

Are women offended by the way they are portrayed in advertising?

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Before writing this commentary to address the above question, posed by John Ford, the comments editor, we both took some time to reflect on our own personal responses to it. Obviously, there is much research that does indeed suggest that women are offended by advertisements depicting negative portrayals of women (Ford *et al.* 1981; Ford & LaTour 1993; Christy 2006; Scriven 2007). However, as thirtysomething females, we were both quite surprised when we came to the conclusion that, on the whole, we are not offended by the way women are portrayed in advertising. This is quite interesting given that typical complainants in relation to offensive advertising depicting females are reported to be women aged between 34 and 55 (Christy 2006).

In deconstructing our thoughts and probing why we are swimming against the tide of research, we both admit to feeling a little bad that we are not being offended by the way females have generally been portrayed in advertisements. As females who share the same demographic as typical complainants, are we not supposed to be outraged? Where is our feminist consciousness?

The theoretical basis for understanding the potential offence caused by certain advertisements can be found in an individual's ethical judgement. The messages reflected in advertising are evaluated from the perspective of an individual's moral philosophy or

ethical judgement (Arthur & Quester 2003; Dean 2005). If the depicted advertising message is divergent to these viewpoints, then the individual will experience offence. Are our ethics and morals so different to those of other females? We are somewhat calmed by understanding the numerous factors that interact that cause offence to advertising (Christy 2006). Individuals experience different levels of affect (in this case, offence) as a consequence of exposure to various stimuli in their environment. Subsequently, this creates a broad range of individual behaviours and cognitions (Schwarz 1998; Jundt & Hinsz 2002).

We begin by noting that the question posed is obviously assuming that portrayals of women are negative; however, it should be acknowledged that, for the most part, portrayals of women in mainstream advertising are not in fact negative. Furthermore, advertisements can be found to be offensive on two different dimensions: offensive products and offensive execution (Barnes & Dotson 1990). The focus we have taken in this commentary is on the role of creative execution used in an advertisement, in creating offence. Having established that the issue here is focused on those advertisements that are offensive due to execution, we now take a look at the issue in more depth. At face value it is a black-and-white question, to which our personal response is a black-and-white answer of 'no'. But certainly some females do take offence at the portrayal of women in advertising. Why do these variations in advertising processing occur? Why do women feel different levels

of negative affect such as feelings of distress, anger, fear, disgust and shame (Tomkins 1991)? Well, our response is as clear as mud, and is based on 'if', 'but' and 'maybe'.

We will begin with 'if'. In what circumstances might we feel offended by a negative portrayal? Drawing on the literature, Social Comparison Theory (Festinger 1954) is commonly used as a basis for investigating how young women engage in comparison of themselves with others. This theory suggests that people strive to evaluate their opinions and abilities, which in the absence of objective bases for comparison, can be satisfied by social comparison with similar others (Festinger 1954). However, comparisons can also occur with dissimilar others such as reference groups (Hyman 1968) or with various social categories (Merton 1957). In differing contexts, social comparison investigations by Richins (1991, 1995) and Martin and Kennedy (1993) have largely explored the outcomes of comparison behaviour and the subsequent impact on social psychology issues such as esteem, self-concept and satisfaction with appearance, and general insecurity.

So, in probing our response to John's question, we have decided that, if an advertisement portrays a female to whom we might normally relate or compare ourselves, or whom we may aspire to be like, and she is negatively depicted, then yes, offence is far more likely to occur. In addition, if that 'similar other', or 'dissimilar but inspirational' other, is shown in a contextual setting or using a product that we may currently use or aspire

to use, resonance is likely to translate and then the likelihood of offence is heightened. So, is high involvement a precondition for possible offence?

Now comes the 'but'. Supposing we see an advertisement that resonates with us either due to perceived similarity, contextual setting or through use of a favourite product or brand – is this enough to make us feel offended? Personally, the answer for both of us still lean towards 'no'. So, there must be more to the answer, which leads us to the 'but'. Let us assume that we have engaged in comparison behaviour that has triggered increased processing of an offensive advertisement *but* we still don't feel offended by the negative portrayal of a female(s). Why might this be? The answer may possibly lie in the fact that the advertisement is not literally processed due to high levels of advertising scepticism. That is, the processing is impacted and the message discounted, leading to no offence experienced by the negative portrayal of women in the advertisement.

In the advertising literature, scepticism can be defined as a feeling of distrust and doubt evoked by stimuli that appear to be unrealistic, exaggerated and phoney (Batra & Ray 1986). In other words, the more consumers experience perceived advertising deception and exaggeration, the more sceptical they will become of advertising in general. This scepticism in turn impacts advertising processing and can, for example, on a personal level, make us discount the message as being 'ridiculous', 'silly', 'laughable' and simply 'untrue'. So while

comparison behaviour may exist, does scepticism negate the potential effects of offensive advertising?

Scepticism to advertising and the subsequent lack of offence at the portrayal of women may also be linked to our expectations of advertising. Although our individual value systems may not appreciate the stereotyping of women in some advertisements as sex objects or homemakers, we expect that some companies will advertise their products or brands using these execution types. So, even when viewing an advertisement that negatively portrays women and that goes against our own personal value systems, if we expect such a portrayal then no offence will be taken. That is, we are almost desensitised to such executions.

Finally, we conclude with 'maybe'. Maybe the determination of whether we are offended by a portrayal is not simply about our ethical judgements, but also related to other factors. Perhaps it depends on similarity of the context, similarity of the message source (including ethnicity) and the product or brand with the message receiver's self or lifestyle. That is, there needs to be a high level of involvement and consequently elaborate processing for offence to occur. Maybe the determination of offence also depends on the individual's level of scepticism towards advertising overall. This scepticism may in fact negate feelings of offence where the advertising portrayal is simply 'too ridiculous' to be taken seriously or literally.

There are in fact many more questions than answers that have been alluded to in this commentary. What

has been mentioned are a few shades of grey. But what are the other conditions that impact processing and feelings of offence? Certainly, the literature does guide these initial questions, and our own personal reflections, but now we ask the question 'What other shades of grey are there?'

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