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**National Cultures, Values and Lifestyles
Influencing Consumers' Perception
towards Sexual Imagery in Alcohol
Advertising:
An Exploratory Study in the UK, Germany
and Italy**

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This exploratory study examines consumers' perception towards sexual imagery in alcohol advertising across national cultures and among men and women with different demographic and psychographic make-up in those cultures. This study addresses a very important gap found in the literature, namely the influence of consumers' psychographic characteristics as values and lifestyles on their overall perception towards sexual imagery in advertising. The study was conducted among consumers aged between 18 and 35 in the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy. Results indicate that Italians overall have higher acceptance levels towards sexual imagery portrayed in advertisements as compared to German and British consumers. Furthermore, varying levels of sexual imagery are much more appealing to men than women in all three countries. Consumers' values and lifestyles also played an important role in their overall perception. Moral values in particular are an indicator of acceptance levels of sexual content.

Keywords: Sexual imagery, Advertising, European nations, Gender, Values, Lifestyles

Introduction

This paper ventures into a previously unexplored area of advertising research. It seeks to understand how consumers perceive sexual imagery in advertising across three European nations and how their values and lifestyles influence this perception. This area calls for research in order to guide international advertisers to prepare sound advertising strategies to enter or

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develop new markets. Past research has delved into the issue of the impact that sexual appeals in advertising has on consumers and it has been found that stronger sexual content made an advertisement more objectionable and this trend was more apparent among women than among men (La Tour and Henthorne 1993; Ford, La Tour and Lundstorm 1991). It has also been found that the use of sexual appeals in advertising has persistently increased in magazine advertisements (c.f. Soley & Reid, 1988). However, much of past research findings are based on a researcher perspective, using content analysis or on American consumers' perspective only, using business student samples (c.f. Severn, Belch and Belch 1990; Reichert et al. 1999). There are very few empirical studies that have looked into consumer attitudes towards sexual content in advertising across national cultures (c.f. Ford, La Tour, and Clarke 2004) and even less, if any, across subcultures within a nation with different values and lifestyles. This is a primary gap found in the literature. Furthermore, it is surprising to see a lack of academic contribution on this body of research from European scholars.

This paper seeks to address the above mentioned issues and explores the perception of consumers in three important European markets, i.e. United Kingdom, Germany and Italy, towards the use of sexual imagery in alcohol advertisements. The paper begins with a review of literature, followed by research questions and methodology employed. Research findings will then be discussed followed by managerial implications for the optimal use of sex in pan-European advertising.

Review of the Literature

Despite feminist opposition and evidence from academic research about the negative consequences of using sexually overt or suggestive advertising (c.f. Ford, La Tour, and Clarke 2004; La Tour and Henthorne 1993; Ford, La Tour and Lundstorm 1991), advertisers have continued to use rampant sexual imagery for selling products ranging from alcoholic beverages and perfumes to automobiles, industrial equipment and food products. Research in the area of sex in advertising has shown that sexual explicitness in advertising has increased over three decades from late 1970s to the present (c.f. Reichert et al. 1999; Soley and Reid 1988). Sexual appeals are attention getting, arousing, affect inducing, and memorable (for review, see Belch, Belch, and Villarreal 1987). Therefore, the motives of advertisers for using such imagery are clear. However, more important is the question of how consumers perceive the sexual content used in advertising.

Consumer Perception Towards Sexual Imagery in Advertising

Evidence from literature shows that advertisements containing explicit

nudity and erotic appeals have been found to be less favourably perceived and considered more offensive than ads with moderately clothed models inspite of increased attention to these ads (Peterson and Kerin 1977). Severn, Belch and Belch (1990) found that the use of sexual appeal in advertising interferes with message comprehension, particularly when there is substantial information available for processing. A number of studies have also shown that gender differences in perception are common and that women tend to find sexual imagery in advertisements much more offensive than men because typically women are portrayed as sex objects in advertising (Ford et al. 2004; La Tour and Henthorne 1993). Nudity in ads was also found to generate uneasiness and tension among women respondents (La Tour and Henthorne 1993). Two key areas of this research study relate to cross-cultural (national) and gender differences in consumer perception towards sexual imagery in advertising. Prior to addressing the research questions for our study, we will turn our attention to how each of the key areas in our study is tied to the literature. A third key area in our study, namely the influence of values and lifestyles on consumer perception towards sexual imagery has, however, not been addressed in the literature.

There is a clear dearth of cross-cultural research in consumer perception towards the use of sex in advertising. Ford, La Tour and Clarke's study (2004) is one of the very few studies in the cross-culture area that is documented in the literature. Their study assessed the perceptions of adult men and women from the United States, Singapore, India and China about the sex role portrayals of advertisers in the fast food, fitness/health, personal care and alcohol industries. Although there were variations in consumer responses, the main finding was that both the U.S. and Singaporean samples had some perceptual problems with sex role portrayals (found women's portrayal as sex objects to be offensive) in alcohol ads, and the Chinese respondents had perceptual problems with ads of all the product categories. The primary limitation of this research is that it used a convenience sample of business students studying in the U.S. but this group may not be representative of their countries' native populations. Also, the ads in Ford et al.'s study did not necessarily have only sexual content but rather focused on the sex role portrayals depicted in advertisements.

Although, there have been a number of studies on gender differences in consumer response towards sexual content in advertising, none except Ford et al. (2004) has looked at this issue from a cross-cultural perspective. As such, a cross-cultural study, especially in a European context is considered to be valuable. Nevertheless, research exploring gender differences has shown that women are much more offended by sexual content in ads than men (Ford, La Tour, and Lundstorm 1991; La Tour and Henthorne 1993). Ford et al. (1991) found that more educated and feminist oriented women consumers

(feminist orientation was assessed using the Arnott Female Autonomy Inventory 1972) were highly critical of women only used as sex objects in advertising. Our study looks at sexual imagery in advertisements that use both women alone and women and men together in sexual positions. It must be noted that Mittal and Lassar (2000) did not find gender differences in perception towards sexual content in perfume advertising. Although women on an average were still more offended by high sex content in ads than men, it is interesting to note that some women did not find high sex content ads very offensive. Mittal and Lassar (2000) have classified these types of respondents as "sexually liberated" (that comprises of both men *as well as* women) and have suggested future research to address the demographic and psychographic profiles of these sexually liberated consumers.

In order to understand the psychographic profiles of consumers, we must attempt to look at consumers' values and lifestyles. A deeper understanding of consumers' innate values can help in guiding advertisers not only to design appealing advertisements for the target consumers but also guide them to understand why consumers like or dislike certain types of sexual imagery portrayed in ads, as values are said to provide potentially powerful explanations of human behaviour because they serve as standards or criteria of conduct, tend to be limited in number and are remarkably stable over time (Kamakura and Mazzon 1991). A study of American consumers by Henthorne and La Tour (1995) indicated that the use of high levels of female nudity/erotic content in print ads may not be perceived as morally right or culturally acceptable to viewers of such ads. Since their study showed the consumers' opinion of what is morally wrong, rather than consumers' beliefs and values which might have motivated them to respond in that way, it leaves a gap for our study to address, particularly in an international context. Lifestyle is seen as a mental construct that explains human behaviour (Brunso and Grunert 1998) and this too can elucidate how consumers perceive (how they behave towards) sexual imagery based on the lifestyles they lead.

Less attention has been paid in the literature on the "soft issues" such as discerning the level of decency regarding sexual content in advertising. Boddewyn (1991, p. 25) notes that these issue "are more difficult to define and handle because they reflect a large variety of personally subjective, culturally related and historically changing values and attitudes." Thus, values have been identified as an important factor that could influence consumers' perception of how much sexual imagery is considered decent. This, therefore, is a pertinent, even if difficult issue to explore. Researchers in clinical and social psychology (c.f. Lips 1988) have explored people's attitudes towards sex and erotic material based on their values but not specifically with respect to sexual imagery used in commercial advertising.

However, this subject has not been previously discussed in the marketing and consumer behaviour literature and our study seeks to make a substantial contribution in this area.

Thus, this paper seeks to answer three important research questions (R.Q.):

- R.Q.1:** How do consumers across the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy perceive the use of varying degrees of sexual imagery in advertisements of international alcohol brands?
- R.Q.2:** Do women perceive sexual imagery in alcohol advertisements more negatively than men in all the three countries?
- R.Q.3:** How do consumers' values and lifestyles influence their perception towards nudity and sexual suggestiveness in alcohol ads in the three countries?

R.Q. 1 and R.Q. 2 are an extension of past empirical work. R.Q. 3 is, however, a new area of research and this paper's primary contribution to the consumer behaviour literature lies in the answer to this question.

Research Context

Attitudes towards sex and sex role portrayals in advertising are a critical component of cultural understanding (Milner and Collins 2000). With multinational companies trying to standardise their pan-European advertising in order to achieve economies of scale in production and to maintain uniform brand image, it is pertinent to understand whether similar levels of sexual imagery can be employed in advertising in three of the most important markets in Europe. Since attitude towards use of sex in advertising is a function of culture, advertisers need to carefully consider the boundaries of acceptable sexual imagery they can use in advertisements in the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy.

There were a number of reasons that prompted us to choose the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy for this cross-cultural study. Advertisers often assume that what works in the United Kingdom, might also work in Germany and/or Italy as is evident from similar advertising strategies for a number of brands and products in these countries today. The underlying assumption might be that these countries are three of the most advanced European markets (Eurostat 2003), with consumers having similar disposable incomes, tastes, wants and lifestyles. Thus, similar advertising might appeal to similar consumer segments across these countries. However, marketers often ignore the possibility that even though consumers may have similar lifestyles, the expression of lifestyle activities may differ considerably, which

may be dependent on the culture and norms of one's nation and this difference in expression of lifestyles may also affect consumer perception towards sexual imagery in advertising.

The three nations were also chosen as they are representative of different geographic areas of Europe, with the UK being a north-west European nation, Germany being a central European nation and Italy being a Mediterranean south European nation. These countries are also found to be relatively different in terms of their attitude towards sex in general, with Germans being much more open about it as compared to British and Italians. The Italian society, still dominated by Catholic traditions is one of the least sexually permissive in Europe (Bosveld 1996). Moreover, according to Inglehart and Norris (2003), on the basis of the World Values Survey (1995-2001), Germany scores very high on the international gender equality scale, with the United Kingdom and Italy being further behind in Europe. It would be interesting to note how men and women from the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy, with their respective positions in the gender equality scale would react to sexual imagery in advertising, often depicting women as sex objects. It is expected that in Italy (being a more traditional Catholic society, coupled with its relatively low position on the gender equality scale), gender roles are more demarcated which is pronounced by male-dominated-female subordinate relationship. A country's ranking on the gender equality scale may be able to explain the activeness of sexual politics and feminist ideology and its resulting influence on gender perception towards sexual imagery in advertising. Finally, these countries were also chosen due to researchers' knowledge of the languages of all three countries.

Alcohol is chosen as a product because a considerable number of alcohol advertisements seem to depend on the use of sex to capture consumer attention. Even though consumption of alcohol is seen to have a negative effect on sexual performance (Doweiko 1990), advertisers have often relied on sexual content in alcohol advertising to gain consumer attention. As is evident from recent advertisements, alcohol advertisers seem to be selling an alcohol stimulated, sexually active lifestyle to young consumers in all three countries. It is important to understand how young consumers of different demographic and psychographic make-up in these countries react to alcohol advertisers' intentions.

Research Design and Method

A qualitative methodology was employed, using in-depth interviews with respondents in the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy. Interviews were conducted by one of the researchers who had knowledge of the local languages over a period of six months between June and November 2003. A

qualitative approach was undertaken as this is an exploratory piece of work and several dimensions under study have not been previously examined in the literature. It was thought that new insights and ideas could also emerge as we interview respondents that have not been thought of by researchers before. Gould (1994) has also advocated the use of qualitative research to understand consumer characteristics in interpreting ad messages laden with sexual content. Several aspects emerge during a qualitative study (Creswell 2002), which cannot be seen from a quantitative study. A quantitative study has a set of questions developed on the basis of some previously established scale or instrument, which leaves less room for new ideas to flow in. In-depth interviews were used as a data collection method so that respondents could give an honest opinion on their perception towards the sexual images that were shown without the feeling that other respondents were 'judging' or watching what they said, as would be in a group discussion. Interviews were held in a relaxed atmosphere - in cafés, respondents' homes and university board rooms, with comfortable settings. A possible limitation of this interview approach is that the respondent may not have answered entirely truthfully and gave answers which 'sounded good' rather than what they really felt.

Colour copies of four real magazine advertisements of four different well known alcohol brands (well known in all the three countries under study) having varying levels of sexual imagery were obtained from advertising agencies and were shown to the respondents. Brand names are kept anonymous on advertisers' request. Respondents were asked to comment on their perception (negative/positive/indifferent) towards the sexual imagery portrayed in the ad. The interview began with the researcher asking respondents about the values they have in life and certain lifestyle related questions. Mick and Buhl (1992) argue that when consumers encounter an advertisement, their reaction to it depends on the meaning they assign to it, which in turn depends on characteristics of both the ad and the individual consumer. This argument reinforces our belief that consumer characteristics such as their values and lifestyles will influence their perception and thus relevant questions need to be asked. Apart from their values, consumers were asked about their age, occupation, education background (demographic information) and also about their activities and interests, importance of going to clubs, parties and how important alcohol is in their lives (psychographic).

From the literature, sexual advertising appeals have varied along two dimensions: (i) the amount of nudity in an ad (Peterson and Kerin 1977), and (ii) the degree of suggestiveness in an ad (Sciglimpaglia, Belch and Cain 1978). These are the two dimensions along which ads for our research study have been chosen and consumer responses elucidated. The advertisements chosen were according to the presence of nudity and sexual suggestiveness.

They are described in the table below:

Table 1: Categories of Advertisements shown to Respondents

Ad	Category	Description
Ad 1	Semi nude	This ad of a very popular alcohol brand contained a picture of a semi-nude woman riding on the back of a man, having "fun" (in the words of one respondent). The woman is wearing shorts and a bikini top only half-covering her breasts, with a very prominent cleavage
Ad 2	Semi nude	This ad has a picture of a woman wearing nothing but a piece of clothing made to look like an orange peel. The woman is shown from behind, with only her back completely exposed. The ad is of an orange based drink
Ad 3	Nude	This ad features a couple shown lying down completely naked, from behind. The couple's rear side is totally exposed. The ad is of a new pre-mixed drink in the European market
Ad 4	Suggestive	This ad belongs to a popular brand among young consumers. The ad shows a woman licking the drink bottle. The ad was chosen because a one-country pilot study showed that most consumers found the ad to be highly sexually suggestive, because of the way the woman licks the bottle

Interviews were tape recorded with respondents' consent and then transcribed verbatim. Transcripts generated rich qualitative data which necessitated the use of qualitative analysis software *QSR Nud*ist*. This was helpful in coding large volumes of data and helped generating predicted and new themes useful for the study. An eight-step coding procedure highlighted by Tesch (1990) was used for data analysis. Data was coded for respondents' age, occupation, lifestyle, values, and opinion towards semi-nude, nude and suggestive ads. Additionally, separate codes were also developed for emerging relationships such as relationship between a respondent's particular value, lifestyle and opinion towards the semi-nude/nude/suggestive picture.

Sample

A purposeful, convenience and snowball sampling was used. A total of 90

respondents between the age of 18 and 35 were interviewed in the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy. Interviews were held in the cities of Glasgow and London in the United Kingdom, Muenster and Bremen in Germany, and Modena and Milan in Italy. There were 33 respondents in the United Kingdom (15 men, 18 women), 30 in Germany (16 men, 14 women) and 27 in Italy (14 men, 13 women). The 18-35 age group was chosen as this is the group identified as the 'young consumers' by alcohol multinationals. Respondents interviewed comprised of students, bankers, teachers, housewives, consultants, self-employed, and others employed in a variety of services.

Findings and Analysis

For our study, a semiotic analysis approach was used as the tool to understand consumer perceptions towards sexual imagery. Semiotic analysis, which is a study of signs and their meanings (Mick 1986) is a research technique commonly used in advertising interpretation studies. Our overall findings suggest that gender plays a very important role in consumers' perception towards sexual imagery in advertising. Even though country differences do exist, women in all three countries are much more critical of the sexual imagery portrayed in alcohol advertising as compared to men, on the whole. The answers to R.Q.1 and R.Q.2 are therefore combined and presented.

Country and Gender Differences in Perception

Differences in perception between individual countries and between men and women are presented for each ad shown to consumers. It must be noted that Ad 1 and Ad 4 generated most discussion and therefore, a bulk of the findings relate to these two ads.

Ad 1: This ad seems to have achieved the purpose of grabbing attention, with respondents' attention being immediately drawn to the model's breasts. However, it must be noted that attention grabbing does not necessarily mean respondents liking the ad. Therefore, if the advertiser's intention was solely to attract attention to the ad, it has achieved its purpose. However, if the intention was generating a positive affective response from consumers towards the ad, response was mixed, with most women disliking the "offensive" and "vulgar" depiction of the woman model as a sex object.

For British respondents, women mostly found this ad "offensive", "cheap", "vulgar" and "exploitative". This reaction seemed to come from women aged anything between 20 and 35, irrespective of their lifestyles and values. Young women who are students as well as those who work or have higher disposable incomes found the sexual imagery distasteful and

offensive. One woman respondent (student, aged 20), however, found this ad to be "fun", portraying excitement and did not have any problem with the sexual imagery in the ad. She rather liked this ad as it conveyed the message of woman's dominance. This is what the respondent said: "I think it's good. Look at the girl, she is on top of the man and she is showing the dominance there and anything which is showing that has got to be good." Most British men interviewed found this ad "trendy" and "provocative". Although, it caught the attention of all the men interviewed, some men did not react well to the sexual imagery because of their values (discussed later) or were indifferent (almost desensitised) because using a woman's semi-nakedness to sell alcohol is nothing new or special. It must also be noted that three British male respondents (aged between 30 and 35) were slightly resentful of seeing the image of the woman on top of the man.

German women did not like the ad either because they felt it was not personally targeted at them and/or that the woman model looked "cheap". But they seemed more indifferent about the sexual explicitness in the ad than the British women. Also, more women in Germany mentioned that they were used to seeing such explicit images in the media and were not shocked or surprised. Two women respondents (aged 24 and 27) liked the ad because the ad conveyed the message of "fun" and they liked the depiction of the woman's dominance. In the words of one respondent, "It's fun. They seem to be having fun and she has got the power. It's cool." Men in Germany mostly did not have a problem with this image, but did mention that they would have preferred to see something more subtle and not so "in-your-face". Some men again did not like the ad as they mentioned they mentioned having some basic values which made them dislike the ad. Most young men who are university students however, did mention that they liked the woman model and found her to be "sexy". The response and reaction of men towards this ad largely depended on their values and lifestyles. It is interesting to note that German men did not mention disliking the woman in control (being on top of the man), as did some British men.

Italian women thought that sexual explicitness in ads was boring as they are so used to seeing such imagery. Italian women did not find this ad offensive, but rather boring. They seemed to think this ad would appeal to men and they did not have a problem with that. Also, no woman respondent mentioned liking the ad because of the woman shown to be on top and being dominant. This exploratory research evidence could reflect Bosveld's (1996) finding that gender role differences in the traditional Italian society are more pronounced than in the UK and Germany. As a result Italian women may not feel totally comfortable with depiction of a woman's dominance in a society which is traditionally characterised by a male-dominated-female-subordinate relationship. Italian men largely liked this ad and did not have any negative

reaction towards the ad because of the sexual imagery. Italian men did not seem to find image explicit either. They primarily thought of the woman model as "hot", "sexy" and "provocative". Men who did not particularly like this ad mentioned that they preferred to see a more subtle use of sex in an ad. These men were between the ages 30 and 35.

Ad 2: Most respondents, men and women, in all three countries liked this ad. Even though the woman model in this ad is covered with merely an orange peel and no more, respondents did not think her appearance to be cheap or indecent. The model was found to have a "cheeky" and "fresh" look about her which appealed to a lot of respondents, particularly young women in the UK, Germany and Italy. The sexual appeal used in Ad 2 with a semi-nude girl covered with only a piece of clothing made to look like an orange peel was therefore not deemed to be cheap or exploitative as it was used somewhat in context (Brand 2 being an orange drink).

Ad 3: Although the sexual imagery used in this ad was not seen as very offensive by most respondents (both men and women) in all three countries, overall attitude towards the ad was not positive because respondents failed to see the link between the picture and the product. It can be inferred from this finding that even the use of sex, if out of context, does not go down well with consumers. Therefore, even though perception towards the sexual imagery itself was not negative, it was so towards the ad. Moreover, even if no link was found between the image and the product, Italian consumers did point out that the picture used in the ad (a black and white, artistic looking picture) was stylish and that it was well-designed more than the British and German consumers. It must be noted, however, that the only respondents who did like the ad were also Italians. Some Italian men and women liked the ad because they found the picture "stylish" and "beautiful". It is also noteworthy that respondents, both men and women, mentioned that this alcohol ad, with its artistic sexual imagery looked more like a perfume ad, and that they would not associate the ad with an alcohol brand in any way.

Ad 4: There was a general consensus in the UK and Germany that this ad was highly suggestive sexually. However, in Italy, a number of respondents did not think it to be that suggestive.

Most British consumers said that this ad was highly sexual, almost like an open invitation for sex and as such they did not like it. The sexual imagery portrayed in this ad was thought to be perhaps a bit extreme for an alcohol advert. Women once again thought that the ad was highly sexual and vulgar (with the exception of two women who found the ad sexual, but "stylish"). A higher number of British men disliked this ad as compared to Ad 1 for its overt use of sex. One male respondent said, "To me it is almost pornographic." Another young British respondent said, "It is very sexual, like an open invitation for sex. I think it is a bit much for a drink advert."

This ad was however, more approved by the German respondents, both men and women. Some women who mentioned having high moral values still did not like it and thought it was cheap. Nevertheless, their reaction was not as negative compared to the semi-nude, explicit ad (Ad 1). The instances of women finding the advert "alright" were much higher in Germany than in the UK or Italy. Most German men did not mind this ad at all because it was seen as subtle, yet sexual in a tasteful way. Men who had mentioned having moral values did not like it but were not offended either by this image because it did not use explicit sexual stimulus.

A number of Italian respondents did not view this ad as particularly suggestive sexually, which is a very different perception from British or German respondents. In the words of one Italian male respondent, "I am not shocked by this. These kinds of images have become so common nowadays that people may not even realise that this is a subtle way of using sex." This suggests that the idea of what constitutes sexual suggestiveness might be different in different countries, which can depend, among other things, on the way sex is portrayed in the media (Lips 1988). Italian men and women seemed to be highly exposed to a lot of "trashy" sexual content on television and advertising which has perhaps made the sexual content in Ad 3 almost negligible. Even though British and German respondents are also exposed to a lot of sexual content in the media, they seem to have similar perceptions to at least what constitutes sexual explicitness and sexual subtleness. This could be a potential area of future research by psychologists, anthropologists and consumer behaviour theorists who can formulate national cultural dimensions of sexual attitudes that can be used across academic disciplines.

Influence of Values

Respondents were asked to mention their values in life prior to being shown the ads. Values such as love, peace, independence, happiness, and moral values proved to be quite common. Among these and more values mentioned, moral values, in particular, seemed to have an influence on whether consumers are more or less acceptable towards the use of sex in advertising. The perception towards the sexual imagery used in ads differed largely on whether consumers mentioned having moral values or not. Consumers who mentioned having moral values (some mentioned having religious moral values whereas some others mentioned having moral values without any religious connotation) were negative towards Ad 1 and Ad 3 which were considered to be more offensive and explicit in their sexual message. In reaction to Ad 1, a British male respondent said, "Almost every advertiser seems to use sex to sell any kind of product. Frankly, I am fed up with these kind of ads. I can imagine lot of guys would like this ad, but I don't like it." Findings illustrate however that only British and German

respondents mentioned having moral values when asked about their values in life, whereas Italian respondents did not.

Influence of Consumer Lifestyles

Consumers' lifestyles seemed to influence their perception less as compared to values, especially moral values. Overall findings indicate that consumers conformed more to their national culture and gender rather than similar lifestyles. For example, women respondents in Britain, having different lifestyles (from young party-goers to students and workaholics) found the image in Ad 1 and Ad 4 rather offensive. Even young women in the UK who admit to "getting drunk" frequently and going to parties, clubs and pubs on a regular basis did not like the "offensive" use of sex in two of the alcohol ads shown. German female respondents belonging to similar lifestyle groups however, seemed more permissive towards the use of sexual imagery than their British counterparts. Italian women sharing similar lifestyles and interests with women in the UK and Germany proved to be most tolerant of the sexual imagery shown to them. Male respondents varied more in their perception with men leading a party-active lifestyle being much more appreciative of the sexual appeals rather than men who lead a more conservative lifestyle (activities more centred around work and family). This trend was however more apparent among the British and German men than Italians.

Combining gender, values and lifestyles, our findings address a question left open in Mittal and Lassar's (2000) study on the profile of sexually liberated consumers who are more accepting of high sex content in ads and even like them. The profile of consumers who liked the high sex content ads, based on their gender, values and lifestyles in all three countries are as follows:

- Men who lead lifestyles of partying, clubbing and are mostly students or young workers (who did not mention having moral values)
- Men who work and are relatively older (between 30 and 35 years of age) and accept the portrayal of women as sex objects in advertising
- Women who are young (age ranging from 20 to 25), university students, having values such as independence, fun, and self confidence, are party loving, admit to regularly going clubbing and even getting drunk on occasions, are fashion leaders or quite fashion conscious. These women however liked the ads only when a woman was shown to be in control and having fun.

Managerial Implications

Our study on young consumers' response to sexual imagery in alcohol advertising in three of Europe's leading markets would suggest that alcohol advertisers need to carefully study their target market before using sexual appeals in advertising. 'Sex always sells' can be a dangerous assumption and advertisers could alienate their target audiences, particularly women. It seems clear from this study that women are much less appreciative of the use of sex in alcohol ads, and therefore this target segment can be reached with more creative ad messages, without the use of blatant sex appeals. Advertisements of drinks targeted at men using sexual imagery (particularly explicit) are best being used only in men's magazines such as *FHM* or *GQ*, without alienating that section of the male population who drink alcohol but may not like the use of explicit sexual imagery in advertising. Using sex appeals may not always be a bad idea, but it is advisable not to take it to any extreme. Consumers seem more inclined to see creative and clever use of sexual appeals, without having to be explicit or suggestive. Advertisers should also realise that they have a social responsibility not to encourage drinking among the youth and associate alcohol with any kind of sexual pleasures. With alcohol being the biggest killer of young men across Europe (WHO Report 2000), advertisers should encourage more responsible drinking behaviour. Using images in ads indicating irresponsible, inappropriate sexual behaviour as a result of drinking will only make advertisers' position look less responsible and more vulnerable in the eyes of both consumers as well as advertising policing organisations.

Conclusions

Our research has taken a first step towards combining the influence of gender, values and lifestyle on perception towards sexual imagery in advertising in a cross-cultural context. Although this study lacks generalisability, it does lay the foundation for a large scale quantitative study using the findings from this study as new variables. In this study across the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy, we found that men clearly liked the use of sex in alcohol ads much more than women. This finding lends support to previous research with regards to women reacting more negatively to the use of sex in advertising in general (c.f. La Tour and Henthorne 1993). Italians showed higher acceptance levels for the use of sexual imagery in advertising. This is revealing as Italy is the most conservative society out of the three countries (Bosveld 1996). Germans seemed to be used to seeing such images but their perception largely depended on their values, particularly moral values. Use of subtle sexual imagery in advertising was

preferred by German respondents. Germans are used to seeing public nudity in beaches, parks etc. as well as on television. As such, sexually explicit imagery might be less of a novelty for them. Interestingly, Italians' exposure to sexually explicit content on television and other media however, does not render the men to desire any less of sexually explicit content in advertising. Out of the three nationalities, British consumers overall seemed less accepting and comfortable with the use of sexual imagery in alcohol advertising. This was especially true of British women.

Interestingly, two types of feminists were uncovered from this study - one, who disliked the use of sexual imagery in advertising using women as sex objects and found the ads offensive; and the other, who did not mind sexual explicitness of any kind as long as the woman is seen to be strong and independent, or shown in control over a man. Thus, the first type of feminists reacted to sexual imagery in advertising in a similar manner as did respondents in Ford, La Tour and Lundstorm's (1991) study but a second type of feminists was uncovered in this study, not previously mentioned in the marketing and consumer behaviour literature.

This study has also shown consumers' values and lifestyles are important determinants of their overall perception. Moral values particularly play a very important role, with those respondents, both men and women who mentioned having moral values, consistently reacted much more negatively to sexual appeals in advertising as compared to those who did not. The prevalence of moral values among consumers in a country from a much larger sample and its influence on response to sexual imagery in advertising can be an area of further research. We hope that our paper will pave the way for more contribution from European academics on researching consumer response to sex in advertising.

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