Moreover, given the fact that younger girls are so used to seeing women in sexist scenarios and stereotypes in the media, they may have a more positive attitude towards women’s representation in the media landscape with respect to older ones. Hence:

H3_B: Younger girls believe that the portrayal of women in advertising is changing for the better, more than older ones.

Moreover, past literature has shown also that younger consumers are more likely to continue buying a product whose advertising they find offensive with respect to older consumers, who are instead more likely to discontinue using or buying it (Phau et al., 2001). A study by Zimmerman et al. (2008) has examined young female attitudes towards sexual objectification in advertising and found that even if they feel offended or do not like advertisements for a product containing sexist appeals, they will still purchase them and will continue using the ones they already have. Then:

H4: Sexist-offensive ads will damage older respondents' purchase intentions of products advertised with sexist-offensive appeals more than the younger's.

Chapter 3: Focus Group on controversial advertising

3.1 Research methodology and design

For the purpose of this study, a mixed methodology was chosen, to include both quantitative and qualitative data collection. According to Creswell (1994), a quantitative research is a type of research that is “explaining phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analysed using mathematically based methods (in particular statistics)”. Quantitative research thus, is based on objective measurements using mathematical and statistical analysis of data and it focuses on gathering numerical data to generalize it across groups of people in order to make sense of a given phenomenon (Babbie, 2010). Examples of quantitative research methodologies are surveys like on-line polls or paper questionnaires; causal-comparative research to understand the cause-effect equation among two or more variables, and experimental researches. Instead qualitative measurements are useful to understand the meanings, perceptions, assumptions, prejudgements and presuppositions of people (Van Manen, 1977). Qualitative research is not just about what people think, but why they think that, it is a tool used to gather deeper and hidden insights from respondents on a specific topic. Qualitative methods are useful to collect information about the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour that are often difficult to catch with a closed survey questionnaire. In this way, people would be free to express feelings, thoughts and past experiences without any constraint. Examples of qualitative research techniques are in-depth interviews, conducted with one respondent at a time, over the phone or face to face; ethnographic research which consists of observing people in their natural occurring environment; record keeping or focus groups.

Previous research about offensive advertising has mainly contributed with quantitative description and measurements, but a qualitative point of view is also needed and desirable to fully understand the topic (ODonohoe, 1995; Boddewyn, 1991). Research has largely used quantitative techniques like surveys to investigate offensive advertising (e.g. Barnes et al, 1990; Waller, 1999, Dahl et al., 2003; Waller et al., 2013, 2015; Prendergast et al., 2002). In particular these studies have determined how women are the category which is most sensitive to offences, but so far studies have not fully examined why they are offended or how.

The focus of this study is to explore the effect of age differences on the perceived level of offensiveness, in particular of advertisements with potentially sexist-offensive appeals. In order to answer to the hypotheses proposed by this study, we decided to adopt a mixed approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. When deciding how to structure a research, the strategy chosen should be based on the research situation, keeping in mind the choice among the

type of questions to ask, the control over behavioral elements and the extent to focus on historical or contemporary elements (Yin, 1994). We decided to conduct two focus groups, one to investigate younger females and the other one to analyze older women's attitudes and behaviors towards potentially offensive ads. A focus group is a qualitative research methodology which includes a small number of participants from a target market, usually from six to ten people, who actively take part in an interactive group session in order to discuss about a topic. For Kitzinger (2005) focus groups are an ideal approach to examine stories, experiences, points of view, beliefs, needs and concerns of individuals.

The discussion among the people involved is led by a moderator, who has the role of facilitating the interaction among the participants by asking open questions, encouraging debates and participant-participant discussions. Even though the moderator leads and keeps the group's discussion on track, he or she should not influence the opinions of the group or give any personal comments. His or her role is to make sure that people feel comfortable during the research and usually, before starting the session, should welcome the participants and introduce the topic for the discussion.

The focus group should be usually held in a non-threatening face-to-face environment, where people feel comfortable and relaxed. Unlike in depth interviews, which are arranged individually through a private meeting with each participant, focus group have the advantage of allowing members to interact with each other and comment on others' ideas and perceptions. Thanks to technology, nowadays it is also possible to conduct online focus groups, when it is not possible to gather all the respondents in the same location, because of geographical distance or other reasons. Online focus groups are of two types, the *Synchronous* one which is conducted in real time, live, through video calls or chats and the other one, the *Asynchronous* type, which means not in real-time, Bulletin board focus groups (BBFGs) or forums and they usually run over a few days and allow people not to be connected for the whole time of the study. Due to the global health emergency related to the spread of Covid 19 during the first months of 2020, we were forced to choose to conduct the focus groups online, in order to respect the government's directives which did not allow to organize a face-to-face discussion. The two focus groups were then conducted online, though a live video call using the app Zoom.

Although this research technique may be very effective to understand and gather insights about consumers' feelings, attitudes and perceptions and extract information that may not be possible to collect using other quantitative methods, it carries also some disadvantages and potential biases that need to be accounted for. First of all, the biggest potential problem may be due to the relatively small number of participants who may not effectively represent the whole population. Second, results may be altered by the emergence of a group leader, who may influence the opinions of the other respondents

and make it difficult to collect accurate data. It is in fact a duty of the moderator to ensure that the discussion flows without any participant towering over some others, allowing everybody to express their opinion and freely comment and also to disagree with someone's thoughts or impressions. There may be also some people who are more introverted than others and so may tend to participate less actively to the discussion, it is important then to select people who feel excited and enjoy in taking part of a study, to be sure that they could give their maximum contribution.

In order to compensate for potential flows in qualitative research methodologies, a questionnaire was also prepared and administered to the participants during the online session. During the focus group respondents were sent a link through the Zoom chat in order to complete the link during the video call. This method, called *triangulation*, helped to ensure the validity of the results, which is the extent to which a concept is accurately measured (Heale et al., 2015). In this way, it was possible to collect data using different collection methods to cross-check the findings and have a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

The two focus groups were conducted during April 2020 and lasted approximately two hours, for the focus group with younger women and one hour and a half for the focus group with older women. Each session was filmed and recorded in order not to miss important comments, facial or bodily expression of the participants, and by agreeing to take part in this research, respondents were aware of this fact. The recorded sessions were then transcribed in order to identify central comments and behaviours crucial for the analysis. Upon completion of each session all participants have been sent a small gift containing a lipstick to thank them for taking part in the focus group.

After conducting the two focus groups, in order to ensure the significance of the quantitative data gathered, the questionnaire was also administered to a larger sample of participants.

3.1.1 Participants selection

The two focus groups were organized according to two different targets: younger women and older ones. Each group was composed of seven participants, and the main criteria for selection was age. The younger group was formed by young girls between 18 and 25 years old, so Millennials and Gen Z, while the older group included females between 45 and 55 years old, so women belonging to the Generation X. All participants were Italian and female, in order to give some homogeneity to the two samples. Younger girls were chosen and contacted through social media networks, and were all students, some of them already graduated and the others in the middle of their university studies. The older group instead

was also selected through social networks, and included a majority of highly and medium educated women.

Participants for both the focus groups and the survey were selected through *convenience sampling*, a sample method which picks respondents based on their availability and willingness to take part in the study in question. Potential bias when using this sampling method may come from the fact that responses may vary depending on the fact that the people actively decide to take part to a study or not. The volunteer bias is a risk of all non-probability sampling techniques, still convenience sampling was the most appropriate method for this research. The survey collected 126 responses in total, of which 24 were left blank or incomplete. The final sample (n=102) was composed by 51 responses for the younger group and 51 responses for the older one. Of the 102 responses collected for the two groups, 14 were those gathered during the initial phase of the focus groups analysis, 7 per group.

3.1.2 Questionnaire design

The questionnaire was designed taking into account the fact that it would have been used as basis to conduct the focus groups. The first important quality of a good questionnaire is that there should be a logical flow of questions, so each section should lead to the next one. Questions should be clear and precise in order not to create confusion or possible misinterpretations. The point of view of the respondents should also be carefully taken into account; failure to design a proper survey may come from not considering the point of view of the respondents and not considering all the possible answers that could be given to a question. A mix among different question styles should be used, including open-ended, closed-ended, multiple choice questions and rating scales, in this way a better engagement and interest of participants can be assured. Responses should be mutually exclusive and exhaustive, meaning that each possible answer should preclude the others and that all possible responses to the question are present (Hyman et al., 2016). It is also important to reduce as much as possible the use of open-ended questions because, even though they provide a useful and deep insights about respondents' feelings and opinions and allow for a greater range of qualitative data with respect to a closed-ended question, the risk is that they may take a long response time increasing participants' fatigue and effort. Moreover, there is limited control over the length of the response and it could also create difficulties for respondents non familiar with expressing clearly their opinions and views. Clear instructions should also be given at the initial part of the survey. The layout should be clean and professional and in this case should also be optimized for different devices, so that respondents can answer using their laptop, tablet or smartphone without having problems of visualizing questions and answers in a clear way.

When preparing online surveys it is also possible to use online surveys check lists to ensure that the questionnaire was prepared in a good way before launching it. The program used to create the online survey, *Qualtrics*, has a function called *ExpertReview* which measures the data quality of the elements of the survey, like logic, questions and quotas, moreover it recommends to users how they can improve their survey, for example by using a certain type of question style over another. The survey was checked using this feature and obtained a *Fair iQ* Score on *Qualtrics*.

Taking into account all these considerations, the questionnaire was divided into six different sections. The first section was an introductory part to understand participants' beliefs about gender and role portrayals in advertising today.

The second section was centered on respondent's attitudes towards six different images of advertisements considered potentially sexist-offensive. The images were sourced from web sites and magazines and included cosmetic brands' advertising campaign for lipsticks, ranging from 2012 to 2017. The brands analyzed were *Mac Cosmetics*, *Klara*, *Covergirl*, *Benefit*, and *Dior*, some of them well known and others less popular. To be selected, advertisements had to contain elements that could be potentially perceived as offensive, especially by a female public. Ad number one (see Appendix), from *MAC Cosmetics* was chosen because it featured a woman in a provocative pose, with a finger posed on her mouth, with the phrase "We'll be the *cherry* that gets you on top", implying that by wearing that lipstick women could become more sexually powerful. The second advertisement (see Appendix), was about a lipstick by the brand *Klara* and pictured a woman wearing a sexy bra and a red lipstick, looking at the camera in a flawless and sensual way, with the slogan "Just kiss me don't ask". This ad in particular was under fire because of a petition started on Change.org by female students from a school in Melbourn, Australia, accusing the brand to promote sexual violence and rape³⁴. The third ad (see Appendix), from *Covergirl*, featured the actress Janelle Monae wearing a suit and tie, with the statement "She'll wear any color, as long as it's black, white or bold!". The only reason of potential offence in this picture could come from the fact that they chose to portray a woman dressed with a typical male suit, a connection could be found between the fact that to be bold, women need to dress like a man. However this advertisement would be considered as a control variable in the analysis, given that it is an ad with a very low probability of causing an offence. The fourth ad (see Appendix), was from *Benefit*, and featured the image of a woman in black and white, with a provocative and plunging neckline. The woman was holding a pair of cards in her hand and the headline said "A good pair beats everything", making a very evident reference to the woman's breasts, instead of pointing the attention of the consumer to the products advertised. The fifth advertisements (see Appendix), was from *MAC* once again, for their line

³⁴ Johnson, E. (2015), "Just Kiss Me, Don't Ask': Female Students Campaign Against 'Vulgar' Lipstick Ad", The Huffington Post UK

Viva Glam, and showed a picture of the singer Miley Cyrus wearing a black body, on the floor with her legs wide open leaning against a mirror. A potential offence could come from the objectified representation of the female body, stressed again by the adjacent picture of lipstick placed to form a V. The last ad (see Appendix) from *Dior*, featured the actress Jennifer Lawrence sitting on a chair with her legs crossed, and holding a lipstick on her fingers like she was holding a cigarette. This particular ad seemed to contain no evident potential offence and was included in order to understand whether there could be a difference in women's attitudes and perceptions between offensive and non-offensive advertisements, so will be treated as a control too.

The third part related to women's attitudes towards female portrayal in the media.

The fourth section aimed to analyze consumers' purchase behavior after being exposed to potentially offensive ads, while the fifth section included some final reflections considering brands which use potentially offensive advertising campaigns.

The very last questions regarded personal information, like gender, age and education level.

3.1.3 Measurements

All the data gathered through the questionnaire was downloaded from *Qualtrics* in an Excel format and then rearranged to be analyzed. The answers to questions including multiple choice or close-ended alternatives were analyzed using Excel pivot tables to compare the frequency distribution among the two groups.

Questions number 2, 3 and 4 (see Appendix) from the first section regarding role portrayals in advertising were analyzed using a Chi-Square test.

To analyze question number 5 (see Appendix), from section 2, regarding respondents' level of personal offence towards the six pictures selected, offence levels were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale, with *Not at all offensive* and *Extremely offensive* as the scale anchors. *Not at all offensive* was given a weight of 1, *Extremely offensive* a weight of 5; a 1-to-5 range with 3 being the neutral point. This 5-point scale of offensiveness was taken from Phau et al. study on offensive advertising in Singapore (2001). Question 6 (see Appendix) about which element was considered most offensive between words and pictures used, was also analyzed using a Chi-Square test.

Question number 7 (see Appendix), from the second section of the questionnaire, asked respondents to check 12 adjectives in order to describe each of the advertisements they were showed. This question was based on Chan et al. (2007) cross cultural study on Chinese and German consumers' response to

offensive advertising. Respondents could check as many adjectives as they found appropriate or none of them. Six adjectives were defined as negative, based on Chan et al. (2007): uncomfortable, offensive, ridiculous, irritating, impolite and disgusting. The other six were positive and were based on Chan's (1996) research about viewers' perceptions of television commercials. The original list included: creative, interesting, lively, clever, informative and convincing. To better match younger female's potential attitude towards the ads, the adjectives lively and clever were substituted with cool and empowering. Positive adjectives were included to avoid that respondents used only negative adjectives to describe the ads.

In the third section about attitudes towards women's portrayal in the media (see Appendix), the fourth statement (see Appendix) was taken from Ford et al. (1997) study on cross-cultural female response to offensive sex roles portrayals in advertising. All four statements were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with *Not at all offensive* and *Extremely offensive* as the scale anchors. *Not at all offensive* was given a weight of 1, *Extremely offensive* a weight of 5; a 1-to-5 range with 3 being the neutral point.

In the fourth section, question number 11 (see Appendix) related to respondents' level of agreement with statements regarding their purchase behavior. Statements were based on the study from Lundstrom and Sciglimpaglia (1977), used also by Ford et al. (1993, 1997) in their analysis of reactions to female role portrayals in advertising. Instead of using just the term offensive, the statements were changed to "sexist-offensive", to better relate to the topic under scrutiny in this research. The last statement was instead similar to the one used in the study by Phau et al. (2002) on Hong Kong consumers, using again the term "sexist-offensive". A five-point Likert-type scale was used to indicate the level of agreement with the statements, ranging from Strongly Disagree with weight 1, to Strongly Agree with weight 5, with I am neutral (weight 3) being the neutral point. Internal reliability for this section was adequate for both samples (all coefficients alphas were > 0.60).

Finally questions 14 and 15 (see Appendix) of the final section were also analysed using a Chi-Square test.

3.2 Data analysis: comparison between the two focus groups

Qualitative research, in specific focus groups, is a type of study which usually generates large amount of data to be analyzed. Qualitative data analysis could be a long and complex process, because of the large amount of information gathered and its complexity. Given that qualitative data is mainly obtained from open-ended questions or oral discussions, it is important to find a method to categorize, analyze and

interpret the data. The scope of analyzing qualitative data is to bring meaning to a particular situation and according to Krueger et al. (2000) it should be a systematic, sequential, verifiable and continuous process. This method provides evidence and increases the extent of dependability, consistency and conformability (Lincoln et al., 1989) of the data, which is useful to determine the quality of qualitative data (Secker et al., 1995). The first step to achieve this is to clearly document all the data collection and analysis so that other researchers can understand and replicate the same procedure in another study or verify the findings. Even though the main source of data comes from written answers and oral discussion among the group, it is also important to keep track of any potential non-verbal communication expressed by the group members during the discussion. This is why it is important to record the whole session through a videotape if possible or audiotape. It is also useful for the researcher to keep a diary during the focus groups to write down any relevant comment or observation that could then facilitate the data analysis. For Krueger (1994) qualitative analysis, in particular focus-group analysis, is a continuous process which occurs concurrently with data collection.

For this research the data was collected first of all through an online questionnaire and both sessions were recorded and videotaped in order not to miss important insights. All the data was then organized into an Excel sheet, and divided between qualitative data and quantitative data given that the questionnaire included both types of questions. The quantitative data was organized into Excel pivot tables, and divided according to each question. Independent t-tests were used to compare the data among the two targets, denoted as “YOUNG” and “OLD”. Moreover frequency tables were created to obtain the exact counts of responses for certain questions.

For the qualitative data, the most complex to analyse, the data obtained from the questionnaire was organized and divided by question and group, using two different colours to distinguish the responses from the two target groups. The recordings of the two sessions were then transcribed and together with the notes gathered during the two focus groups, were helpful for integrating the information coming from the open and multiple choice questions. Moreover the discussion was organized so to let respondents complete first one section of the questionnaire in autonomy, to then stop and discuss each section together. This method helped to ensure that each participant would express his opinion and be sure that it would not be biased by the group discussion. Individual responses on the questionnaires were then compared with the transcripts to see whether respondents changed their opinion during the confrontation. Documenting the different stages through which the qualitative researcher goes through, from data collection, analysis and interpretation helps also to ensure the reliability of the findings, Morgan et al. (2003). Reliability is defined as the extent to which studies can be replicated, that is if a research instrument consistently gives the same results, using the same method (LeCompte et al., 1982).

Participants of both focus groups actively took part in the discussion and precious insights emerged among the two target groups, although the younger group was actually more enthusiastic and engaged in the dialogue than the older one.

Starting from the groups' beliefs regarding role portrayals in advertising today, when talking about an ad that they remembered with a woman as main protagonists, the younger group thought immediately about beauty products, like perfumes or shampoos. The majority of the younger group described these women as sexy, confident and seductive. The discussion focused on the fact that often women's representation in advertising changes depending on the product, and the example of an advertisement featuring the influencer Chiara Ferragni was made, where she's advertising Oreo cookies. Respondents all knew the advertisement in question and agreed that in this ad the woman is portrayed as funny, cool, and she looked like a normal girl. When talking about the cosmetic or beauty industry instead, women are always depicted as good-looking, sexually attractive, wearing sexy clothing. One respondent said that in advertising "women and men are often very sexualized, maybe this is one of the contexts in which men are also sexualized, they're always good looking as the women. They have to appear provoking... that's what they want to sell you". A part of the group described instead other ads for beauty products where women are shown as confident, powerful, like in ads for shampoos. Another respondent had a different opinion about women's portrayal and said that "I don't think it's a negative thing, that women and men are sexualized. Yeah, they wanna sell it like, if you wear this perfume or if you use this product you will be confident, you'll feel good with yourself. I don't know, I don't feel it in a negative way".

The older group had the same opinion regarding this topic, with a difference being noticed in how men are usually portrayed in working roles, waking-up in the morning, having a quick breakfast and then off to work, while the woman stays at home taking care of children and the house. A difference among product categories was also spotted, like in the younger group, with women in advertisements about clothing, make-up and perfumes always being seen as partially naked, "it seems that to sell those items, the woman has to be displayed". Another interesting difference in women's portrayal was found between ads seen in newspapers or fashion magazines and television commercials. Older women found that in television there are more realistic and every-day life situations of women, instead in newspapers and magazines it is more common to see ads with women portrayed as seducers.

Overall both groups were generally satisfied about women's representation in advertising and found that there is a difference in how men and women are portrayed. The older group noticed that nowadays men's portrayal in the fashion industry in particular, has become more sexualized, and said that now they could start to have the same problems that women have with their representation in the media.

The second section on the questionnaire aimed to understand respondents' attitudes towards the six advertisements selected. As defined by Kirmani et al. (2009), *attitudes towards an ad (Aad)* are the thoughts and emotions that consumers feel in relation to an ad. The aim was to understand the degree of offence perceived, if any, when looking at the ads, and whether participants responded in a more positive or negative way when exposed to them. Exhibit 3.1 shows the mean values for the two samples, for the six ads that were included in the study.

Just by looking at Exhibit 3.1 it is possible to see that advertisement number 5 presents the most evident difference between the two age groups, with older women being more offended by younger girls. This finding may suggest that older women are particularly more offended when exposed to explicit objectifications of the female body. In this case the ad showed just the picture of a young girl with her legs widely open, no heading or double-meaning or sexual references were used.

Offence level

OFFENCE LEVEL		
ADS	OLD	YOUNG
AD n°1	3.29 (1.38)	3.29 (0.76)
AD n°2	3.00 (1.53)	3.29 (1.25)
AD n°3	2.14 (1.21)	1.57 (1.13)
AD n°4	4.00 (0.82)	4.29 (0.49)
AD n°5	4.43 (0.79)	2.86 (1.07)
AD n°6	2.57 (1.40)	1.86 (1.07)
TOT MEAN	3.24	2.86

Note (Measured on a 5 Point-Likert Scale, 1 Not at all offensive to 5 Extremely offensive)

Exhibit 3.1 Table of offence level perceived results gathered from the focus groups

In the focus group of younger girls, the discussion mainly centered on ads number two and four, which were the ones that created the most controversy among the respondents. Advertisement number two generated two different attitudes in the group, one more positive and the other one more negative. One part of the group saw the ad as empowering and convincing, it was able to inspire self-confidence and

by looking at it respondents felt sexy and attractive. A difference was also found between words and the picture in this particular ad; one respondent said that she actually liked the picture very much, but then looking at the words used, her rational part came in and thought that it was not very respectful and did not consider the women's consent when being kissed by a man. Another part of the group found that the second ad was impolite and sexist-offensive. The fourth advertisement was considered the most offensive of all for the younger group, which found it not funny, offensive and a clear sexualisation of the female body. One participant also noticed that during the discussion, no one mentioned ads number three and six, which were without any doubts the ones that had the lower probability of causing an offence. She felt surprised that no one mentioned them during the discussion and thought that probably no one noticed them because they were the least controversial, while the other ones were probably more effective in capturing the viewer's attention by using provocative appeals.

The older group had overall more negative comments about the ads in general. The fifth one in particular was seen as disgusting and ridiculous, someone said it looked like "a cabaret show". With respect to the younger group, some older women felt actually not that bothered because they were aware that often advertising shows a portrayal of women which is not realistic, nonetheless a deep concern emerged regarding the possible negative effect that these ads may have on younger girls. Another woman pointed out that the ads actually made her laugh a lot, they were so bad that they made her laugh, she said, and that they reminded her of some bad comedies of the 1960s.

An interesting difference was spotted in the fact that younger girls felt all more offended by the words used in the ads, this could be due to the fact that they were born in a context in which sexualized female representations are something that has become a sort of golden rule in advertising and the media landscape in general. For this fact younger girls may have a more positive attitude towards these kinds of representations because it is what they have been used to see since they were born. In particular it was the association with pictures and phrases with sexual appeals or double-meaning which caused an offence to be perceived. While for the older group, words and pictures offended women in an equal way.

List of adjectives

ADJECTIVES								
Adjectives	AD 1		AD 2		AD 4		AD 5	
	YOUNG	OLD	YOUNG	OLD	YOUNG	OLD	YOUNG	OLD
<i>Negative</i>								
Uncomfortable	4	2	1	1	6	3	2	4
Offensive	0	2	2	1	4	3	1	4
Ridiculous	1	1	2	1	3	2	2	2
Irritating	3	3	1	2	2	2	2	3
Impolite	2	1	1	2	2	3	1	2
Disgusting	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
<i>Positive</i>								
Creative	0	2	1	3	0	2	0	0
Interesting	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Cool	1	0	0	1	0	0	4	0
Empowering	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Informative	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Convincing	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
TOT NEGATIVE	10	9	7	7	17	13	9	15
TOT POSITIVE	2	3	5	4	0	3	4	1

Exhibit 3.2 Table of negative and positive adjectives results gathered from the focus groups

Considering the choice among positive and negative adjectives to describe the advertisements, the younger group assigned more negative adjectives to Ad n° 1 and 4, with respect to the older group. Instead the older focus group assigned more negative adjective to Ad n° 5, as expected from the results of the offence level perceived with question five. More positive adjectives were instead used by the younger group in Ad n° 2 and 5, in accordance as well with the results obtained in question 5. In particular the adjective “Cool” was used four times by younger girls, who probably did not perceive the picture as objectifying. Surprisingly, older women hold more positive attitudes than younger women towards Ad n° 4, with a mean of 0.50 positive adjectives used against a mean of 0 for the younger group. This could be due to the fact that older women perceived the ad as more funny and creative, designed in that particular way just to elicit a provocation in the public.

With respect to the elements that respondents think that are acceptable to be shown in an advertisement for cosmetics, both groups agreed that the face of the model and the product advertised are the two essential elements that need to be present. After these two, both groups included also the image of visible legs of the model, even if to a lesser extent. Visible breasts of the model and sexual references were absolutely excluded to be acceptable. This could be interpreted as a sign that women, of all age, still feel that it is not acceptable nowadays to make such an explicit use of the female intimate parts, at least in this field under examination.

Statement number 3 “When women are shown in sexy and provocative attitudes I want to be like them”, from question 10, regarded the attitude towards women’s portrayal in the media. In general younger girls seemed more likely to agree that women in media and advertisements are a sort of ideal, but unreal standard to which they should aspire. In fact they had more positive attitude regarding this statement with respect to older women, who were instead more likely to wanting to distance themselves from the often too much sexy and provocative female representations in the media. This result could imply that younger girls may interpret sexist and objectifying appeals as something sexy and provocative. Given this interpretation, they may want to appear like women represented in advertisements, because they symbolize something sexy and desirable.

Overall older women had a slightly more positive attitude towards the belief that women’s portrayal is changing for the better. This could be due to the fact that women belonging to the older focus group, were born roughly between 1965 and 1975, so could witness the evolution of women’s portrayal in the media landscape. In comparison with how the situation is nowadays, they may feel that something has changed in a good way, with respect to the past. One respondent in particular said that now the situation could become worse for the male counterpart, given that, she said, always more often also men are portrayed in sexualized and objectified ways in advertisements, even if it would probably never reach the same levels as women’s sexualized portrayal. The younger group instead holds more negative opinions about the matter, saying that the situation is not changing enough, and that probably we are all so used to seeing sexualized and objectified images of women, that it has become something normal. Some more positive comments were also made by younger girls regarding different product categories, like sports or travelling, where more equal representations of men and women can be found, compared to the cosmetics industry.

In order to understand the influence of offensive advertising on their purchase behavior, participants had to express their level of agreement on four different statements, on a scale from 1 to 5, going from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. For both four statements results indicated that an offensive advertising campaign would hurt more the purchase intentions of older consumers with respect to the younger ones.

Participants were asked to respond to the first statement: “If a new product is introduced with ads that I find sexist-offensive, I might still buy it if it offers me benefits which I find attractive”. The younger group agreed that when they enter a shop, they do not pay much attention to displays, or to how they felt when seeing an advertisement for a beauty product. One respondent said “...probably it’s not very fair, but if I like the product and I need it, if I think it’s a good product I would buy it”. Younger consumers seemed to care more about the price of the product, or its benefits and characteristics.

In the second statement participants were asked “If a new product which I normally use adopts an ad campaign which I find sexist-offensive, I will discontinue using it”. From the focus groups discussion it emerged that older women would almost immediately stop purchasing the product advertised with sexist-offensive appeals, while for the younger group this would not be a good enough reason to stop purchasing a product that they already use and are familiar with. This is coherent with the assumption that older women would be more negatively affected by an advertising campaign containing sexist appeals, so would be more agreeing to discontinue using a product advertised in such way.

The last statement asked “If a new product is introduced with ads that I find sexist-offensive, I would buy a similar product from another brand which does not use offensive advertising”. In this case older women agreed that they would prefer to buy a product from another brand which does not use an advertising campaign that may result as offensive. The older group all agreed that after seeing an advertisements containing sexist-offensive appeals, they would change their attitude towards the product and even the brand. One respondent made an example of an advertisement from Tezenis, an Italian brand of underwear, which she found not appropriate and did not like it, so she stopped buying products from that brand. Older women felt that if an ad for a certain product offends you in any way, or makes you feel uncomfortable, this is an enough good reason not to buy it anymore, “...it’s a feeling that you have, your instinct tells you not to buy it”. The situation seemed much different among younger participants, who felt that being offended was not a sufficient reason to stop buying a certain product, or products from a specific brand. In particular one young respondent said that she would be willing to compromise on this particular type of offence, even though she realizes that it is not something fair. She said that she would change her purchase behavior, for example if she saw an article saying that a brand test its product on animals. This for her would be an enough good reason to change her attitude, but not in the case of a sexist-offence. This thought in particular may be also due to the fact that younger girls are more likely to feel that these kind of sexist-appeals in advertisements and in the media in general are something to which they have to live with, because they were born in a reality in which they see this every day.

Question number 12 (see Appendix) asked participants to imagine to be in a shop, looking for a new lipstick. They were presented with six different names of lipsticks; some of them had very sexually explicit names, while some others had nothing to do with the sexual sphere and were simple names that could be assigned to a lipstick. The most explicit names were: “Trophy Wife” from Huda Beauty lipstick, “Glow Job” taken from a product from NARS and “G Spot” from NARS as well. The names without any sexual reference were: “Fuchsia Finish” taken from AVON, “Loving Lips” from Dior and “Red Velvet” from Kylie Cosmetics. Participants had to choose one lipstick just by its name, and

out of 14 participants in total, 11 chose “Red Velvet”, 2 chose “Loving Lips” and 1 chose “Fuchsia Finish”. It is evident that none of the two groups appreciated the presence of sexual and sexist references in the products’ names. There seem to be however, a new trend in the cosmetic industry which involves using explicit names, and it has been followed for a couple of years by brands like Huda Beauty, Too Faced, Mac, Nars and many others³⁵. It is still not clear whether this practice is having a positive or negative effect on consumers, but further research should be made to see if this new trend could damage in any way consumers’ purchase choice.

Regarding the choice about which product the respondents would buy, after seeing the six advertisements, the majority of both groups opted for the last one, the ad of Dior with Jennifer Lawrence happened to be the most successful among both groups, because it did not cause any kind of offence and the woman is depicted as beautiful and attractive without being vulgar. Advertisement number 2 was chosen only by one respondent in the younger focus group, which she defined as the most controversial and offensive, but actually it was the one that most got her attention and that she would remember when being in a shop.

Overall 13 over 14 participants in total were convinced that advertising has an effect on the beliefs that society holds about women. This may indicate that women of all ages, are aware that what they see on television, newspapers or social media, actually can have an effect on the general opinion and as consequence stereotypes and distorted ways in which the female figure can be perceived by the public, both male and female or of any other gender. Moreover all 14 participants agreed that a brand which uses a potentially offensive advertising campaign does so because it wants to be noticed or ran out of other ideas. No one thought that a brand would go for a controversial advertising campaign, not thinking that it could offend someone or could generate negative responses. Among the younger group, six over seven participants agreed that brand which use sexist-offensive appeals respect women, but would do anything to sell, only one chose the option stating that they have a wrong idea about women. Very similarly, in the older group, six women over seven chose the same option as the younger group, just one chose the option stating that the use of sexist-offensive appeals means that brands do not respect women. These results could suggest that overall brand reputation would not be damaged that much by an offensive advertising campaign, and that consumer’s attitude towards the brand in question would be overall positive.

The last question was an open-ended one asking participants to describe how they think that an ad for a lipstick should look like, which elements it should evolve, what kind of appeal should be used, etc.

³⁵ DENT, S. (2018) “Why are cosmetic firms selling make-up with sexually explicit names to teenagers? A blusher called Orgasm is one of the least vulgar ones, says a despairing mother”, The Daily Post UK

Respondents of both groups all described an ideal ad for lipsticks, more or less in the same way. The advertisements should show mainly the face and the lips of the model, concentrating more on the properties and benefits of the product. It should make women feel comfortable, confident and beautiful, the sexual appeal should not be considered as the main theme of the ad, and is not necessary to sell this type of product to women. The advertisement should be always respectful towards its main target audience, whether it being younger girls or more mature women. One young respondent added that she actually is so used to seeing sexualized representations of women in ads that she could not think of any other way to advertise cosmetic and beauty products. She stated also that she believes that probably, given that the aim of these advertisements for beauty products is to make women feel beautiful, it is very likely that sexualized representations would always be present.

To conclude the analysis on the two focus groups, when it comes to the difference in offence levels among the two groups for the ads considered it is clear from the qualitative data gathered that a difference exists between the two groups. In general older women felt more offended by the ads containing sexist-offensive appeals, while younger women had altogether more positive attitudes. Younger girls considered some obvious sexist-offensive ads as flattering or empowering, meaning that younger generations may be so used to seeing these kinds of female representations in the media that they do not pay much attention to it anymore. Among younger girls there was a more positive attitude towards some of the ads, which caused less negative feelings and emotions in the respondents. Among older women instead, the qualitative data collected suggests that there is a stronger negative attitude towards this kind of advertising technique.

Regarding the attitude towards women's portrayal in the media, younger girls resulted to be more likely to agree that they want have the same sexy and provocative attitudes of women they see in ads, with respect to older women. Younger girls reported though, that the portrayal of women is not totally changing for the better, from what they have witnessed during the years, but just advertisements in some particular product categories are making a better representation of women, like for sports products.

Younger girls felt all more offended by words rather than pictures in the ads, this could be due to the fact that looking at a picture with a woman explicitly objectified or depicted in a stereotypical way may not represent a cause of offence for them, because they are used to seeing these types of portrayals. On the contrary, when a picture of this type is also combined with an ad copy or sexist-offensive words, this could make younger girls realize and actually see that an offence could be taken when looking at the ad.

In comparison to the effects of a potential sexist-offensive advertising on consumers' purchase behavior, results confirmed that this type of advertising technique will damage more the purchase intentions of the older group with respect to the younger one.

Conducting the analysis through focus groups implied the use of a small sample size, from a quantitative point of view, a sample size not large enough may not ensure the reliability of the study, moreover it causes a higher variability in the results, which could lead to bias. In order to ensure the probability to find a significant difference between the two groups, the sample size was enlarged to obtain 102 responses in total. In this way, a larger sample size helps to ensure the reliability of the sample mean as estimator of the population parameter.

3.3 Quantitative data analysis: survey questionnaire

The data gathered from the survey questionnaire allowed to analyze the responses from 102 participants in total, 51 for the target of young girls between 18 and 25 years old and 51 for the target group of more mature women, from 45 to 55 years old. Enlarging the sample allowed to ensure the statistical significance of the findings and provided a more representative analysis of the population under examination.

Given that a qualitative point of view was already obtained analyzing the two focus groups, only the quantitative data was taken into consideration during this part of the analysis.

3.3.1 Results of Section 1: Beliefs regarding role portrayals in advertising

Exhibit 3.3 shows the results for women's belief on women's roles in advertising in general. From the bar chart we can see that both groups believed that the most frequent role in which women's are portrayed is the seductive one (45% for both groups). This finding shows how women today, of all age, still believe that stereotyped representations of the female figure as seducer is still present. From this data, it is actually the most frequent portrayal which respondents believe to represent female depiction by advertisements of all types. Decorative images of women as sex objects, whether active or passive, and including physical attractiveness seems to perpetuate also in UK, in print advertisements in particular (Plakoyiannaki et al., 2009). More recent data gathered by a research from the Geena Davis Institution on Gender in Media at Mount Saint Mary's University and JWT analysed more than 2000

Cannes Lions films from English-speaking markets: the US, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand³⁶.

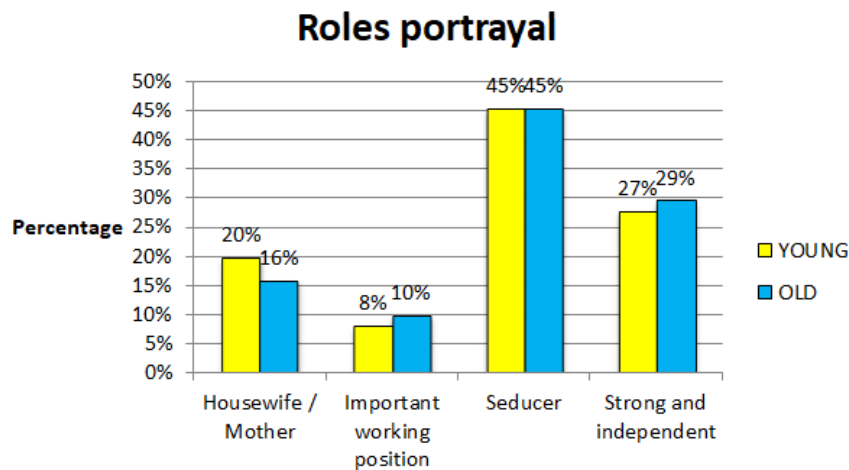


Exhibit 3.3 Roles portrayal, data gathered from the survey

The sample included advertisements from 33 product categories, ranging from cosmetics to insurance. The study showed that one-in-ten female characters are dressed in a sexual way, six times the number of male characters and that women are twice more likely to be shown naked with respect to men. The second most frequent role was women as *Strong and Independent* with 27% for younger girls and 29% for older women. This numbers shows that at least some progress has been made, with women being convinced that also independent and stereotypes-free roles are present in advertising. The *Housewife/Mother* stereotype is still present in the advertising industry according to the two samples, but in lower degree. The lowest scores were obtained for both samples in the *Important working position* category (8% for young girls and 10% for older females). This result shows how still nowadays women feel that an inequality exists between male and female representation regarding the carrier and job position. This could negatively affect societal values about the “appropriate” roles that men and women should undertake in society (Klassen et al., 1993). Moreover the use of gender stereotypes and sexualized advertising portrayals is becoming an increasingly important concern particularly among women and this can create negative brand perceptions and reduced purchase intentions (McKenzie et al., 2018). A Chi-Square test was used to compare the data gathered among younger and older respondents. Results showed that there is not enough evidence to say that a significant difference exists between the two samples, with $X^2(3, 102) = 0.37$, 0.94 and probability $p = 0.94$ being greater than the

³⁶ “Gender Bias in Advertising: Research, Trends and new Visual Language” (2017), Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media and JWT

alpha level= 0.05. In fact the results registered among the two groups are more or less the same for each of the four category considered.

As can be seen in Exhibit 3.4, satisfaction about female portrayal's in the media was quite positive for both groups (60.8% for younger girls and 56.9% for older women), which said to be moderately satisfied with what they see in advertisements nowadays. Only roughly 4% of participants felt to be totally satisfied in both samples.

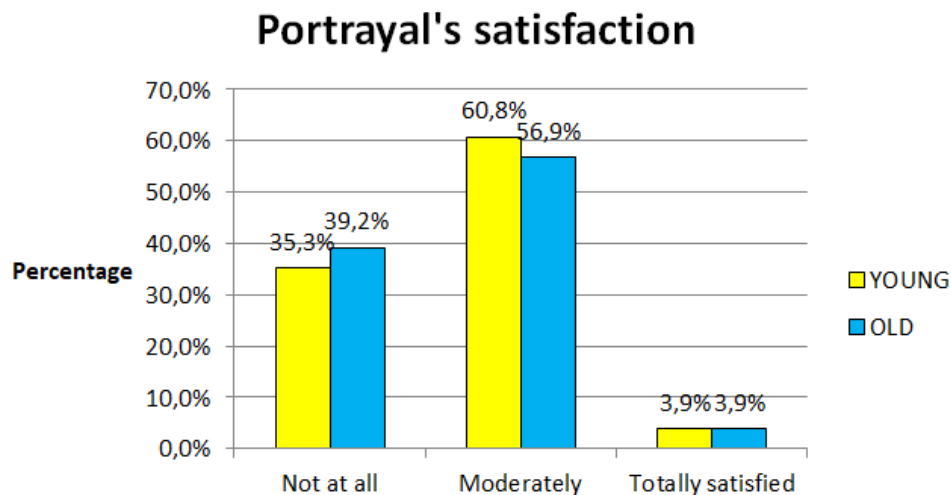


Exhibit 3.4 Satisfaction of female portrayal, data gathered from the survey

Anyway there was a considerable share of participants who felt not at all satisfied, in particular older more older women were not at all satisfied with women's portrayal (39.2%) with respect to younger respondents (35.3%). After comparing the results among the two groups using a Chi-Square test, results showed that there is not enough evidence to say that the two groups are statistically significant, $X^2(2, 102) = 0.17, 0.91$ and the probability $p=0.91$ is greater than the alpha level= 0.05.

Respondents' beliefs about the presence of equality in portrayals among genders showed that women still feel that there is a lot of inequality in advertising. As can be seen in Exhibit 3.5, this difference was actually perceive in bigger amount among younger participants (80.4%), with respect to the older ones (74.5%). A very small portion of both samples believes in the existence of equality between male and female representations (2% for younger girls and almost 6% for older women). These results may imply that younger women actually believe that there is a difference in how women and men are portrayed in advertising, which may come from the use of sexualized images or gender stereotypes, nudity and many other reasons. Hence the belief that advertisers are trying to sell, that female representations have

changed for the better, may not be perceived as something that is true by younger girls. A Chi-Square test was used to compare the results among the two samples, but the result obtained indicated that there was not enough evidence to say that a difference exists among younger and older women in the target population, with $X^2(2, 102) = 1.16$, 0.55 and the probability $p=0.55$ being greater than the alpha level= 0.05.

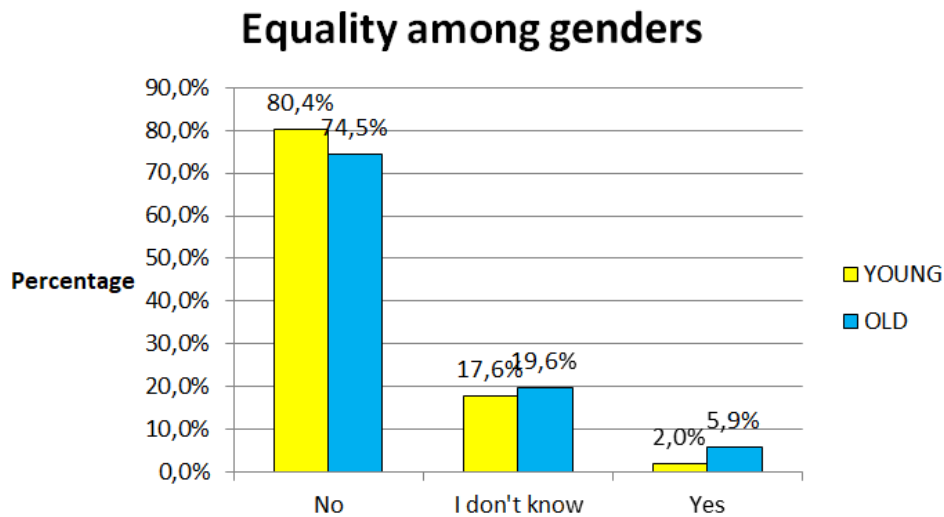


Exhibit 3.5 Equality among genders, data gathered from the survey

3.3.2 Results of Section 2: Attitudes towards the ads

Data gathered from question number 5 (see Appendix), which asked participants to express their level of personal offence, if any, when looking at the selection of print advertisements proposed, confirmed the previous results obtained during the analysis of the focus groups. Results obtained from the two focus groups discussions regarding question number 5 were used as a sort of pre-test to determine which ads were offensive at different levels. Once again, advertisements 3 and 6 (see Appendix) were supposed to be not offensive or with the least probability of causing an offence, so they were considered as controls and were not included in the analysis about offence levels. From what emerged during the focus group analysis, advertisements 1 and 2 (see Appendix) were considered the least offensive, and were actually seen as more flattering, they will be also excluded from the quantitative analysis.

In exhibit 3.6, values for the offence level perceive for the potentially sexist-offensive ads are shown, according to the two targets.

Offence Level

OFFENCE LEVEL		
ADS	OLD	YOUNG
AD n°1	3.12 (1.09)	3.25 (1.06)
AD n°2	2.78 (1.24)	3.02 (1.19)
AD n°3	2.24 (1.07)	1.84 (1.10)
AD n°4	3.49 (1.12)	3.82 (0.99)
AD n°5	3.84 (1.17)	3.29 (1.12)
AD n°6	2.06 (1.07)	1.96 (1.02)
TOT MEAN	2.92	2.86

Note (Measured on a 5 Point-Likert Scale, 1 Not at all offensive to 5 Extremely offensive)

Exhibit 3.6 Table of offence level perceived, results gathered from the survey

The total mean offence for the older group was equal to $M_{\text{OLD}} = 2.92$ and the total mean offence for the younger group was $M_{\text{YOUNG}} = 2.86$.

Independent *t*-tests, assuming equal variances, were conducted among the two samples for advertisements 4 and 5 which were considered as sexist-offensive. Offence levels for advertisement 5 were found to be statistically greater among the older sample compared to the younger one, at the 0.05 level ($M_{\text{YOUNG}} = 3.29$, $Sd = 1.12$, $M_{\text{OLD}} = 3.84$, $Sd = 1.17$, $t(102) = 2.42$, $p < 0.05$). In particular, older women's attitudes towards advertisement number 5 seem to suggest once again that more mature women may feel more offended than younger ones, when exposed to explicit sexually objectifying images of the female body, confirming the results gathered during the focus groups analysis. In this case, the advertisement showed a young girl, dressed in a provocative way, with her legs wide open leaning against a mirror. Advertisement number 5 reached the highest score of offence for the older group, equal to 3.84, this may imply that what bothers older women the most are explicit and sexist representations of the female body. Instead for other advertisements in which the sexist-offence had a more provocative and humorous appeal, always containing sexist-offences, like for example advertisement number 4, there was not enough evidence to say that older women were more offended than younger ones at the 0.05 confidence level ($M_{\text{YOUNG}} = 3.82$, $Sd = 0.99$, $M_{\text{OLD}} = 3.49$, $Sd = 1.12$, $t(102) = -1.59$, $p = 0.06$). Advertisement 4 was the one which obtained the highest offence score among

the younger group, equal to 3.82. It is interesting to notice that younger respondents felt more offended by advertisements in which the sexist offence was the result of a combination between an image and an explicit copy. Instead the older group felt more offended when exposed just to an objectified image of the female body, without any explicit or double-meaning slogan, like in ad number 5.

From the data gathered through this question on the offence level, it is possible to say that H1 is supported just for advertisement number 5. Older women felt more offended by an explicit, sexist and objectifying image of the female body with respect to younger girls. For advertisement number 4 it is not possible to say that H1 is supported. In ad 4 we can see an inverse tendency in the offence level, with younger girls actually being more offended than older ones. This effect may be due to the fact that in ad number 4, a sexist and objectifying image is accompanied by a sexist-offensive copy, which says “A good pair beats anything”, making an explicit reference to the woman’s breast in the ad. The combination between offensive words and pictures could represent a sort of trigger which causes a higher offence to be perceived by younger girls in particular. This effect will be investigated in another hypothesis in the next paragraph.

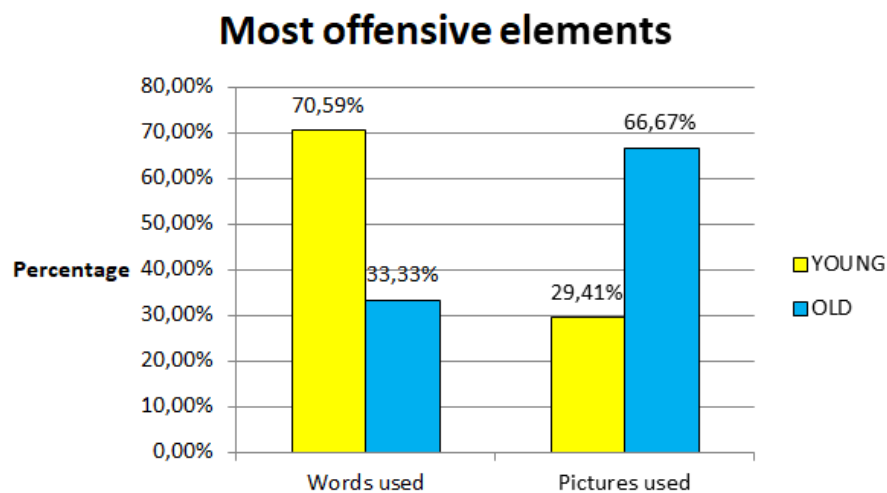


Exhibit 3.7 Most offensive elements, data gathered from the survey

Data obtained from question number 6 (see Appendix), about which elements respondents found most offensive, confirmed the results of the analysis of the two focus groups. As it can be seen in Exhibit 3.7, 66.67% of older women were again more offended by pictures, while 70,59% of younger girls felt more offended by the words used in the advertisements. Using a Chi-Square test the difference among

the two samples was found to be significant $X^2(1, N= 102) = 14.17, 0.00017$, which the probability $p= 0.00017$ being smaller than the alpha level $= 0.05$. These results are also coherent with the insights emerged from the focus groups discussion, suggesting that younger girls were more offended by words than pictures. This finding may be useful when targeting two different segments with age differences when preparing ad advertising campaign. Knowing which elements offend women the most could ensure that advertisers take the right care in designing the ad copy and figurative elements. Given this evidence it is possible to say that H2 was supported.

Looking at the list of positive and negative adjectives, in Exhibit 3.8, with which to describe the six advertisements, overall the total sample of participants use more negative adjectives (691) with respect to positive ones (176). Overall, ad number 4 obtained the largest number of negative adjectives, 133 in total, among the younger group, while advertisement number 5 was the one which obtained the largest number of negative adjectives, 97, for the older group. Results from a two sample independent t -test on the total number of negative adjectives used to describe the four ads, there was not enough evidence to say that the older sample used more negative adjectives than the younger one ($M_{\text{YOUNG}} = 101.25$, $Sd = 27.62$, $M_{\text{OLD}} = 71.50$, $Sd = 28.87$, $t(8) = -1.49$, $p > 0.05$). With respect to the positive adjectives, results from a two sample independent t -test showed that there is not enough evidence to say that the younger sample used more positive adjectives than the older one at the 0.05 significance level ($M_{\text{YOUNG}} = 20.75$, $Sd = 8.02$, $M_{\text{OLD}} = 23.25$, $Sd = 15.63$, $t(8) = -0.28$, $p > 0.05$).

List of adjectives

ADJECTIVES									
Adjectives	AD 1		AD 2		AD 4		AD 5		Total
Negative	YOUNG	OLD	YOUNG	OLD	YOUNG	OLD	YOUNG	OLD	
UNCOMFORTABLE	21	8	16	8	24	13	18	19	127
OFFENSIVE	16	7	13	5	27	20	19	22	129
RIDICULOUS	25	10	10	5	26	20	21	9	126
IRRITATING	21	15	9	15	24	18	15	20	137
IMPOLITE	17	5	15	11	18	15	15	14	110
DISGUSTING	7	2	3	2	14	10	11	13	62
Positive									
CREATIVE	4	13	3	10	5	5	6	3	49
INTERESTING	2	4	4	4	4	1	2	2	23
COOL	3	7	7	9	3	3	10	1	43
EMPOWERING	2	3	3	4	2	3	3	0	20
INFORMATIVE	0	2	2	2	0	1	0	1	8
CONVINCING	2	5	12	10	2	0	2	0	33
TOT Negative Adj.	107	47	66	46	133	96	99	97	691
TOT Positive Adj.	13	34	31	39	16	13	23	7	176

Exhibit 3.8 List of positive and negative adjectives results gathered from the survey

When asked to choose which elements are considered acceptable to be shown in an advertisement for cosmetics, both samples showed very similar results, in accordance with the data obtained from the previous focus groups. As can be seen in Exhibit 3.9, the face of the model and product advertised were found the two necessary elements for an advertisement for a cosmetic product. Elements that scored the lowest values were instead, “visible legs of the model”, “visible breast of the model” with “sexual references” being the last element. Only one person per group found sexual references to be acceptable in advertising. This could indicate that women in general, both young and more mature ones, do not find it acceptable to see explicit or implicit sexual references in advertising for cosmetics. Advertisers should consider whether in this particular sector “sex sells” and if better and more efficient selling strategies should be followed.

Acceptable elements

ACCEPTABLE ELEMENTS			
	YOUNG	OLD	TOTAL
Face of the model	49	49	98
Visible breasts	4	2	6
Product	48	46	94
Sexual references	1	1	2
Visible legs of the model	6	9	15

Exhibit 3.9 Acceptability of advertising elements, results gathered from the survey

3.3.3 Results of Section 3: Attitude towards women’s portrayal in the media

Question number 10 in the third section of the questionnaire (see Appendix) asked participants to express their level of agreement with four different statements, to understand their general attitude towards women’s portrayal in the media landscape. The agreement level was based on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with *Not at all offensive* and *Extremely offensive* as the scale anchors. *Not at all offensive* was given a weight of 1, *Extremely offensive* a weight of 5; a 1-to-5 range with 3 being the neutral point. Each statement was analyzed separately using a t-test to spot a potential difference between younger and older women.

Statement 1: I am more sensitive to the portrayal of women in ads than the portrayal of men.

Count of Respondent n°	Column lables					
Raw Labels	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	I am neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Grand Total
YOUNG	1	4	15	25	6	51
OLD	0	4	28	15	4	51
Grand Total	1	8	43	40	10	102

Exhibit 3.10 Attitude statement n° 1, results gathered from the survey

As can be seen in Exhibit 3.10, more respondents belonging to the younger sample agreed to be more sensitive to the portrayal of women in advertisements with respect to the portrayal of men. In specific almost 50% of younger girls agreed with the first statement, compared to the older sample which had a lower percentage, almost 30%. The majority of older women responded to be actually neutral about the matter, this could be a sign that they are more preoccupied also about how men are portrayed in advertisements. Comparing the data gathered from the two samples using a two sample independent *t*-test there was not enough evidence to say that the results of the two groups are statistically significant at the 0.05 confidence level ($M_{\text{YOUNG}} = 3.61$, $Sd = 0.87$, $M_{\text{OLD}} = 3.37$, $Sd = 0.75$, $t(102) = 1.46$, $p > 0.05$).

Statement 2: I see that women are more often undressed than men in advertisements.

Count of Respondent n°	Column lables					
Raw Labels	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	I am neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Grand Total
YOUNG	0	7	3	22	19	51
OLD	1	6	4	21	19	51
Grand Total	1	13	7	43	38	102

Exhibit 3.11 Attitude statement n° 2, results gathered from the survey

From Exhibit 3.11, it is possible to see that both samples agreed in equal measure that women are more often seen naked in advertisements with respect to men. Advertisers should be careful when utilizing naked or partially naked images in advertisements. As nudity has been identified as a potential reason for offensiveness (Waller, 1999, Waller at al., 2015), advertisers should consider that consumers inside their target audience, who negatively view nudity, may develop a negative AG (attitude towards

advertising in general) after continuous exposure to this kind of appeal (Huhmann et al., 2016). Using a two samples independent *t*-test it was found that the results of the two groups are not statistically significant at the 0.05 level of confidence ($M_{\text{YOUNG}}=4.04$, $Sd= 1.00$, $M_{\text{OLD}}= 4.00$, $Sd= 1.05$, $t(102)= 0.19$, $p> 0.05$).

Statement 3: When women are shown in sexy and provocative attitudes in an ad, I want to be like them.

Count of Respondent n°	Column lables					
Raw Labels	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	I am neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Grand Total
YOUNG	9	22	12	7	1	51
OLD	17	22	8	4	0	51
Grand Total	26	44	20	11	1	102

Exhibit 3.12 Attitude statement n° 3, results gathered from the survey

As can be seen in Exhibit 3.12, a portion of 43% or respondents in both samples disagreed with the third statement. It seems from these results that sexy and provocative appeals in advertising are not seen in a favourable and positive way by women of all ages. These kind of appeals may be used by advertisers to try to sell an ideal image that a woman could have by using a particular product. Sex appeals may help brands get more noticed, but in this case it seems cause a tendency to negative attitudes among respondents. In particular older women resulted more in disagreement with this statement than younger ones. Using a two sample independent *t*-test to compare the data obtained from each sample, results indicated that there is actually a significant difference among the two groups at the 0.05 confidence level, with younger women having more positive attitudes compared to older ones ($M_{\text{YOUNG}}= 2.39$, $Sd= 1.00$, $M_{\text{OLD}}= 1.98$, $Sd= 0.91$, $t(102)= 2.18$, $p<0.05$). The results obtained analysing the survey data confirm the finding derived from focus groups discussion regarding this particular statement. Given these results then, younger women may have more positive attitudes towards sex and provocative appeals, with respect to older women, so $H3_A$ was supported. In particular this could be linked again to the fact that they have always been exposed to advertisements which show women as sexually empowered and free to show their sexuality and confidence. Older women, instead, were born in a more conservative time period, and so may have more negative attitudes and see these kinds of representations as indecent and as a sort of taboo.

Statement 4: Overall, I believe that the portrayal of women in ads is changing for the better.

Count of Respondent n°	Column lables					
Raw Labels	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	I am neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Grand Total
YOUNG	0	17	16	17	1	51
OLD	9	15	12	15	0	51
Grand Total	9	32	28	32	1	102

Exhibit 3.13 Attitude statement n° 4, results gathered from the survey

This statement was taken from Ford et al. (1997) study on cross-cultural female response to offensive sex role portrayals in advertising. Using a two sample independent *t*-test to compare the data obtained from the two samples, results show that there is enough evidence to say that the results of the two groups are statistically significant at the 0.05 confidence level, with the younger group having more positive attitudes compared to the older one ($M_{\text{YOUNG}} = 3.04$, $Sd = 0.87$, $M_{\text{OLD}} = 2.65$, $Sd = 1.09$, $t(102) = 2.00$, $p < 0.05$). Overall the mean score for both groups is not that positive, this could imply that a lot of work still has to be done to ensure that women feel well represented in advertising so that they do not feel offended or develop negative attitude or negative purchase behaviours as consequence. However younger respondents seem to have more positive attitudes regarding women's portrayal in advertising and seem to be more optimistic with respect to the older group, so $H3_B$ was also supported. This result could imply that younger girls are convinced that advertisements about women are changing for the better, but perhaps do not understand fully how still today's representations, which may seem as sexually empowering or that strive for women's independence and sexual liberation from stereotypes and objectification, often are actually contributing once again to women's wrongful depiction in the media.

3.3.4 Results of Section 4: Purchase behavior

The fourth section of the questionnaire aimed to investigate the effect of potentially offensive advertising on consumers' purchase behaviour. After a review of the relevant literature of the topic it was hypothesized that offensive advertising would damage more older consumers' purchase intentions than those of younger ones. Consumers' purchase intentions were measured with a 5-point Likert-type scale, again with *Not at all offensive* and *Extremely offensive* as the scale anchors. *Not at all offensive* was given a weight of 1, *Extremely offensive* a weight of 5; a 1-to-5 range with 3 being the neutral point.

Respondents were asked to express their level of agreement about four different statements. Data gathered from both samples was used to compute Cronbach's Alpha, which is a measurement used to assess the internal consistency and ultimately the reliability of a set of items. Generally an α between 0.6 and 0.7 indicates an acceptable level of reliability (Ursachi et al., 2015). Responses for the younger group to the four statements of question 11, obtained a Cronbach α equal to 0.67, while the older group obtained a Cronbach α equal to 0.64.

Statement 1: If a new product is introduced with ads that I find sexist-offensive, I might still buy it if it offers me benefits which I find attractive.

Exhibit 3.14 shows the data obtained from a two-samples independent t -test conducted to compare the two samples. Younger group's purchase intentions were hypothesized to be greater, so more positive, with respect to the older group. Results showed that the difference among the two groups was not statistically significant at the 0.05 confidence level ($M_{\text{YOUNG}} = 2.86$, $Sd = 1.08$, $M_{\text{OLD}} = 2.71$, $Sd = 1.01$, $t(102) = 0.76$, $p > 0.05$).

Test t: two samples assuming equal variances

	P.I. YOUNG	P.I. OLD
Mean	2,86	2,71
Variance	1,16	1,01
Observations	51,00	51,00
Pooled Variance	1,09	
Hyputhesized mean difference	0,00	
Df	100,00	
t Stat	0,76	
P(T<=t) one tail	0,22	
t Critical one tail	1,66	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0,45	
t Critical two-tail	1,98	

Exhibit 3.14 data gathered from the survey

Statement 2: If a new product which I normally use adopts an ad campaign which I find sexist-offensive, I will discontinue using it.

Again the purchase intentions of the younger group were hypothesized to be greater, so more positive, than those for the older one. As can be seen in Exhibit 3.15, results from a two sample independent t -test indicated that the purchase intentions for the younger group were greater than those of the older

one ($M_{\text{YOUNG}} = 3.22$, $Sd = 0.97$, $M_{\text{OLD}} = 2.75$, $Sd = 0.96$, $t(102) = 2.47$, $p < 0.05$). This means that older women's purchase intentions would be more damaged by a sexist-offensive advertising campaign and would imply a stop in the purchase of the product advertised. Probably, more mature women would seek products of other brands which do not use offensive advertising as a way to promote their products, but offer the same benefits in terms of product characteristics and probably a similar price. Younger girls would continue to purchase a product which they normally use, even if advertised with sexist-offensive appeals, more than more mature women.

Test t: two samples assuming equal variances

	P.I. YOUNG	P.I. OLD
Mean	3,22	2,75
Variance	0,93	0,91
Observations	51,00	51,00
Pooled Variance	0,92	
Hypothesized mean difference	0,00	
Df	100,00	
t Stat	2,47	
P(T<=t) one tail	0,01	
t Critical one tail	1,66	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0,02	
t Critical two-tail	1,98	

Exhibit 3.15 data gathered from the survey

Statement 3: Even though I may see an ad which is sexist-offensive, I would continue to purchase other products that I have been using from the same company.

Also in this case younger respondents' purchase intentions were hypothesized to be greater, so more positive than those of the older group. Results from a two sample independent t -test, in Exhibit 3.16, confirmed that the difference among the two groups is statistically significant ($M_{\text{YOUNG}} = 3.29$, $Sd = 0.83$, $M_{\text{OLD}} = 2.76$, $Sd = 0.86$, $t(102) = 3.16$, $p < 0.05$).

This means that younger respondents would continue to purchase other products from a brand even after seeing a sexist-offensive advertisement for another product of the same brand, more than older

respondents. In this case, the offence perceived by younger girls, would impact their willingness to purchase other products of the same brand in a lower amount, with respect to more mature women who may instead spread the same rejection to other brand-related products.

Test t: two samples assuming equal variances

	P.I. YOUNG	P.I. OLD
Mean	3,29	2,76
Variance	0,69	0,74
Observations	51,00	51,00
Pooled Variance	0,72	
Hypothesized mean difference	0,00	
Df	100,00	
t Stat	3,16	
P(T<=t) one tail	0,001	
t Critical one tail	1,66	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0,00	
t Critical two-tail	1,98	

Exhibit 3.16 data gathered from the survey

Statement 4: If a new product is introduced with ads that I find sexist-offensive, I would buy a similar product from another brand which does not use offensive advertising.

As can be seen in Exhibit 3.17, results from a two sample independent t-test showed that there is not enough evidence to say that the responses of the two samples are statistically significant ($M_{\text{YOUNG}} = 2.37$, $Sd = 1.02$, $M_{\text{OLD}} = 2.27$, $Sd = 0.85$, $t(102) = 0.53$, $p > 0.05$).

Test t: two samples assuming equal variances

	P.I. YOUNG	P.I. OLD
Mean	2,37	2,27
Variance	1,04	0,72
Observations	51,00	51,00
Pooled Variance	0,88	
Hypothesized mean difference	0,00	
Df	100,00	
t Stat	0,53	
P(T<=t) one tail	0,30	
t Critical one tail	1,66	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0,60	
t Critical two-tail	1,98	

Exhibit 3.17 data gathered from the survey

Thanks to the data gathered in this section, it was possible to say that H4 was partially supported.

Regarding the choice of the lipstick name, as it can be seen in Exhibit 3.18, the majority of both samples decided to go for the name “Red Velvet”. At the second place the most chosen lipstick name was “Lovin’ Lips”. This evidence confirms the findings from the focus groups analysis, so women in both samples seemed to prefer lipstick names which did not contain any sexual references. This result may be relevant because when being in a shop, women may also pay attention to the names of the products and this could influence their purchase behavior, leading them to choose one product over another, especially in this case if it contains sexual references or not. However there is a possible limitation to this finding because it measured only short-term responses, so it would be also interesting to see the effect in the long-run.

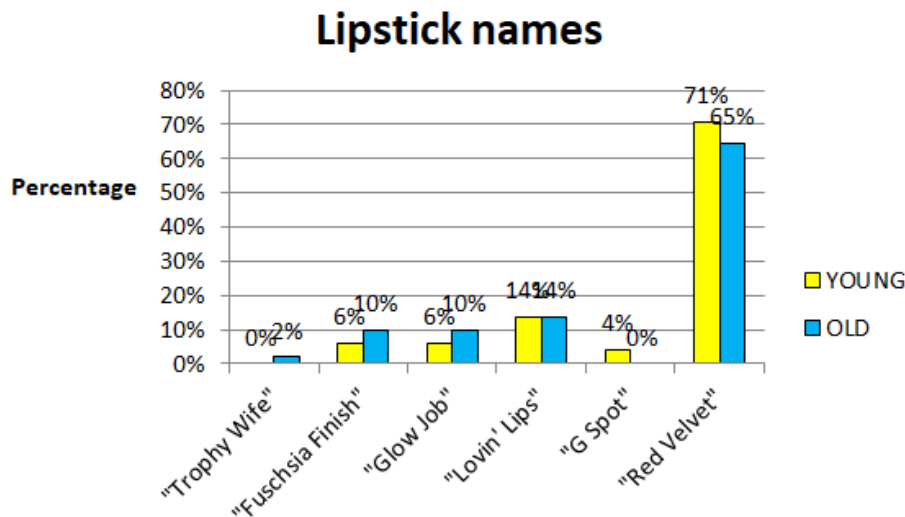


Exhibit 3.18 Lipstick names, data gathered from the survey

3.3.5 Results of Section 5: Final reflections

The final section of the questionnaire aimed to investigate participants' beliefs about the effect of advertising has on society's beliefs and the potential impact of a sexist-offensive advertising campaign on the brand image or reputation.

Looking at Exhibit 3.19, it is possible to say that both samples believed that advertising has an effect on the beliefs that society holds about women, in particular 92% of younger respondents and 73% for the older sample. This is a general belief that most women in both samples have and confirms the fact that gender stereotyping and unequal representations in advertising and the media in general affects social beliefs about women in particular, being them the category most often stereotyped and offended by unfair representations. Advertising in particular is a channel through which cultural ideologies about the position, status and value of men and women in society are transmitted (McKenzie et al., 2018). A Chi-Square test was used to compare the data gathered from the two samples and results showed that the results of the two groups are statistically significant, with $X^2(2, 102) = 7.62$, 0.02, the probability $p = 0.02$ is lower than the alpha level $= 0.05$. Hence a difference exists in women's opinion about the effects that advertising has on society's beliefs. In particular younger women are more convinced that this is true, with respect to more mature ones. Maybe this finding could mean that younger women pay more attention to advertisements and media generated content, compared to older ones, and think of it as a source of inspiration or diffusion of ideals and conceptions about how women should look like or act.

Advertising influence on society's beliefs

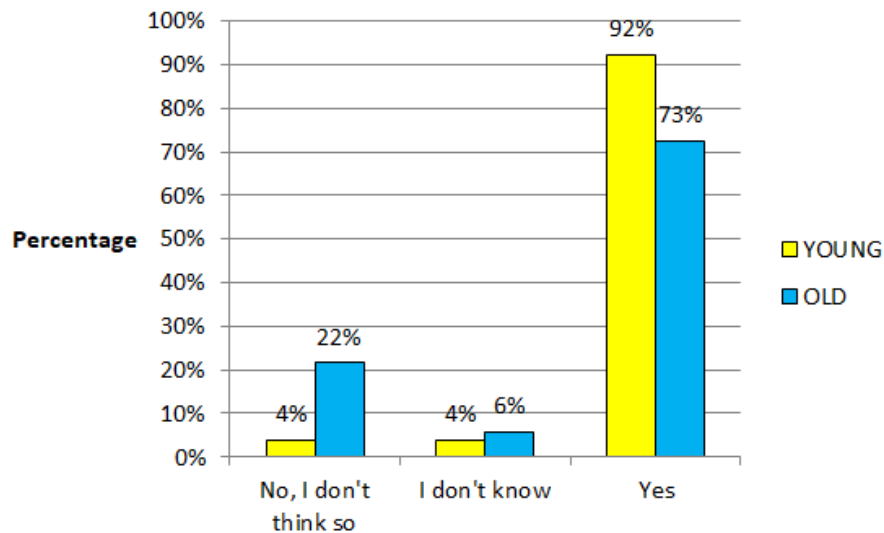


Exhibit 3.19 data gathered from the survey

Question number 15 (see Appendix) was close-ended and asked respondents to express their opinion regarding brand which use offensive advertising.

The first statement asked participants to choose one alternative to express their view about why a brand could use as promotional strategy an advertising campaign with offensive appeals. As can be seen in Exhibit 3.20, around 75% of both samples thought that the reason why a brand could choose this type of strategy is because it wants to be noticed, to it would be willing to do anything, including the use of potentially offensive appeals. Only 8% of younger women and 14% of older ones thought that a brand could use this type of appeals because it ran out of other, maybe better ideas, so considered offensive advertising as the last option that a brand could have to sell its products. Finally 16% of younger women and 12% of older ones had a more positive perspective about the matter and chose the option “It doesn’t think that it could offend people”. A Chi-Square test was conducted on the data gathered from the two samples and results showed that there is no statistical difference among the two groups, with $X^2(2,102) = 1.11$, 0.57, the probability $p = 0.57$ is greater than the alpha level=0.05.

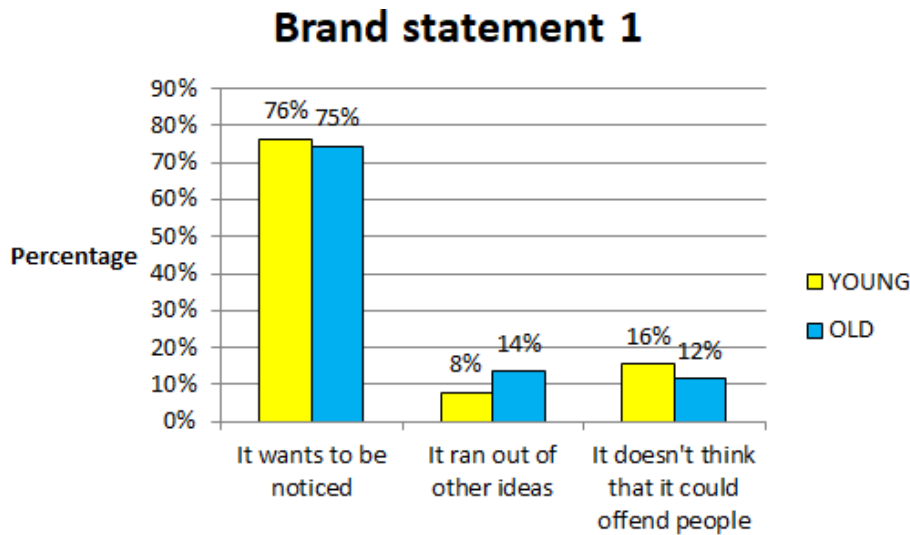


Exhibit 3.20 Brand statement 1, data gathered from the survey

Finally looking at Exhibit 3.21, for both samples, the majority of respondents had a more positive opinion about brands which use sexist-offensive advertisements. 57% for the younger group and 59% for the older one agreed that brands which advertise their products through sexist-offensive appeals actually respect women, but would do anything to sell. Looking at these results it would seem that a sexist-offensive campaign would not damage that much the opinions of women, of both age levels, about the brand in question. Looking at these results we can see how things have changed compared to what was discovered in the study conducted by Lundstrum and Sciglimpaglia (1977) on sex role portrayals in advertising. In their research, the authors found that women believed that offensive role portrayals are an extension of the way in which a company or brand thinks about women's place in society. While from the results of this study it is possible to see that a change has occurred in the attitudes of women towards offensive role portrayals in connection with the company or brand. The majority of women in both samples was aware of the dynamics of designing an advertising campaign and believed that it is merely a technique which advertisers use to sell, not their actual opinion about women's societal role.

A considerable amount though was convinced of the opposite, so that this type of brands do not respect women at all. Only less than 20% of women were convinced that brands which use sexist-offensive appeals have a wrong idea about women. A Chi-Square test was performed to see whether the data among the two groups was statistically significant or not. Results showed that there is not enough evidence to say that the two groups are statistically different, with $X^2(2,102) = 0.61, 0.73$. Given that the probability $p = 0.73$ is greater than $\alpha = 0.05$, the results are not statistically significant.

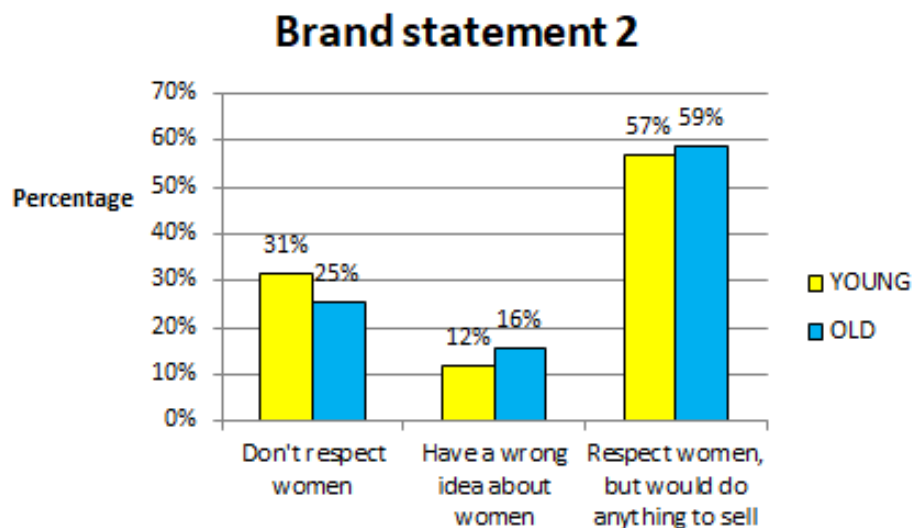


Exhibit 3.21 Brand statement 2, data gathered from the survey

3.4 Conclusions and limitations of the study

This study aimed to understand the effects of potentially sexist-offensive advertising appeals on women belonging to two different generations. The advertisements under investigation were cosmetics, in particular lipsticks and, being it a non-controversial product, the focus was on the execution technique with which they were promoted. A comparison among two age groups, was conducted in order to understand whether there was a difference in the attitudes towards sexist-offensive ads and its potential effect on consumers' purchase behaviour. Thanks to the qualitative and quantitative data gathered through a survey and through focus groups' discussions, it was possible to understand the attitudes of the two targets under scrutiny.

As it emerged from the quantitative analysis, only for ad number 5 a significant difference was found between young and old women when exposed to sexist-offensive advertisements. The data showed that older women may have more negative attitudes regarding more explicit and objectified female representation with respect to younger girls, who may feel more used to this kind of portrayal, given that they were born in an era of so called "sexual liberation" of the female body in the media landscape. Perhaps given that women, in particular, have always been the subject of misrepresentations and gender stereotypes in advertising, it is possible that still nowadays the topic of sexism in particular is one with which women, of all ages, cannot compromise with.

A difference was however spotted regarding the element which is more likely to cause an offence among the two groups. Younger women resulted to be more offended by the words used in the ad copy, while older women were more offended by the pictures used. This difference could be taken into consideration by advertisers when designing an ad campaign for different target markets. However, extreme care should be taken when deciding to conduct controversial advertising campaigns that may cause the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and sexist, objectified female representations. Even though such techniques may create buzz and help to reach a short-term goal by getting the attention of the target market, they may have harmful long-term consequence on consumer welfare and societal norms and beliefs about men and women. Further research to understand whether a difference exists among women of different generations should be conducted also taking into considerations other reasons for offensiveness, like violence for example, and examine the theory behind this effect.

Women's attitudes regarding the female portrayal in the media suggested that younger girls in particular consider sexual and provocative attitudes in ad advertisement as something likeable and desirable, with respect to older women. Extreme care should be taken to ensure that what may be seen as sexy and provocative does not risk to be perceived as sexist or offensive.

As regards respondents' purchase behaviour, it was found that sexist-offensive advertising would damage more older women's purchase intentions, with respect to the younger group. Hence, sexist-offensive advertising may be successful in catching the audience's attention and cut through a clutter of advertisements, but it may have negative consequences when looking at the purchase behaviour of more mature women. Attention should then be used when considering the target to which the ad is intended for. Further research should also examine the effect of sexist-offensive advertising on consumer's purchase choice in this product category.

Of course there are different limitations to this research. First of all, the generalizations of the findings may be limited by the fact that the younger respondents were students, so participants with other educational and professional backgrounds should also be included to have a more realistic sample. Moreover, only Italian women have been included in the research, but it could be interesting to make a comparison between women of different nationalities. Other cultural and social factors could also be included in order to understand any other potential differences in the attitudes of women towards offensive advertising. Another limitation of this study may come from the sample size utilized, so it could be useful also to enlarge even more the number of respondents to ensure the significance of the data gathered.

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Appendix

- Questionnaire prepared for the focus groups and then adapted for the survey distribution:

Focus Group on controversial advertising

Moderator: Nicole De Luca

Introduction

Welcome everyone and thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group. My name is Nicole De Luca, I am student in Innovation and Marketing Management and this session will be helpful for my Master thesis. The goal of this research is to analyse consumers' perceptions of controversial advertisements for lipsticks with sexist appeals.

To ensure the accuracy of this study, I kindly ask you to answer to these questions as truly as possible, keeping in mind that there are no right or wrong answers. Feel free to express your point of view with both positive and negative answers or comments. This session will be recorded in order not to miss important comments and insights about the discussion. All the information collected will be treated as anonymous.

Do you agree to take part in this research? Yes ☐ No ☐

Beliefs regarding role portrayals in advertising

1. Name the last ad that you can remember with a woman as main protagonist and explain briefly how she is portrayed and what do you think about the ad. Please elaborate.

2. Do you think that women today are portrayed more in which type of role?

☐ Housewife / Mother

☐ Important working position

- ☐ Seducer
- ☐ Strong and independent

3. Are you generally satisfied with how women are portrayed in advertisements today?

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Moderately satisfied
- ☐ Totally satisfied

4. Do you think that women and men are portrayed in the same way in advertising?

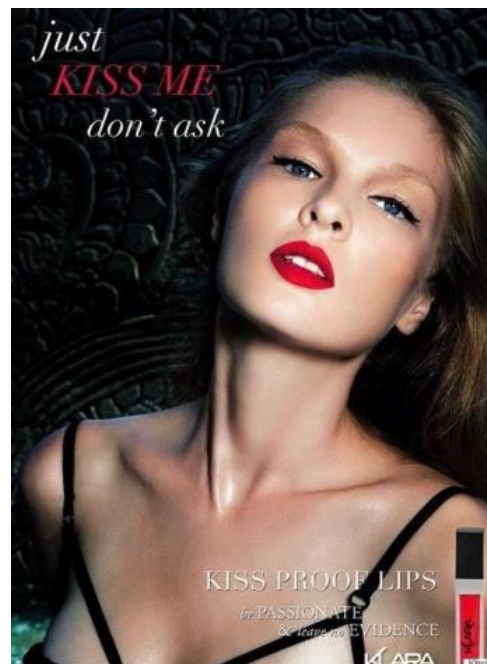
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know
- ☐ Yes

Attitudes toward the ads

Ad 1



Ad 2



Ad 3



Ad 4



Ad 5



Ad 6



5. Please express your level of personal offence toward the ads showed.

	Ad 1	Ad 2	Ad 3	Ad 4	Ad 5	Ad 6
Not at all offensive						
Not very offensive						
I am indifferent						
Very offensive						
Extremely offensive						

6. Looking at these ads, what offends you the most?

☐ Words used

☐ Pictures used

7. Please choose the adjectives that you think are appropriate to describe each ad. Choose as many as you want.

Adjectives	Ad 1	Ad 2	Ad 3	Ad 4	Ad 5	Ad 6
<i>Negative:</i>						
Uncomfortable						
Offensive						
Ridiculous						
Irritating						
Impolite						
Disgusting						
<i>Positive:</i>						
Creative						
Interesting						
Cool						
Empowering						
Informative						
Convincing						

8. What elements do you find acceptable to be shown in an ad for cosmetics?

	Acceptable elements
Face of the model	
Visible breasts of the model	
The product advertised	
Sexual references	
Visible legs of the model	

9. How does these advertisements make you feel when you look at them ? Please elaborate.

Attitude toward women's portrayal in the media

10. Please indicate your level of agreement with these statements.

I am more sensitive to the portrayal of women in ads than the portrayal of men.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	I am neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
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I see that women are often more undressed than men in advertisements.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	I am neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	--------------	-------	----------------

When women are shown in sexy and provocative attitudes in an ad, I want to be like them.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	I am neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	--------------	-------	----------------

Overall, I believe that the portrayal of women in ads is changing for the better.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	I am neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	--------------	-------	----------------

Purchase behaviour

11. Please express your level of agreement with the following statements:

If a new product is introduced with ads that I find sexist-offensive, I might still buy it if it offers me benefits which I find attractive.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	I am neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
-------------------	----------	--------------	-------	----------------

If a new product which I normally use adopts an ad campaign which I find sexist-offensive, I will discontinue using it.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	I am neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
-------------------	----------	--------------	-------	----------------

Even though I may see an ad which is sexist-offensive I would continue to purchase other products that I have been using from the same company.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	I am neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
-------------------	----------	--------------	-------	----------------

If a new product is introduced with ads that I find sexist-offensive, I would buy a similar product from another brand which does not use offensive advertising.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	I am neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
-------------------	----------	--------------	-------	----------------

12. Imagine to be in a shop, looking for a new lipstick. When you arrive at the lipsticks' shelf, these are the names of the lipsticks that are available, please choose one.

- ☐ "Trophy Wife"
- ☐ "Fuchsia Finish"
- ☐ "Glow job"
- ☐ "Lovin' Lips"
- ☐ "G Spot"
- ☐ "Red Velvet"

13. Among the ads showed before, which product would you buy, and why? Please elaborate.

Final reflections

14. Do you think that advertising has an effect on the beliefs that society holds about women?

☐ No, I don't think so

☐ I don't know

☐ Yes, I do

15. Please complete the statements choosing one alternative.

If a brand uses an offensive advertising campaign, it does so because...

It wants to be noticed	It ran out of other ideas	It doesn't think that it could offend people
------------------------	---------------------------	--

I believe that brands which use sexist-offensive appeals...

Don't respect women	Have a wrong idea about women	Respect women, but would do anything to sell
---------------------	-------------------------------	--

16. How do you think that an ad for a lipstick should look like? Please elaborate.

Conclusion

17. Gender?:

☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ Other

18. Please select your age range:

☐ 18 - 25

☐ 45 - 55

19. What is your highest education level?

☐ High School Diploma

☐ Bachelor Degree

☐ Master Degree/ PhD