THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN ADVERTISEMENTS

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ABSTRACT: Understanding the impact of portrayals of violence and abuse by advertising media, especially when directed at women, requires our going beyond concerns about effectiveness of such marketing communications. Previous research finds an unequivocal and harmful increased acceptance of cross-gender aggression and rape within society as a result of sexualized violence. However, none of these investigations examines the impact of violence as an advertising appeal. Thus, our research looks at the influence of sexualized violence in ads on rape myth beliefs *and* traditional consumer behavior variables. The findings from our study suggest that sexualized violence appeals may impact important advertising variables and appeal to specific market segments, but nevertheless have little value for marketing success.

From high above the storied Sunset Strip on a glorious June day, a bound and bruised woman on a billboard gazed down at the citizens of Los Angeles. She was the centerpiece of a new advertising campaign for the Rolling Stones' 1976 album *Black and Blue*, part of a national promotion by Atlantic Records that featured print ads, radio spots, and in-store displays. At 14 by 48 feet, she dominated the busy skyline, and traffic snarled up and down the boulevard as drivers slowed to get a better look. The woman wore a lacy white bodice, strategically ripped to display her breasts. Her hands were tied with ropes, immobilized above her head, and her bruised legs were spread apart. She straddled an image of the Stones, with her pubic bone positioned just above Mick Jagger's head. Her eyes were half closed and her mouth hung open in an expression of pure sexual arousal, as if the rough physical treatment had wakened her desires and now she wanted more. Her enjoyment was captured in the ad copy: "I'm Black and Blue from the Rolling Stones and I love it!" (Bronstein 2008, p. 418)

This passage comes from a recent chronicling of an advocacy group's work to stop a large media conglomerate from continuing an advertising campaign in the 1970s that glorified violence against women. Their fear was that such portrayals reinforce the inappropriate belief that women experience sexual pleasure from physical abuse. This mythic connection denies most standard definitions that violence occurs against

the will of the victim rather than with their tacit agreement (see Andersson et al. 2004). Social science literature captures this mentality as "rape myths"; false stereotypes that females enjoy being sexually abused despite their protests to the contrary (Boddewyn and Kunz 1991). Statistics regarding sexual violence against women are alarming; every hour, 16 women confront rapists and every six minutes a woman is raped in the United States, clearly demonstrating that this is a major social problem (Woodruff 1996).

The term *rape myth* was coined by Burt (1980) and refers to beliefs that individuals hold about the act of sexual assault by men on women, with a central focus on the conviction that the victim bears partial or even primary responsibility. According to the rape myth, rapists assume little or no personal responsibility for their aggressive actions. Thus, the rape myth constitutes a set of beliefs that represents fundamental misconceptions about sexualized violence because the "myths" run counter to well-known evidence about sexual assault and its victims. The issue is whether exposure to images of sexualized violence in the media increases the degree of personal acceptance of these attitudes by men. If exposure leads to the adoption of such beliefs, then media violence may inadvertently promote antisocial behavior.

Unfortunately, the depiction of women in stereotypical contexts continues to exist in advertisements for several product categories, leading to the inaccurate conclusion that females may appropriately be viewed as sexual objects for the pleasure of male consumption. Research shows, "By viewing women as exclusively sexual beings whose purpose is to sexually arouse and gratify men, a power differential is created in which women generally are subordinate. This power hierarchy may support development of perceptions of women as appropriate

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targets for sexually aggressive behaviors" (Lanis and Covell 1995, p. 647). Continuation and propagation of this mentality throughout the media, from music videos to video games, imply to advertisers and marketers that these displays are appealing to broad audiences and innocuous. Indeed, one of the more egregious examples is the "RapeLay" video game from Japan that allows players to choose various methods to assault a teenage girl on the subway, including graphic, interactive scenes of rape (Lah 2010). As a result, distinguished scholars and other social observers have monitored the rise of serious objections, starting with the modern women's liberation movement to the present time (Boddewyn and Kunz 1991; Bronstein 2008). Needless to say, arguments against these representations are based on convictions that they exacerbate traditional attitudes about and behaviors toward women on the acceptability of certain acts of violence (Donnerstein and Linz 1986). Thus, the purpose of our investigation is to examine the influence of sexualized violence as an advertising appeal on consumers' beliefs, attitudes, and intentions.

Much of the research on this topic has examined the broader media, with an emphasis on the longer-term impact of such portrayals, with relatively consistent results. For example, using a triangulation strategy, researchers found a positive link between media violence and aggressive behavior regardless of the research method used by investigators (Anderson and Bushman 2002). In addition, Bushman (2005) looked at research across several hundred investigations spanning decades and states unequivocally that violent television programs beget generalized violence in society. More specific to our purposes, Bronstein (2008) summarizes a large body of research, with a focus on sexualized media violence, and confirms a significant relationship between use of these images and several factors associated with sexual aggression toward females by males.

Consistent with previous research, *sexualized violence* is an overarching term used to describe any violence, physical or psychological, carried out through sexual means or by targeting sexuality. In a broader sense, sexualized violence is about abusing power and encompasses a range of offenses that involve nonconsenting victims (Basile and Saltzman 2009). Our focus is sexual violence perpetrated by men and directed toward women. Therefore, the goal of this study is to demonstrate that the prevalence of media violence poses a societal dilemma, with a specific emphasis on how much, if any, is attributable to the potential negative consequences of sexualized violence in advertising. Of particular interest are the effects such advertising depictions have on rape myth beliefs and consumer attitudes.

CULPABILITY OF ADVERTISING

Scholarship involving magazine advertising has found that sexually oriented appeals are widespread, visible, and increasing (Soley and Kurzbard 1986). According to LaTour and Henthorne (1994), it is commonplace for readers of all ages to pick up any general-interest consumer magazine and find an ad featuring provocatively posed and attired models for many products. Indeed, the use of overt sexual appeals in print advertising has increased considerably in contemporary advertising practice. Recent advertising research suggests, "sex in advertising is worthy of consideration because of its pervasiveness" (Reichert, LaTour, and Kim 2007, p. 63). Furthermore, these authors state, "In magazine advertising, the proportion of sexualized women rose from less than one-third in 1964 to one-half in 2003" (Reichert, LaTour, and Kim 2007, p. 63).

Research clearly shows that the sexual content in mainstream advertising has become more pervasive throughout the 1980s and beyond based on the premise that sex sells, but only if it is more shocking and more graphic than preceding campaigns (Reichert et al. 1999). Consequently, advertisers may feel compelled to "push the envelope" and employ more shocking appeals to "break through the clutter" in the future. The prevalence of violence against women in advertising is significant, with many examples of such sexualized violence as advertising themes in mainstream media outlets (Lukas 2009). Various scholars have found that it is increasingly common for advertising to connect sexuality with aggression or violence against women (e.g., Benokraitis and Feagin 1995). However, there have been few empirical studies that have examined this issue. For instance, Wolf (1991) states that "beauty sadomasochism" is one explanation for the prevalence of violence and sex in many ads, but there has been no research to date that examines the impact of sexually violent ads on consumer behavior.

Furthermore, leading scholars who examine the depiction of women in advertisements have sounded the alarm that many constituencies find the advertising industry negligent in their responsibilities because of possible "glorification of violence against women" (Ford and LaTour 1993, p. 43). Indeed, use of shock appeals by advertisers (designed to deliberately offend their audiences) depicting sexual references and violence is not uncommon (e.g., Andersson et al. 2004; Dahl, Frankenberger, and Manchanda 2003). Yet this indictment has not fostered studies to determine the underlying causes, various expressions across media, and consequences for ads, brands, sponsors, and the larger society. Instead, concerned parties rely heavily on scholarship involving advertising that is tangential to their purposes. For instance, one television study reports that viewers give greater attention to violent programs than nonviolent programs, as well as to sexually explicit versus nonsexual offerings (Bushman 2005). The unspoken conclusion is that the combination must be very powerful, attracting a wide swath of viewers and consumers.

Nonetheless, research exists that gives an alternative understanding of the possible impact of violence against women

in advertisements. General findings show that men actually enjoy violent content, especially when compared to women (Haridakis 2006). However, advertising studies involving what LaTour, Pitts, and Snook-Luther (1989) refer to as "erotic communications appeals" seem to elicit both negative and positive reactions from consumers. Other research provides mostly bad news for advertisers, demonstrating that violence and sex on television inhibit memory formation for advertised products embedded in such programming, along with lower intentions to buy (Bushman 2005). A final set of investigations finds that, compared with men, females are more offended by sexualized violence toward women, and the resulting deleterious impact on attitudes toward ads and brands and behavioral intentions are more severe for women versus men (Reichert, LaTour, and Kim 2007).

From a societal perspective, the most important issue is whether violence depicted in advertising contributes to the subjugation of women and to an increase in the acceptance of violence toward them. Once again, evidence is tangential and suggests that *any* emphasis on dominance and aggression by men based on stereotypical sex roles causes development of rape-permissive attitudes (Walker, Rowe, and Quinsey 1993). By way of example, Donnerstein and Linz (1986) assert that viewing "sexually aggressive films" positively influences acceptance of both interpersonal violence and rape myth beliefs. Of course, advertisements typically do not garner the time or attention associated with watching movies. Yet Anderson and colleagues (2003) describe how even short-term exposure to violence has the power to elicit aggressive thinking and feelings by priming preexisting violent scripts and triggering the human tendency for imitation consistent with social learning theory described next.

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Our previous discussion implies that societal acceptance of violence against women is acquired over time through exposure to violent messages and contexts. One potential frame for understanding how it occurs is Social Learning Theory (SLT), which demonstrates that human behavior is obtained through modeling by observing other people and consequences of their actions (Akers 1977; Bandura 1965, 1977, 1986). In addition, much of this learning takes place without intention to learn and without awareness that learning has occurred. Bandura (1977) believes that the best explanation is in terms of continuous and reciprocal interactions between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors. Thus, SLT posits that the person and his or her environment do not function as independent units but instead simultaneously determine each other. Such experiences and their consequences also determine what a person perceives as possible, which affects subsequent behaviors.

SLT goes beyond operant learning by recognizing the role of vicarious processes (i.e., modeling), the effects of covert cognitive processes, and the influence of self-control processes. Bandura (1977) notes that within these parameters, learning occurs deliberately and inadvertently through the influence of examples. Most external influences affect behavior via intermediary cognitive processes that determine, in part, which external events are attended to, how they are interpreted, and whether they leave any lasting effects. SLT also recognizes the impact of self-regulatory functions on the control of behavior based on internal self-evaluative consequences as well as perceptions regarding possible external or environmental consequences. In other words, people are affected not only by external influences on behavior but also by the punishments and rewards that they give themselves.

Another influential source of social learning is the symbolic modeling provided by visual media. Research shows that both children and adults acquire attitudes, emotional responses, and new styles of conduct through mass media, which play an important role in shaping behavior and social attitudes (Bandura 1973; Liebert, Neale, and Davidson 1973). More specifically, SLT emphasizes imitative and disinhibitive effects of media violence (Bandura 1973). If depicted relationships involve aggressive or violent behavior, then these values may be adopted by audience members under certain circumstances. For example, programs that contain sexualized violence against women where male perpetrators are rewarded with arousal and gratification may create a model to imitate (Allen et al. 1995). Moreover, habitual exposure to violent media may also reduce viewers' inhibitions against aggression and violence. Building on SLT, Huesman (1986) proposed a social cognitive theory of media-related aggression. He shows that when children observe violence in the mass media, they learn aggressive scripts for social behavior. Our premise, then, is that sexualized violence in advertisements may trigger or prompt these aggressive scripts and act as positive reinforcement for previously held attitudes.

OUR INVESTIGATION

Our review of relevant social science and advertising literature within the framework of SLT allows for research propositions that guided the selection of appropriate methodology and analytic protocol. For example, while advertisers often assume violence and sex sell goods and services, our discussion suggests that the opposite may occur. Relevant work shows that violent or sexual themes may have an adverse effect on memory, with sexually explicit ads leading to a decrease in brand-related information recall from print advertising (Alexander and Judd 1978). More contemporary work by Reichert, Heckler, and Jackson (2001) support this result and indicate that ads with sexual images stimulate fewer cognitive responses toward

the message than nonsexual appeals. Bushman and Bonacci (2002) and Bushman and Phillips (2001) concur and show that televised violence and sex impaired memory for commercial messages both immediately after exposure and following one day. Bushman (2005) provides an extension and found that violence and sex in television programs do not support sales of products contained within embedded ads.

These consequences of exposure to violence against women in advertisements may not be uniform. As might be expected, viewer characteristics may dampen or heighten their reactions in significant ways. For instance, research shows that certain demographic factors such as gender and age are influential in the formation of attitudes about the use of another "shock" appeal (female nudity) in advertisements (LaTour, Pitts, and Snook-Luther 1989). Other researchers found that similar characteristics mediate relationships between exposure to media violence and the series of aggressive outcomes noted previously (e.g., Harris 1996). These findings also emerge from scholarship involving violent content on television (Anderson et al. 2003). For instance, in younger demographic groups such as Generation Y, female consumers have been shown to oppose use of sexual appeals (Maciejewski 2004), with females in general more averse to such media portrayals, particularly those depicting violence (McDaniel, Lim, and Mahan 2007).

For the purposes of this investigation, the most salient results show that males are more aggressive than females and younger people are more aggressive than older people, suggesting that advertising appeals using sexualized violence may follow the same pattern.

H1a: Consumers will hold less positive attitudes toward the advertisement, as advertisements exhibit increased levels of sexualized violence.

H1b: Consumers will hold less positive attitudes toward the advertiser, as advertisements exhibit increased levels of sexualized violence.

H1c: Consumers will have lower purchase intentions for the advertised product, as advertisements exhibit increased levels of sexualized violence.

H2a: Females will hold less positive attitudes toward the advertisement than their male counterparts, as advertisements exhibit increased levels of sexualized violence.

H2b: Females will hold less positive attitudes toward the advertiser, as advertisements exhibit increased levels of sexualized violence.

H2c: Females will have lower purchase intentions for the advertised product than their male counterparts, as advertisements exhibit increased levels of sexualized violence.

H3a: Older consumers will hold less positive attitudes toward the advertisement than their younger counterparts, as advertisements exhibit increased levels of sexualized violence.

H3b: Older consumers will hold less positive attitudes toward the advertiser than their younger counterparts, as advertisements exhibit increased levels of sexualized violence.

H3c: Older consumers will have lower purchase intentions for the advertised product than their younger counterparts, as advertisements exhibit increased levels of sexualized violence.

SLT argues that people use stimuli around them to learn about their surroundings; specifically, mass media images "teach" about the world beyond the personal and create the possibility of contributing to an understanding of social interaction patterns. Furthermore, the review of SLT suggests a positive correlation between exposure to sexualized violence toward women in advertising and rape myth acceptance for males since such material shows successful outcomes of these actions (Allen et al. 1995). Exposure to sexualized violence in this context may activate a complex set of associations related to aggressive ideas and emotions, thereby temporarily increasing accessibility to aggressive thoughts, feelings, and scripts (Anderson et al. 2003). As a consequence, research has shown a correlation between exposure to sexually violent media and development of attitudes that support violence against women (Malamuth and Briere 1986). If this social learning perspective is correct, then one should find a positive correlation between exposure to sexually violent media and rape myth acceptance.

Considerable previous research also indicates that males are more accepting of interpersonal violence, rape myths, and adversarial sexual relations than females (e.g., Malamuth and Check 1981).

H4: Consumers will show greater acceptance of violence against women and rape myths, as advertisements exhibit increased levels of sexualized violence.

H5: Males will show a greater acceptance of violence against women than their female counterparts, as advertisements exhibit increased levels of sexualized violence.

H6: Younger consumers will show a greater acceptance of violence against women than their older counterparts, as advertisements exhibit increased levels of sexualized violence.

METHOD AND RESULTS

As mentioned, this study extends the diverse body of research across disciplines on mass media into the narrower field of advertising. To this end, several advertisements were amassed from current and previous campaigns using sexualized violence

toward women as an advertising appeal. A subset of three ads that varied significantly from one another in perceived violence was selected as stimuli for the full investigation after pretesting. Consumers were exposed to one of these promotions and subsequently asked to respond to questions from well-known measures of attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the advertiser (firm), and behavioral intentions. They also completed scales that measure perceptions of violence toward women, emphasizing rape myth acceptance. The final set of questions involves some demographic data deemed relevant by previous research outside the advertising domain (e.g., Harris 1996).

Our first step involved an extensive and systematic review of current and past print magazine advertisements for relevant portrayals of sexualized violence against women. The search process included online resources and archived ads collected by universities, advocacy groups, and media using Internet search terms such as "sexualized violence in advertisements." Multiple sites were examined in their entirety and a subset of ads was selected for additional consideration. The review was limited to actual advertisements for branded products and excluded public service announcements because the intended responses are (obviously) drastically different from ads for consumer goods and services. In a limited number of cases, violent acts by men against men or women against women were found but ultimately not included because they were deemed lacking in sexualized violence relevant to our study.

Consideration was given to altering the facial expressions of the recipients of violent acts in order to manipulate viewers' perceived levels of ad violence. Because all of the victims portrayed showed expressions of serenity or pleasure, our belief was that adding distress or disgust might represent a third dimension. Of course, use of this caricature is common among public service announcements. Nonetheless, after much deliberation, the decision was reached to use advertisements as they existed in the marketplace in order to maintain external validity and to allow for managerial recommendations on current practice. As a consequence, stimuli used in our investigation are made up of examples of sexualized violence against women in magazine advertising that consumers may be exposed to depending on media and shopping habits.

To meet research needs, the ads containing sexualized violence against women by men were reviewed and tested for their perceived levels of violence. From the publicly available advertisements, a subset of 100 was chosen for additional review. Three of the four authors individually examined them and selected exemplars for pretesting. They then came together and discussed the merits of each ad, with several receiving consensus as potentially appropriate for study. After pretesting, a 3 (ad: low, moderate, high violence) × 2 (gender: male, female) × 3 (age: tercile split)[1] factorial design was used to explore the impact of sexualized violence in print advertising.

Study participants were exposed to full-color ads of existing goods and services while completing scales associated with dependent variables. A more complete description of pretest and main study procedures follows.

Pilot Studies

The pretest was employed to select ads for our primary investigation. The principal goal was to find advertisements that varied in perceived violence without much variation on other related affective/emotional dimensions; thus, it served as a manipulation check so that the main study would be as internally valid as possible. As noted, initial evaluation involved culling through 100 ads deemed sufficiently violent to warrant additional review. Specifically, ads that demonstrated sexualized violence against women and depicted both the victim and assailant were appropriate for our research purposes. Criteria for inclusion in the pilot study were that ads must show people (e.g., no cartoons or animation), and preference was given to ads identifying male perpetrators of the violent acts. After an exhaustive search from current and past magazine campaigns that portrayed violence against women, eight ads were selected for pilot study that seemed to vary in sexualized violence based on the authors' unanimous agreement. A within-subjects experimental design was used in the analysis.

With existing literature as a guide (Gunter, Furnham, and Pappa 2005), the pilot study consisted of having consumers view each of the eight ads followed by a 12-item scale to assess the perceived level of violence of each individual ad. A total of 93 adults (female = 46) completed the paper-and-pencil survey at a national coffeehouse, and respondents were offered free drinks in exchange for doing so. Participants examined eight ads separately, and evaluated each ad on the following items ranging from 1 (not at all) to 10 (extremely): absorbing, hostile, arousing, disturbing, engaging, entertaining, enjoyable, exciting, happy, violent, involving, and interesting. As depicted in Table 1, ensuing analysis resulted in two factors—one associated with generalized "violence" and the other associated with "enjoyment." However, only the three-item measure of perceived violence reached the appropriate reliability level (α = .83). Notably, confound checks suggest that the three ads did not vary on any relevant emotional responses.

Most importantly, three different levels of violence manifested, leading to selection of least violent and most violent ads for the main study. To capture the middle ground, a third advertisement with moderate levels of violence also was chosen that respondents perceived as equally enjoyable as the least violent ad but significantly different in violence from both test advertisements (see the Appendix for visual representations). The overall univariate F-test (F = 100.4, p < .01) demonstrates that differences in perceived violence across

TABLE 1
Pilot Test Factor Analysis Showing
Two-Factor Solution

	Component	
	Enjoyment	**Violence**
Absorbing	.644	.079
Hostile	−.188	.842
Arousing	.680	.240
Disturbing	−.326	.758
Engaging	.747	.280
Entertaining	.803	.106
Enjoyable	.880	−.012
Exciting	.880	−.039
Happy	.690	−.281
Violent	−.191	.855
Involving	.764	.161
Interesting	.800	.221

the three ads are significant. Comparisons indicate that the "high-violence" ad ($M = 8.67$) was seen as more violent than the "moderate-violence" ad ($M = 5.93$; $t = 67.34$, $p < .01$), which was viewed as more violent than the "low-violence" ad ($M = 4.90$; $t = 9.56$, $p < .01$).

Given that real ads (vs. mockups) were used in the main study, there was some concern that these advertisements might differ across other dimensions besides perceived violence. To address this issue, a separate study was conducted to examine the extent to which the three test ads differed across potentially confounding variables. Forty-six nonstudent participants were exposed to one of the three ads used in the main study and asked to respond to various measures of interest.[2] Results show that the three ads did not significantly differ across perceived ad target audience ($F = 1.04$, $p = .36$), ad execution style ($F = .98$, $p = .38$), ad type ($F = 1.57$, $p = .22$), company position ($F = .28$, $p = .76$), company history ($F = .26$, $p = .77$), or explicitness ($F = .77$, $p = .47$). These findings support our use of these ads.

Main Study

Four hundred eighty-four nonstudent U.S. adults drawn from a large marketing research firm participated in our study online. The sample was equally split between males and females and the average age of participants was 48 ($SD = 13.5$). Median household income of participants was between \$40,000 and \$50,000 and 75% had graduated from high school. Respondents were provided information about the purpose of the investigation as well as their right to decline participation. Upon agreement, they then were randomly assigned to one of the three advertising conditions and exposed to the test ad continuously as they answered questions on violence against

women, attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the firm, and purchase intentions. Respondents next completed measures of demographic variables. These copy-testing methods are supported in the literature (Andrews and Maronick 1995; Maronick 1991).

A common (Lee 2000) five-item scale measured attitude toward the ad (A_{ad}), exhibiting robust levels of reliability ($\alpha = .97$). Items were "I dislike the ad (r)," "The ad is appealing to me," "The ad is attractive to me," "The ad is interesting to me," and "I think the ad is bad (r)." Attitude toward the firm (A_{firm}) used "unpleasant/pleasant," "unfavorable/favorable," "bad/good," "negative/positive," and "not reputable/reputable," with reliability ($\alpha = .87$) consistent with previous research (e.g., Lohse and Rosen 2001; MacKenzie and Lutz 1989; Meuhling 1987). Finally, purchase intentions (PI) included "I am eager to check out the product because of this ad," "I intend to try this product," "I plan on buying this product," "It is likely that I will buy this product when it becomes available," and "I would consider purchasing this product" ($\alpha = .96$). All items used seven-point scales with anchors of "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree."

Also consistent with previous research, acceptance of interpersonal violence was used as a proxy for violence against women, with an emphasis on rape myth agreement. For example, the Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence Against Women Scale (AIV) measures the relative acceptability of using violence toward women as it pertains to satisfaction of male sexual desires (Burt 1980). These metrics are capable of examining the link between exposure to media sexualized violence and the acceptance of rape myths using the simple premise that such violence against women portrays them as objects of male pleasure. Factor analysis suggested two distinct scales: acceptance of interpersonal *sexual* violence (AIV-Sexual) and acceptance of interpersonal *general* violence (AIV-General), with only AIV-Sexual deemed appropriate for our investigation. AIV-Sexual has three items: "Being roughed up is sexually stimulating to many women," "Many times a woman will pretend she doesn't want to have intercourse because she doesn't want to seem loose, but she's really hoping the man will force her," and "Sometimes the only way a man can get a cold woman turned on is to use force." The coefficient α for this three-item measure was .77. All used seven-point scales with anchors of "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree," and they were coded so that higher scores indicate greater acceptance of interpersonal violence. Table 2 shows cell means for each independent variable across the various dimensions described above.

Major Findings

To test our original research propositions, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) with income and education levels as covariates was run. As shown in Table 3, there

TABLE 2
Cell Means for AIV, A_{ad}, A_{firm}, and *PI*

Independent variables	AIV	A_{ad}	A_{firm}	*PI*
Low-violence ad				
Male				
Young	2.33	2.66	2.73	2.70
Middle	2.35	2.72	2.17	1.88
Older	2.33	2.42	2.42	1.68
Female				
Young	2.16	2.90	2.67	2.21
Middle	1.88	1.56	1.71	1.46
Older	1.74	2.26	1.94	1.34
Moderate-violence ad				
Male				
Young	2.78	4.30	3.88	3.15
Middle	2.32	2.90	2.50	2.05
Older	2.21	2.45	2.22	1.74
Female				
Young	2.72	3.27	2.82	2.18
Middle	2.02	2.26	2.08	1.83
Older	2.65	2.06	1.62	1.48
High-violence ad				
Male				
Young	2.24	2.50	2.63	2.25
Middle	1.91	2.15	2.47	1.80
Older	1.91	2.23	2.79	1.83
Female				
Young	2.28	2.86	2.38	2.09
Middle	1.49	1.64	1.69	1.23
Older	2.00	2.77	2.12	2.15

AIV = Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence Against Women Scale; A_{ad} = attitude toward the ad; A_{firm} = attitude toward the firm; *PI* = purchase intentions.

are significant multivariate main effects for violent ad (H1: Wilks's λ = .95, F = 2.60, $p < .01$), gender (H2: Wilks's λ = .94, F = 6.37, $p < .01$), and age (H3: Wilks's λ = .92, F = 3.97, $p < .01$). In addition, there are significant two-way interactions for violent ad × gender (Wilks's λ = .96, F = 1.99, $p < .05$), violent ad × age (Wilks's λ = .93, F = 1.64, $p < .05$), and gender × age (Wilks's λ = .95, F = 2.30, $p < .05$). Findings demonstrate that the manipulation was successful and our dependent variables were affected accordingly. To examine specific propositions, several individual univariate tests were also run and reviewed as described below.

Results show a number of interesting interactions. First, findings reveal that gender moderates the effects predicted in our hypotheses for A_{ad} (F = 2.83, $p < .05$). As portrayed in Figure 1, planned comparisons indicate that men report a significantly higher A_{ad} for the moderate-violence ad condition versus the low- and high-violence ad conditions (t = 2.35/3.33, respectively, $p < .01$ for both). Women report lower and similar (not statistically significant) A_{ad} across the three conditions. Findings thus suggest that the results supporting our predictions are driven largely by male participants in our study

and that females may be less receptive to *all* ads containing sexualized violence.

Also, results demonstrate that age moderates effects for A_{ad} (F = 3.16, $p < .05$), A_{firm} (F = 2.89, $p < .05$), and *PI* (F = 2.09, $p < .05$). Figure 2 displays the pattern of results, which reveals that younger consumers report higher overall levels of A_{ad}, A_{firm}, and *PI* versus middle and older age groups. Again, the moderate-violence ad appealed to younger consumers. Planned comparisons show that younger respondents reported significantly higher attitude toward the ad for the moderate-violence ad condition versus the low (t = 3.26, $p < .05$) and high (t = 3.54, $p < .05$) violence ads. A similar pattern of results was found for A_{firm} such that the moderate-violence ad condition resulted in higher values than the low (t = 2.13, $p < .05$) and high (t = 2.81, $p < .05$) violence ad conditions. These results suggest that while young adults may be positively aroused by a moderate level of sexualized violence in ads, middle-aged and older adults seem to display little appreciation for such ad themes.

Univariate tests indicate a significant main effect for violence on A_{ad} (H1a: F = 6.01, $p < .01$), but not on attitude

TABLE 3
Multivariate and Univariate Results for Study Dependent Variables

| Independent variables	MANCOVA results		Univariate			
	Wilks's λ	*F*-value	AIV	A_{ad}	A_{firm}	*PI*
Main effects						
Violent ad	.95	2.60**	5.92**	6.01**	1.23	1.24
Gender	.94	6.37**	3.42*	6.31**	16.03**	9.21**
Age	.92	3.97**	4.12**	15.45**	11.52**	16.69**
Interaction effects						
VA × gender	.96	1.99*	1.27	2.83*	.44	.79
VA × age	.93	1.64*	.51	3.16*	2.89*	2.09*
Gender × age	.95	2.30*	.90	2.70*	.18	.95
VA × age × gender	.97	.76	.37	1.24	.64	.81

Notes: MANCOVA = multivariate analysis of covariance; AIV = Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence Against Women Scale; A_{ad} = attitude toward the ad; A_{firm} = attitude toward the firm; *PI* = purchase intentions; VA = violent ad.

[a] To account for education level and income, these variables were included as covariates in the analysis. Education had a significant effect on the AIV-Sexual variable, A_{ad}, and A_{firm}.

* *p* <.05.

** *p* < .01.

FIGURE 1
**Ad × Gender Interaction for A_{ad}**
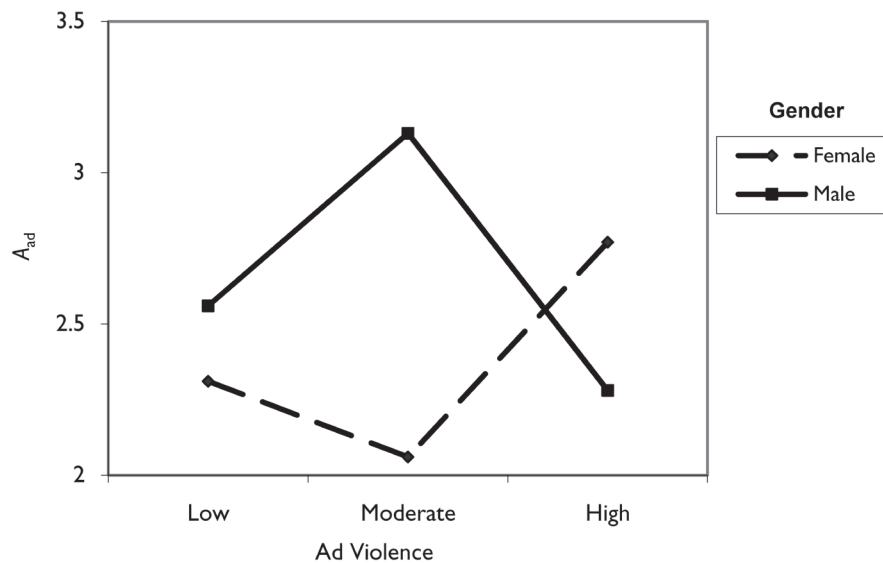
Note: A_{ad} = attitude toward the ad.

toward the firm sponsoring the ad or on *PI* (H1b, H1c). Therefore, partial support is found for H1; specifically, only H1a is found to be significant. In addition, planned comparisons (modified Bonferroni procedure) were used to examine differences in each of the three ad conditions. Participants exposed to the moderate-violence ad reported significantly higher A_{ad} (*M* = 2.83) than those exposed to either the high-violence ad (*M* = 2.56; *p* < .01) or the low-violence ad (*M* = 2.48; *p* < .01).

Univariate tests also reveal a gender main effect on dependent variables of A_{ad} (H2a: *F* = 6.31, *p* < .01), A_{firm} (H2b: *F* = 16.03, *p* < .01), and *PI* (H2c: *F* = 9.21, *p* < .01). Thus, H2 is fully supported. As expected, women reported significantly less positive evaluations than men across dependent variables of A_{ad} (M_F = 2.39 vs. M_M = 2.66), A_{firm} (M_F = 2.14 vs. M_M = 2.62), and intentions to buy (M_F = 1.74 vs. M_M = 2.07). Finally, univariate tests show a main effect for age on dependent variables

FIGURE 2
Ad × Age Interaction for A_{ad}, A_{firm}, and *PI*
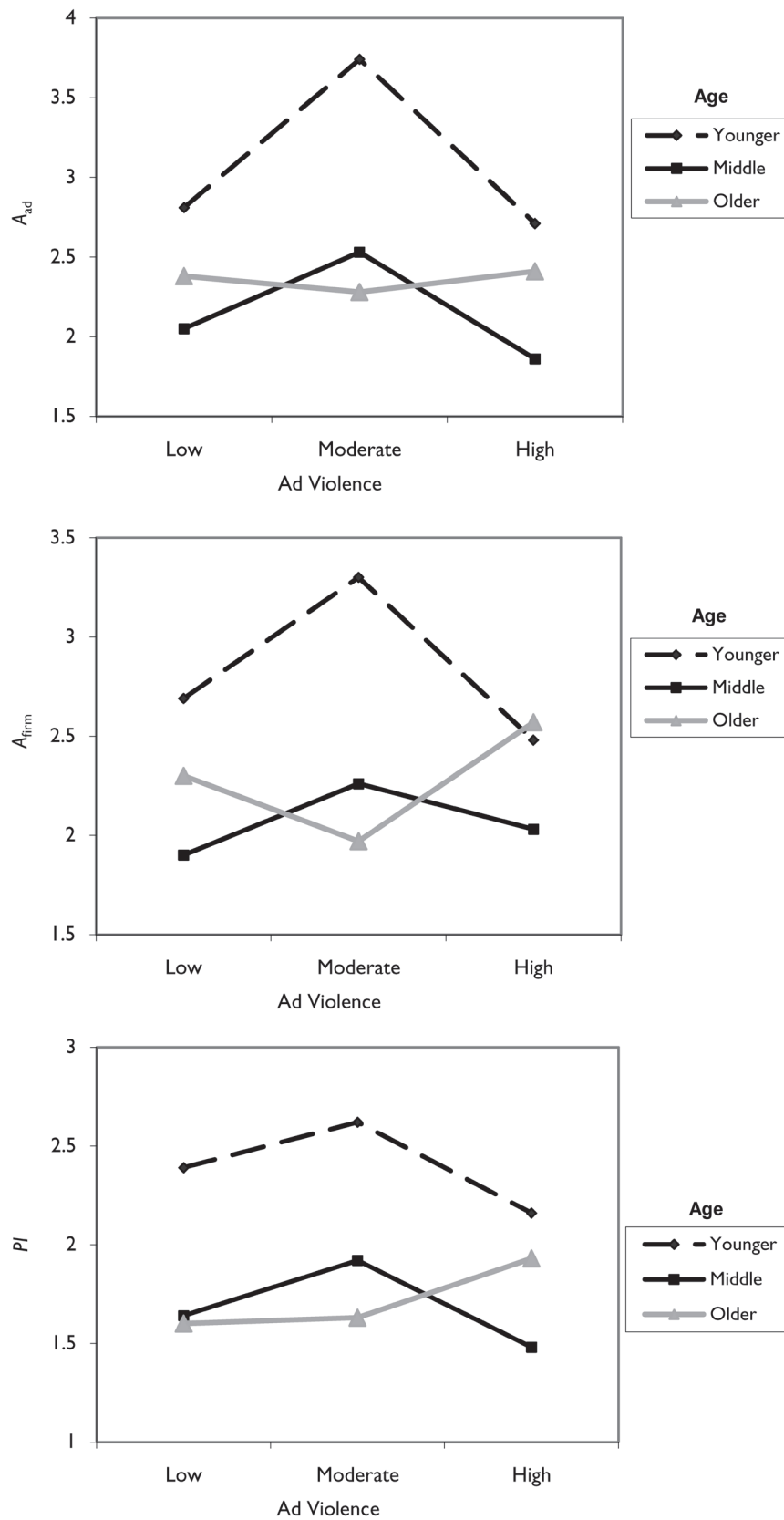
Notes: A_{ad} = attitude toward the ad; A_{firm} = attitude toward the firm; *PI* = purchase intentions.

A_{ad} (H3a: $F = 15.51$, $p < .01$), A_{firm} (H3b: $F = 11.52$, $p < .01$), and PI (H3c: $F = 16.69$, $p < .01$). As a result, H3 is also fully supported. In general, younger participants reported more positive evaluations of ads than older participants.

Univariate tests indicate a main effect for violent ads on the dependent variable of AIV-Sexual ($F = 5.92$, $p < .01$), giving support for H4. But contrary to expectations that the high-violence ad condition would generate the highest levels of violence acceptance, the moderate-violence ad resulted in significantly higher levels for AIV-Sexual ($M = 2.45$) than the other two advertisements (all ps $< .01$). As predicted and in support of H5 and H6, females reported lower levels of acceptance of sexualized violence than males (H5: AIV-Sexual, $M_F = 2.12$ vs. $M_M = 2.25$), and younger participants reported higher levels of acceptance than the two older groups of participants (H6: AIV-Sexual, $M_Y = 2.41$; $M_O = 2.07$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Findings

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this research is to examine the influence of sexualized violence as an advertising appeal on consumers' beliefs, attitudes, and intentions within the theoretical framework of social learning. The ads selected are from real promotional campaigns. Materials were pretested using adult subjects who responded to a variety of measures to ensure that the manipulation effects were caused by perceived violence. Three advertisements that differ significantly from one another and provided the greatest possible distinctions subsequently were chosen for the study. Traditional attitude and behavioral intentions measures common in advertising research were administered concurrent with this exposure. Measures of interpersonal violence acceptance were also included, along with some relevant demographic questions.

Our findings reveal that attitude toward the ad varied significantly across the three ad conditions, but exposure to ads with increased levels of sexualized violence did not directly influence consumers' attitudes toward the firm or behavioral intentions. Results suggest that this ad main effect is moderated by both gender and age. Female respondents reported relatively low levels of attitude toward the ad across conditions, whereas males generally held more positive responses for attitude toward the ad (as well as attitude toward the sponsor/purchase intentions). However, contrary to the linear effects articulated in H1, males' reactions to the ads are curvilinear. Parallel outcomes also occur when age is taken into account. The curvilinear pattern of results observed in the ad by gender interaction is evident in the ad × age interaction across dependent variables of attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the firm, and behavioral intentions. Finally, younger consumers generally evaluated ads more positively than the older cohorts;

however, evaluations did not decrease in a progressive manner as expected across ads for the oldest subgroup.

From a societal perspective, the larger concern is whether sexualized violence as an advertising appeal affects acceptance of interpersonal violence. Consistent with SLT, results indicate that sexual aggression dimensions were influenced by viewership of the ads, but the impact was curvilinear and similar to the attitude toward the ad findings. Nevertheless, males and females responded in the same way, and their reactions are a matter of degree rather than direction, with the former more accepting of sexualized violence in comparison to the latter. Once again and as predicted, the younger respondents were more susceptible to the implicit manipulation of perspective by sexualized violence as an advertising appeal, and they demonstrated changes in acceptance consistent with attitude toward the ad reactions.

Implications for Theory and Practice

As Kilbourne aptly states: "Sex has long been used in advertising to sell just about everything—from champagne to shampoo, from chainsaws to chewing gum" (2005, p. 119). She goes on to remark that these sexualized images have become increasingly graphic over time, and their larger impact is "sexist, demeaning, and harmful to everyone," with "a cumulative effect that is profoundly anti-erotic" (Kilbourne 2005, p. 119). Yet such prognostications seem to fall mostly on deaf ears with advertisers. Even when academic research goes against conventional wisdom and suggests that use of these highly attractive and sexually enticing women produces mixed results at best, the myth of their effectiveness endures (see Bower 2001). Thus, diminution of usage in appeals to consumers is unlikely to happen, even if the only legitimate result is to attract attention without subsequent movement toward purchase. Indeed, previous scholarship clearly indicates that the emotional nature of sexual information in advertising attracts attention and directs processing resources toward the sexual stimulus rather than the brand (Reichert, Heckler, and Jackson 2001).

For the most part, our findings support these conclusions when females are considered the primary target audience (also see Lanis and Covell 1995). Women generally were unmoved in their attitudes and intentions after exposure to sexualized violence, regardless of its level and intensity. Men were more positive across the board, however, suggesting important differences that played out principally in elevated attitude toward the ad. Similar results occurred with the younger respondents who seemed more positive in their reactions when compared to their older counterparts, helping drive attitude toward the ad measures as well. Of course, the potential for a curvilinear relationship between sexualized violence and attitude toward the ad with these groups merits further exploration.

Interestingly, this curvilinear pattern mirrors results found in research focused on arousal by ads (e.g., Henthorne, LaTour, and Nataraajan 1993; LaTour, Pitts, and Snook-Luther 1989). Specifically, this research suggests that sexual tension generates energy up to a certain point, and beyond that "threshold" additional increases arouse anxiety and deplete one's energy. When studies are conducted, scholars must recognize the complexities associated with arousal as described by LaTour (2006), and how such a multidimensional view modifies the traditional conceptualizations of threshold levels.

Of greater consequence perhaps is the impact of violence against women in ads on the potential for increased acceptance of such behavior. Researchers have reported as many as one-fourth of American women and half of female college students are subjected to some form of male sexual aggression (Malamuth and Briere 1986). Recent data also reveal that images of female "pleasure" coupled with male sexual aggression trigger thought patterns that encourage violence against women, and long-term exposure to these counterintuitive beliefs leads to greater acceptance by men of their sexual harassment (Dill, Brown, and Collins 2008). Desensitization theory often is used to explain this phenomenon, suggesting that prosocial attitudes operating to empower women are pushed into the background when such antisocial behaviors dominate popular culture images (Linz, Donnerstein, and Penrod 1988), but our work reveals that SLT may provide a better framework.

Our results should cause some pause within the advertising community since they mirror, to some extent, what mass media scholars have been articulating for some time (see Donnerstein and Linz 1986). The predominant concern expressed by feminists and other interested observers is that men may perceive these images as reinforcement for violence against women (Bronstein 2008). Further, socialization of younger men into a culture of aggression (as posited by SLT) in their relationships with women elicits more apprehension because it helps perpetuate existing cycles of violence. Indeed, this investigation lends some credence to both perspectives, with men in general and younger consumers in particular finding advertisements with sexualized violence more appealing.

Although it is beyond the original purpose of our investigation to discuss all ethical and moral issues involved, it is nonetheless important to recognize the potential limits to employing sexualized violence in advertisements. Specifically, use of sexualized violence is fraught with a host of problems, including potential risks of increasing aggression toward women, of exposing viewers to materials that they find distressing, and of contributing to the desensitization and socialization of aggressive behavior. Obviously, use of this form of sexual appeal should be employed with care. Indeed, because female consumers dislike such gratuitous advertisements, reconsidering use of sexualized violence appeals may

help advertisers insulate themselves from unethical missteps in the marketplace (Maciejewski 2004).

As is the case with any study, these findings must be tempered by their limitations. For example, our results are only for short-term attitudinal effects, and the design does not provide the environment necessary for a true experiment. Although this tactic was a deliberate decision made to maximize realism, future research is needed that uses more controlled environments and experimental designs. Also, another plausible explanation for our results is that in the high-violence ad condition, respondents focused relatively more attention on the violent nature of the ad as compared to the sexualized violence of the other two ad conditions. And while our sample of 484 nonstudent adults is large for an investigation of this nature, data were collected online and thus are not random. In addition, the inclusion of more than one ad per treatment could enhance the generalizability of our findings, especially if other associated factors from our pretests are relevant. Future research may address these limitations in myriad ways that extend our findings. For instance, since prior scholarship suggests that fear and shock appeals are often ineffective, even leading to an increase of the targeted behavior(s) (Hastings, Stead, and Webb 2004), any follow-up could examine this phenomenon as it pertains to public service announcements depicting violence against women.

Closing Remarks

Advertising scholars with an interest in ethics and social responsibility may seek to parcel out that portion of damage to women elicited by such promotions. Indeed, some policy-oriented research has examined this issue and raised concerns regarding its impact (see Gould 1992). Yet the oft-heard excuse that marketing strategies and tactics follow rather than lead cultural icons and myths is a poor defense for increasing the amount of advertising portraying violence against women perpetrated by men. At any rate, the evidence that sexualized appeals in advertisements have little value to essential marketing outcomes leads to the conclusion that public costs are not balanced by private gains, even among the most callous and calculating executives. Practitioners and researchers must ponder life lessons young boys and girls may discover when they regularly view images of unattainable beauty who are subjected to such physical and sexual abuse without recourse. Even assuming that the role of advertising on consumers is relatively minor, what code of conduct would support this blatant disregard?

Nonetheless, if attitudes and behaviors concerning interpersonal violence and rape are learned, then both men and women are able to "unlearn" them as well (Donnerstein and Linz 1986). Studies dating as far back as the early 1970s demonstrate that various forms of participant modeling have the

capacity to change behaviors in significant ways, including the reduction of aggression among incarcerated and unincarcerated populations (see Bandura 1973). Efforts by feminist organizations, nonprofit firms, and governmental agencies to reduce the availability of these images and provide counter-programming examples are encouraging, at least in claims to their successes (Bronstein 2008). Still, the ad industry should do more than sit idly by and accept little blame for our current situation. Instead, our goal should be to provide socially appropriate role models that encourage healthy behaviors *and* increase positive responses to offerings.

NOTES

1. The means for the three age conditions are as follows: young = 32, middle = 49, and old = 62.

2. We thank the reviewers for suggesting this additional study and helping to identify potential confounding variables.

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APPENDIX 1
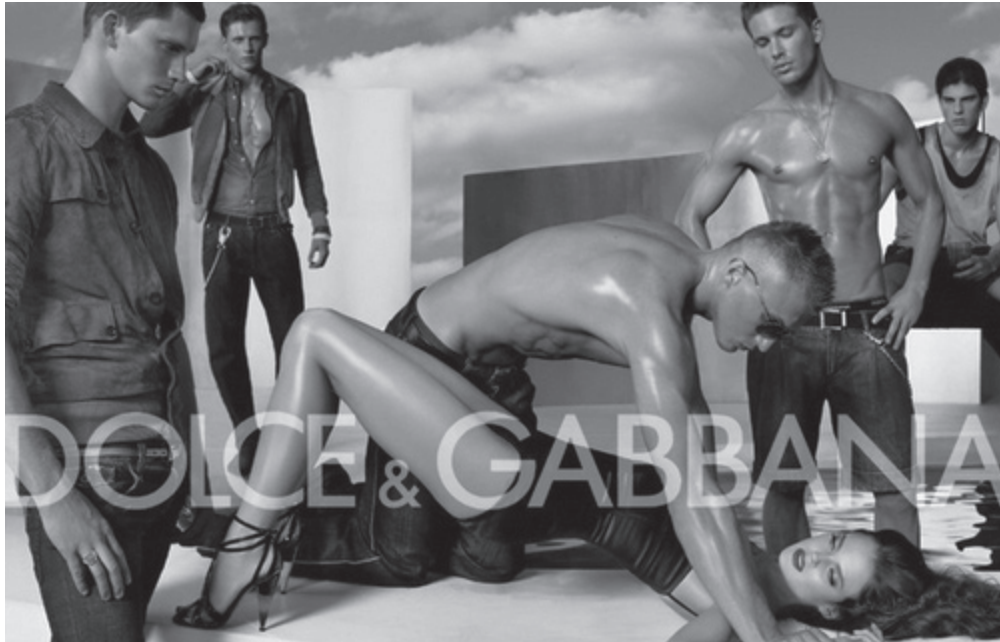
Low-Violence Ad (Based on Pilot Test Results)

Moderate-Violence Ad

High-Violence Ad