

# Could humour make advertisements worse?

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### Abstract

*The aim of this study is to assess the impact of sexist advertisements on the perception of advertisements' violation, ridiculousness and consumers' intention to purchase a product by considering different cases of interaction between the type of advertisement (sexism without humour and sexism with humour), the direction of sexism and the respondents' gender. The study uses a two-by-two factorial design experiment to investigate data obtained by means of a questionnaire (183 responses). Data analysis revealed that the involvement of humour in sexist advertising has a negative impact on the perception of the advertisement and consumers' intention to purchase. Furthermore, the direction of sexism (against women vs men) appears significant when it is paired with humour. The results of the study fill a research gap regarding the impact of the interaction between the type of advertising, the direction of sexism, and the respondents' gender on the perception of specific advertisements and intention to purchase the advertised product.*

*Keywords: humour, sexism, advertisement's violation, advertisement's ridiculousness, intention to purchase.*

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, sexist advertisements that depict gender stereotypes have received controversial consumer reactions and have been banned or significantly limited in several countries. However, some companies still use this type of advertisement by bypassing existing restrictions, as it has already proven to be effective and is likely to deliver short-term gains. In

response to this, the amount of scientific research related to gender and advertising has increased a lot recently (Theodoridis et al. 2013; Eisend et al. 2014; Grau & Zotos 2016; Zawisza et al. 2018; Mayer et al. 2019). Moreover, relevant studies indicate that advertising clearly contributes to gender inequality by promoting “sexism” and distorted body image ideals as valid and acceptable (Plakoyiannaki & Zotos 2009; Easpaig & Humphrey 2016; Ramos et al. 2018; Ulah et al. 2016; Grau & Zotos 2016; Wyllie et al. 2014). However, most of the studies have focused on various aspects of female stereotypes in advertisements by analysing women’s and men’s attitudes towards them, and their intentions to purchase the advertised products, etc. (Ford et al. 2008; Infanager et al. 2012; Mayer et al. 2019). Some studies have explored stereotypes as elements of “sexism” directed against different genders and how this affects the perception of different genders in both messages and opinions about the opposite-sex (Peters et al. 2015; Huhmann & Limbu 2016). However, most often, the analysed studies focused on a sexist message directed against one gender and the assessment of its effects on both genders (Theodoridis et al. 2013) because consumers may respond in one way to a message that is directed to their gender and completely differently to a sexist message that is directed to the opposite sex (Mayer et al. 2019). As a result, each situation is highly individual, making it difficult to compare the results of different studies.

Humour appeal has also been widely investigated in advertising-related studies (Sabri 2012; Damiano 2014; Djambaska et al. 2016). Furthermore, it was often “mated” with sexism in order to trigger desired individual behaviour (Ford et al. 2015; Strain et al. 2015; Das et al. 2015), as it can be seen as a mitigating factor which “detoxifies” the effect of sexism (Ford et al. 2008; Weinberger & Gulas 2019). Moreover, a few previous studies have analysed different individuals’ reactions to sexist humour appeals (Das et al. 2015; Sparks & Lang 2015). However, it is difficult to compare the results obtained due to varying consumer behaviour aspects measured in the mentioned studies, and, therefore, the impact of sexist humour on the perception of an advertisement (understood as its violation of social norms and ridiculousness) as well as the intention to purchase the advertised product remains unclear.

Taking this as a starting point, the present study develops and empirically tests a model aimed at analysing the impact of a sexist advertisement on the perception of advertisement’s violation, ridiculousness and intention to purchase a product by considering different cases of interaction between the type of advertisement (sexism without humour and sexism with humour), the direction of sexism (against women vs men) and the respondents’ gender. Firstly, the current study presents a clear mechanism of how the involvement of humour in sexist advertising impacts the perception of advertisement (its degrees of violation of social norms and ridiculousness) and the intention to purchase the advertised product. Secondly, it measures the impact of the direction of sexism (against women vs men) on the perception of a sexist advertisement as well as their intention to purchase a product. Finally, it contributes to existing sexism literature by exploring how the interaction between the type of advertising, the direction of sexism, and the respondents’ gender influences the perception of the advertisement and the intention to purchase the advertised product.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Sexism**

Sexism refers to the portrayal of women and men in an inferior manner relative to their capabilities and potential (Lysonski 1985; Pollay 1986). This phenomenon and its impact on advertisement perception has been studied by many authors (Ford et al. 2015; Infanager et al. 2012; Mayer et al. 2019). The ambivalent sexism theory distinguishes two different

components of sexism that are evident in most societies: hostility and benevolence (Glick & Fiske 1997). Hostile sexism represents a negative reaction toward women, who are perceived as challenging men's power and status or as using their sexist allure to gain control over men (Gaunt 2013). In contrast, benevolent sexism is a subjectively positive attitude, which generally consists of the exaltation of women who conform to traditional gender roles (Glick & Fiske 1996; 1997; Plakoyiannaki et al. 2008; Ramos et al. 2018). Although the two before-mentioned types of sexism are distinct, they can both be used simultaneously (the so-called ambivalent sexism). Furthermore, even though sexism is usually associated with attitudes toward women, the concept has been applied to men as well (Glick & Fiske 1999).

Both hostile and benevolent sexism are evident in the categories of female role stereotypes in advertising (Glick & Fiske 1996; 1997). Previous research results confirm that men and women tend to be more accepting of benevolent sexism than of hostile sexism, finding benevolent statements less sexist, more pampering women, and more justified (Bohner et al. 2010; Jost & Kay 2005; Moya et al. 2007). Furthermore, Ramos et al. (2018) revealed that benevolent sexism conveys a particularly warm image of women, yet, these different forms of sexism did not differ in what they were seen to communicate about men. However, these results are not surprising because both hostile and benevolent sexism usually targeted primarily women, but there are also forms of sexism that target and derogate men (Glick et al. 2004).

More recent studies expanded this field of study by analysing the impact of sexism on different consumer behaviour aspects: perception of a sexist advertisement, intention to purchase the product / brand advertised in a sexist advertisement, etc. (Moses & Charles 2014; Lull & Bushman 2015; Chang & Tseng 2013; Mayer & Peev 2017; Sari et al. 2015; Vistbhakdi 2011). Some pieces of research even more specifically analysed the impact of two types of sexism (benevolent and hostile) on attitudes towards the advertisement and intention to purchase the advertised product (Zawisza & Cinnirella 2010; Infanager et al. 2012; Zawisza et al. 2018). Furthermore, the study performed by Zawisza et al. (2018) revealed a cross-country impact of sexism on the advertisement's effectiveness and purchase intention. The results of this study confirmed that traditional female portrayals in advertising were more effective than non-traditional ones, and this was confirmed across Poland, South Africa and the United Kingdom, which differ in national levels of sexism. However, the respondents' intention to purchase the advertised product was different depending on the country. To summarise, it can be stated that some of the studies were less conclusive, while others provided more relevant insights; however, some of the results were contradictory, which requires further investigation.

## **2.2. Sexist humour**

Humour positively influences perceptions, beliefs, and evaluations of the advertising audience (e.g., Eisend 2009; Gulas & Weinberger 2006). If advertising content is perceived negatively or can lead to negative reactions, inclusion of humour can lead to a different perception of the advertisement. Therefore, added to the sexist advertisement, humour can be seen as a sexism-mitigating factor (Ford et al. 2008). Firstly, humour reduces negative effects of sexist advertising by distracting consumers from unfavourably evaluated content in a particular advertisement and by leading consumers to focusing on the positive, humorous part (Duncan & Nelson 1985; Nelson et al. 1985). This can be explained by the cognitive mechanism of distraction. Secondly, the linguistic theory of the less critical mindset suggests that humour changes the way information is processed. Therefore, consumers apply a less critical mindset and have higher tolerance towards otherwise offensive or even unacceptable content (Rößner et al. 2017).

Previous studies examined the impact of sexist humour on the attitude towards advertising and brand (Mayer 2011; Sparks & Lang 2015; Das et al. 2015; Mayer et al. 2019). Mayer (2011) found that sexist humour is perceived as humorous by both male and female audience members. Males, however, reported stronger advertisement and brand attitudes than females after exposure to advertisements with sexist humour. Similarly, Damiano (2014) concluded that pairing sex and humour enhances recall and triggers associative networks, and that humour alleviates beliefs that sexist appeals may be inappropriate. Consistent with these results, the study by Sabri (2012) revealed that if humour is added, advertisements with the highest level of sexist violence gained more attention and were more liked by women than when there was no humour. Mayer et al. (2019) results suggest that both male and female audiences enjoy sexist humour in advertisements at similar levels, but these enjoyment levels do not always result in the same high levels of attitudinal evaluations. Also, the efficacy of the advertisement with sexist humour appeal for female audiences increases when there is a higher perceived fit between the brand and sexist humour. However, Hornik et al. (2016) found that both sexism and humour, when used individually, are the most effective message strategies. Based on contradictory results of the previous research, this study analyses the impact of humour used in sexist advertisements on the perception of the advertisement and the intention to purchase the advertised product. Moreover, it is important to stress that, in this study, perception of the advertisement is based on the perception of its violation of social norms and ridiculousness. According to the incongruity theory, ridiculousness is perceived as an exasperated reaction of mistrust one experiences in situations that seem inconsistent with usual circumstances (Sen 2012; Campisano 2016). Meanwhile, norm violation stems from the violation of shared expectations that people develop through the process of social learning. While interacting with social groups, people learn the rules that those groups define for acceptable, and unacceptable, behavior (Baron & Byrne 1977). Advertising, as a social object, is evaluated by social norms and is considered offensive when its content breaches norms of decency, good taste, aesthetic propriety, and/or personal moral standards (Day 1991).

### **2.3. Direction of sexism and the respondents' gender**

Most of the studies analysed sexist advertisements directed against women and their impact on advertisement perception based on gender (Ford et al. 2008; Infanager et al. 2012; Ford et al. 2015). Some of the studies have explored sexism directed against different genders and how it affects the perception of the advertisement and opinions about the opposite gender (Peters et al. 2015; Huhmann & Limbu 2016). However, most of these studies focused on the sexist message directed against one gender and assessed its effects on both genders (Greenwood & Isbell 2002; Theodoridis et al. 2013). The limitation of these studies is that a person may respond in one way to a sexist message that is directed to his/her gender and completely differently to a sexist message that is directed to the opposite gender (Mayer et al. 2019). As a result, each situation is highly individual, making it difficult to compare studies on different selected variables.

Furthermore, previous studies suggest that a sexist advertisement was more negatively evaluated by women, as compared to men, because women are more likely to recognize sexism, which is also more frequently used against them. Advertisements depicting sexuality very openly or in provocative scenes can cause a negative reaction among female audiences because a woman may feel stunned or aggressed (Vistbhakdi 2011; Moses & Charles 2014). As a result, this can negatively impact their attitude towards the advertised product or brand and intention to purchase it (Mayer & Peev 2017).

Previous research on sexism with humour confirms that sexist humour directed against both men and women has an impact on their self-perception and shapes attitudes towards the

opposite gender. Furthermore, sexist humour directed at a specific gender may have a different effect on genders. It was confirmed that men are very mildly concerned about their body or characteristics when faced with sexist humour directed against them. On the contrary, there is a marked increase in women's self-objectification depending on the sexist humour faced (Ford et al. 2015). This can be explained by the fact that women perceive humour not only as a laugh or anecdote, but as a hidden remark, a comment – something real and serious. Yet, sexist humour affects the self-esteem of women very strongly because they are not inclined to acknowledge it or recognize sexist humour and try not to allow themselves to be affected by it (Ford et al. 2015). In addition, some previous research results state that women value sexist humour as less entertaining since, for them, this form of humour is less acceptable than for men (Greenwood & Isbell 2002). In a sexist advertisement, humour hides seriousness and the negative aspects, and directly makes it difficult to recognize or publicly acknowledge encountering sexism. Therefore, like negative sexism, sexist humour is particularly dangerous, because it contributes to the formation of gender stereotypes and precisely increases gender discrimination. This is especially noticeable among individuals who are prone to negative / hostile sexism (Ford et al. 2001). However, there are other studies that provide contradicting results stating that sexist humour may have a positive effect on the perception of the advertisement as well as the advertised brand and intention to purchase (Eisend et al. 2014; Swim et al. 2001). Based on contradictory results of the previous research, this study deepens the knowledge of humour research by analysing how the direction of sexism (against men vs women) effects the perception of a sexist advertisement and the intention to purchase the advertised product. Furthermore, it evaluates whether the interaction between the type of advertising, the direction of sexism, and the respondents' gender influences the perception of the advertisement and the intention to purchase a product.

### **3. Research methodology**

#### **3.1. Stimuli selection**

The effect of two types of sexist advertisements (with humour and without humour) on the intention to purchase products was tested using a two-by-two factorial design experiment. Previous studies noticed that sexism was closely related to gender, and advertisements could include sexism directed against women or men (Infanager et al. 2012; Ford et al. 2015; Peters et al. 2015; Mayer et al. 2019). Therefore, another factor – the direction of sexism – was analysed.

In accordance with previous research based on experiments, this study also used printed advertisements, thus allowing avoidance of extraneous variables such as level of involvement and necessary time for concentration on the advertisement (Royo-Vela et al. 2007; Ulah et al. 2016; Mayer et al. 2019). The convenience-based pilot study led to a selection of 4 existing advertisements of well-known brands with sexist appeals meeting the requirements of the classification provided in Table 1. Two of the advertisements were directed against women, one of which showed a ridiculous and sexist image of a woman in a short dress made of milk. Meanwhile, the second advertisement depicted a subtly sexy image of a woman with red lips, open back and a hat. The other two advertisements were directed against men, where the first advertisement portrayed a self-confident man in a classical style, while the other advertisement depicted a ridiculous image of a sexy athletic man hanging with only one hand on the cliff shore. All the chosen advertisements were not previously used in Lithuania but were criticized for their sexism (Schott 2015; Klausner 2014; Gambert & Linne 2018). On the one hand, it made it possible to avoid recognition of the advertisements and the impact of preconceived

attitude towards the advertisement (Royo-Vela et al. 2007; Mayer et al. 2019). On the other hand, it provided an opportunity to evaluate/judge the selected advertisements based on the expression of sexism alone or sexism with humour. Finally, it was decided that the advertisements must feature the advertised object. Therefore, non-alcoholic drinks (soft drinks and milk drinks) were selected to be advertised, since the purchasing of these products is gender-free, it does not require high involvement, and these items are bought frequently.

Table 1. Classification of the advertisements under analysis

Direction of sexism	Type of ad	
	Sexism without humor	Sexism with humor
Against women	Advertisement 1	Advertisement 3
Against men	Advertisement 2	Advertisement 4

### 3.2. Participants

The data were collected through an internet survey using a convenience sample. An internet survey was selected due to its main advantages: high response rate, low cost, real-time access, convenience, and no influence of the interviewer. The survey generated 240 responses from Lithuania, but some questionnaires were incomplete, some respondents filled in the questionnaires too fast, and some questionnaires had no variance in responses. Therefore, 57 questionnaires were excluded, and data analysis was based on 183 responses: 99 respondents filled in questionnaire A and 84 completed questionnaire B. Since one respondent presented responses about two advertisements, the total of 366 cases were used for the analysis. The respondents included in both samples did not differ by their gender ( $\chi^2 (1) = 0.011, p=0.92$ ), but displayed age differences ( $\chi^2 (2) = 8.99, p=0.011$ ) (see Table 2).

Table 2. The demographic data of the respondents in both samples (%)

Gender	Sample		Age (years)	Sample	
	A	B		A	B
Male	42.4	41.7	16-25	11.1	28.6
Female	57.6	58.3	26-40	80.8	64.3
			41 and older	8.1	7.1

### 3.3. Questionnaire development and measures

Two questionnaires were created for this research. Questionnaire A included advertisements 1 and 3, while Questionnaire B – Advertisement 2 and Advertisement 4 (see Table 1). First, for both questionnaires, the respondents were shown the mentioned print advertisements and asked to answer the same questions about the perceived advertisement’s violation, perceived advertisement’s ridiculousness and intention to purchase the products. To be consistent with the previous studies, the scales employed by other scholars in the field were also used in the research questionnaires. The measurement of the perceived advertisement’s violation was based on the statements adapted from Swani et al. (2013) and Gurrieri et al. (2016). The scale consisted of 4 statements (see statements 1-4, Table 3). The respondents had to express their attitude using a 5-point Likert scale in which 1 represented “strongly disagree”, whereas 5

represented “strongly agree”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.893 ( $\alpha=0.82$ ; 0.885; 0.867; 0.908 for advertisements 1,2,3,4, respectively), indicating an appropriate degree of the scale’s reliability. The measurement of perceived advertisement’s ridiculousness was based on the scale adapted from Zhang (1996), which was also used in some later studies (Cline et al. 2003; Swani et al. 2013). This scale consisted of 4 statements (see statements 5-8 in Table 3) and had high reliability (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=0.848$ ), which was appropriate for every advertisement used in the research ( $\alpha =0.862$ ; 0.772; 0.812; 0.916 for advertisements 1,2,3,4, respectively). The respondents presented their answers to this measurement scale using the same 5-point Likert scale. Finally, a scale proposed by Loureiro (2003) and employed in other studies (Barber et al. 2012; Barber & Taylor 2013) was used to measure the intention to purchase the products. The scale consisted of 4 statements (see statements 9-12 in Table 3) and had a high psychometric property (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=0.948$ ), which varied insignificantly depending on the advertisement ( $\alpha=0.933$ ; 0.946; 0.968; 0.924 for advertisements 1,2,3,4, respectively). The respondents were asked to show their attitude towards the statements on a 7-point Likert scale in which 1 represented “strongly disagree”, whereas 7 indicated “strongly agree”. The questionnaires also included a few demographic questions about respondents’ gender, age, and education level.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. Reliability of scales

Exploratory factor analysis was used in the current study due to the need to adapt the statements to another language. This study used the principal component analysis method with a varimax rotation to extract factors from 12 statements used in the questionnaire. The results of Bartlett’s test of sphericity indicated that the correlation matrix was not random,  $\chi^2(66) = 3513.2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) statistic was 0.845, well above the minimum standard for conducting factor analysis. Therefore, it was determined that the correlation matrix was appropriate for factor analysis.

Table 3. Measurement scales used in the research and their reliability

Variable	Intention to purchase	Perception of advertisement’s violation	Perception of advertisement’s ridiculousness	$h^2$
This commercial is offensive	-0.212	<b>0.852</b>	-0.078	0.776
This commercial is discriminatory	-0.160	<b>0.872</b>	-0.117	0.800
This commercial is wrong	-0.191	<b>0.779</b>	-0.139	0.663
This commercial violated social norms	-0.149	<b>0.867</b>	-0.119	0.788
This commercial is funny	0.033	0.139	<b>0.738</b>	0.565
This commercial is amusing	0.246	-0.205	<b>0.844</b>	0.815
This commercial is playful	0.097	-0.221	<b>0.811</b>	0.716
This commercial is fun	0.268	-0.291	<b>0.802</b>	0.800
I plan on buying this product	<b>0.900</b>	-0.161	0.116	0.850
I am interested in tasting this product	<b>0.935</b>	-0.199	0.107	0.924
I would consider purchasing this product	<b>0.881</b>	-0.189	0.201	0.852
I intend to try this product	<b>0.876</b>	-0.211	0.198	0.851
% of Variance	29.4	25.6	23.7	

The extraction method was principal component analysis with a varimax (with Kaiser normalization) rotation. Factor loadings above 0.5 are in bold.  $h^2$  = communality coefficient

The analysis yielded a three-factor solution. Table 3 presents the factor loadings, communalities, and variances explained. Four items loaded onto the first factor (0.876–0.935). These items were related to the consumers’ intention to purchase the advertised product. Four items loaded onto the second factor (0.779–0.872), which referred to the perception of the advertisement’s violation. The final four statements belonged to the third factor (0.738–0.844), which represented the perception the advertisement’s ridiculousness. These three factors explained more than 78% of the total variance. According to Hair et al. (2019), factors that account for 60% of the total variance are satisfactory.

The results showed that intention to purchase significantly correlated with the perception of the advertisement’s ridiculousness and perception of advertisement’s violation of social norms, even though the values of correlation coefficients were not high (see Table 4). The perception of the advertisement’s ridiculousness had a positive impact on intention to purchase, while the perception of advertisement’s violation was negatively related to the intention to purchase (and the perception of the advertisement’s ridiculousness). Thus, it can be concluded that both variables have an impact on the intention to purchase but behave differently.

Table 4. Correlation analysis of research variables

	Perception of advertisement’s violation	Perception of advertisement’s ridiculousness
Perception of advertisement’s ridiculousness	-0.248**	
Intention to purchase	-0.418**	0.332**
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).		

A 2x2x2 multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to examine the main and interaction effects of the respondents’ gender, type of advertisement (sexism without humour or sexism with humour) and direction of sexism (against men or women) on dependent variables: perception of the advertisement’s violation, perception of the advertisement’s ridiculousness and intention to purchase.

**4.2. Impact of gender, the type of the advertisement and direction of sexism on the perception of the advertisement and intention to buy**

The type of the advertisement had an influence on several dependent variables (Wilks’  $\lambda = 0.942$ ,  $F(3, 356) = 7.26$   $p < 0.001$   $\eta^2 = 0.058$ ). The univariate F test for the type of advertisement and perception of the advertisement’s violation was significant  $F(1, 358) = 12.28$   $p < 0.001$   $\eta^2 = 0.03$ , showing differences in perception of the advertisement’s violation depending on the type of advertisement. Higher scores indicate a higher level of perceived violation. A sexist advertisement without humour was perceived as less violating ( $M = 2.30$   $SD = 0.96$ ) than a sexist advertisement with humour ( $M = 2.63$   $SD = 1.06$ ). Both advertisements were perceived as equally ridiculous  $F(1, 358) = 0.11$   $p > 0.05$ . This indicates that humour used in advertisements did not increase the level of ridiculousness (see Table 5). There was a strong effect of the type of the advertisement on the intention to purchase  $F(1, 358) = 10.30$   $p < 0.001$   $\eta^2 = 0.03$ . Purchase intention was higher ( $M = 3.17$   $SD = 1.64$ ) for sexist advertisements without humour than sexist advertisements with humour ( $M = 2.63$   $SD = 2.63$ ).

While a significant multivariate effect was obtained for the direction of sexism (Wilks’  $\lambda = 0.972$ ,  $F(3, 356) = 3.38$   $p = 0.018$   $\eta^2 = 0.028$ ), univariate analysis showed significant effect just on the advertisement’s ridiculousness  $F(1, 358) = 9.99$   $p = 0.002$   $\eta^2 = 0.03$ . The advertisements were perceived as more ridiculous when the advertisement was directed against men ( $M = 2.93$



SD=0.86) than against women (M=2.65 SD=0.86). However, no significant effect was obtained for the direction of sexism in the perception of the advertisement's violation  $F(1, 358)= 0.64$   $p=0.425$  and intention to purchase  $F(1, 358)= 0.43$   $p=0.515$ .

Contrary to the direction of sexism, the respondents' gender had a significant multivariate effect (Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.846$ ,  $F(3, 356)= 21.56$   $p<0.001$   $\eta^2=0.154$ ). The univariate F test for the gender and perception of the advertisement's violation was significant  $F(1, 358)= 52.39$   $p<0.001$   $\eta^2=0.13$ , showing differences in the perception of advertisement's violation depending on the respondents' gender. The advertisement was perceived as more offensive by women (M=2.80 SD=0.97) than by men (M=2.13 SD=0.96). Conversely, there were more men who stated that advertisements were more ridiculous (M=2.95 SD=0.92) than women (M=2.64 SD=0.82). Gender has a significant effect on the intention to purchase as well ( $F(3, 356)=31.38$   $p<0.001$   $\eta^2=0.008$ ). Purchase intention was higher among men (M=3.36 SD=1.78) than among women (M=2.43 SD=1.47).

Table 5. Main effects on dependent variables

Dependent Variable	M	SD	M	SD	F(1,358)	Sig.	$\eta^2$
Type of advertisement	Sexism without humour		Sexism with humour				
Perception of advertisement's violation	2.30	0.96	2.63	1.06	12.28	0.001	0.03
Perception of advertisement's ridiculousness	2.78	0.83	2.81	0.91	0.11	0.739	0.00
Purchase intention	3.17	1.64	2.63	1.65	10.30	0.001	0.03
Direction of sexism	Against men		Against women				
Perception of advertisement's violation	2.43	0.93	2.50	1.11	0.64	0.425	0.00
Perception of advertisement's ridiculousness	2.93	0.86	2.65	0.86	9.99	0.002	0.03
Purchase intention	2.95	1.69	2.85	1.66	0.43	0.515	0.00
Respondent's gender	Male		Female				
Perception of advertisement's violation	2.13	0.96	2.80	0.97	52.39	0.000	0.13
Perception of advertisement's ridiculousness	2.95	0.92	2.64	0.82	12.19	0.001	0.03
Purchase intention	3.36	1.78	2.43	1.47	31.38	0.000	0.08

### 4.3. Interaction effects on the perception of the advertisement and intention to buy

A 2x2x2 multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to examine the interaction effects of the respondents' gender, type of advertisement (sexism without humour or sexism with humour) and the direction of sexism (against men or women) on the dependent variables: perception of the advertisement's violation, perception of the advertisement's ridiculousness and intention to purchase. Out of three two-way interactional effects, two had no significant multivariate effect. Neither interaction of gender and the type of advertisement (Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.984$ ,  $F(3, 356)= 1.93$   $p=0.125$   $\eta^2=0.016$ ) nor interaction of gender and the direction of sexism (Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.986$ ,  $F(3, 356)= 1.67$   $p=0.174$   $\eta^2=0.014$ ) had any significant multivariate effect. This shows the dominating effect of gender in the perception of the impact of sexism in advertisements on dependent variables (see Table 6).

The interaction between the type of advertisement and direction of sexism had significant multivariate impact on dependent variables (Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.763$ ,  $F(3, 356)= 36.78$   $p< 0.001$   $\eta^2=0.237$ ). The univariate tests show that the interaction effect on perception of advertisement's violation was significant  $F(1, 358)= 72.62$   $p< 0.001$   $\eta^2=0.169$ . The perception

of violation was higher ( $M=3.06$   $SD=0.10$ ) when a sexist advertisement with humour was directed against women compared to all other cases. In the case of sexism without humour, higher level of violation was noticed when sexism was directed against men ( $M=2.66$   $SD=0.91$ ) than women ( $M=1.94$   $SD=0.87$ ). This shows that humour can have a negative effect when the sexist message is directed against women, but it works positively when sexism is directed against men (see Table 6).

An interaction between the type of advertisement and direction of sexism had a significant effect on the perception of the advertisement’s ridiculousness as well:  $F(1, 358)= 9.16$   $p= 0.003$   $\eta^2= 0.025$ . In the case of the sexist advertisement without humour, ridiculousness was higher for sexism directed against men ( $M=3.05$   $SD=0.88$ ) than women ( $M=2.50$   $SD=0.71$ ). However, the direction of sexism had no influence on the perception of ridiculousness when sexist advertisements with humour were presented (see Table 6).

The impact of the interaction between the type of advertisement and direction of sexism on purchase intention was significant  $F(1, 358)= 8.92$   $p= 0.003$   $\eta^2= 0.024$  and yielded similar results to the perception of advertisement’s violation. The intention to purchase a product was higher for sexist advertisements without humour ( $M=3.36$   $SD=1.63$ ) than for sexist advertisements with humour ( $M=2.33$   $SD=0.17$ ) when sexism was directed against women. However, the type of advertisement caused no differences when sexism was directed against men – it was equally high ( $M=2.97$  for sexism without humour and  $M=2.94$  for sexism with humour). Such results highlight the negative effect of sexist advertisements with humour only when they are directed against women (see Table 6).

Table 6. Effect of two-way interactions on dependent variables

Dependent Variable	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F(1,358)	Sig.	$\eta^2$
Type of advertisement * Direction of sexism	Sexism without humour				Sexism with humour						
	Against men		Against women		Against men		Against women				
Perception of advertisement’s violation	2.66	0.91	1.94	0.87	2.19	0.09	3.06	0.10	72.62	0.000	0.17
Perception of advertisement’s ridiculousness	3.05	0.88	2.50	0.71	2.81	0.09	2.80	0.09	9.16	0.003	0.03
Purchase intention	2.97	1.64	3.36	1.63	2.94	0.16	2.33	0.17	8.92	0.003	0.02
Type of advertisement * Respondent’s gender	Sexism without humour				Sexism with humour						
	Male		Female		Male		Female				
Perception of advertisement’s violation	1.98	0.89	2.62	0.91	2.28	1.01	2.98	1.01	0.08	0.772	0.00
Perception of advertisement’s ridiculousness	2.84	0.85	2.72	0.82	3.06	0.98	2.56	0.81	4.64	0.032	0.01
Purchase intention	3.50	1.72	2.83	1.53	3.23	1.84	2.04	1.28	2.54	0.112	0.01
Direction of sexism * Respondent’s gender	Against men				Against women						
	Male		Female		Male		Female				
Perception of advertisement’s violation	2.11	0.92	2.74	0.85	2.14	1.01	2.85	1.09	0.16	0.688	0.00
Perception of advertisement’s ridiculousness	3.02	0.90	2.84	0.83	2.87	0.94	2.43	0.75	2.28	0.132	0.01
Purchase intention	3.50	1.79	2.41	1.44	3.23	1.77	2.46	1.49	1.00	0.318	0.00

A significant multivariate effect was obtained for a three-way interaction, (Wilks’  $\lambda = 0.977$ ,  $F(3, 356)= 2.75$   $p=0.043$   $\eta^2=0.214$ ). The univariate analysis of the interaction was

significant only for the perception of the advertisement's ridiculousness ( $F(1, 358)= 4.56$   $p= 0.033$   $\eta^2= 0.013$ ), while it was insignificant for the perception of the advertisement's violation of social norms ( $F(1, 358)= 0.005$   $p= 0.944$ ) and for purchase intention ( $F(1, 358)= 1.107$   $p=0.293$ ). The perceived advertisement's violation was significantly higher for sexist advertisements with humour compared with those that displayed no humour when sexism was directed against women. Perception of violation increases from  $M=2.29$  to  $M=3.42$  among female participants and from  $M=1.60$  to  $M=2.69$  among male respondents. Moreover, both types of messages directed against women created a higher level of perceived violation among women than men. Contrary, humour had a positive effect on the perception of violation (advertisements were evaluated as less violating social norms) when sexism was directed against men. Perception of violation decreases from  $M=2.96$  to  $M=2.53$  among female and from  $M=2.36$  to  $M=1.86$  among male respondents. The difference exists both among women and men, but the latter perceived advertisement's violation as less serious. These results conclude that humour could decrease perceived violation of a sexist advertisement if the advertisement is directed against men but could have a negative effect when the advertisement is directed against women (see Figure 1).

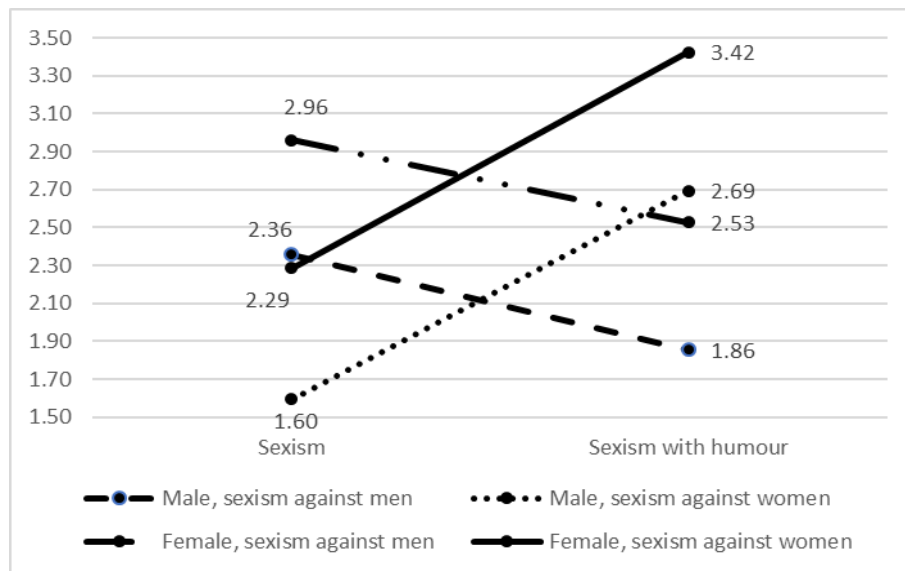


Figure 1. The effect of a three-way interaction on the perception of advertisement's violation

As it was mentioned, a three-way interaction had a significant effect on the perception of the advertisement's ridiculousness. The saying 'It would be funny if it wasn't so sad' could describe the presented results. In most of the cases, the advertisement's ridiculousness was perceived equally (no statistically significant differences) for both the sexist advertisement without and with humour. This shows the inability of humour to increase ridiculousness in sexist advertisements. One exceptional case was found when males evaluated sexist advertisement directed against women. It was perceived as more ridiculous ( $M=3.21$ ) compared with the sexist advertisement without humour ( $M=2.53$ ) (see Figure 2).

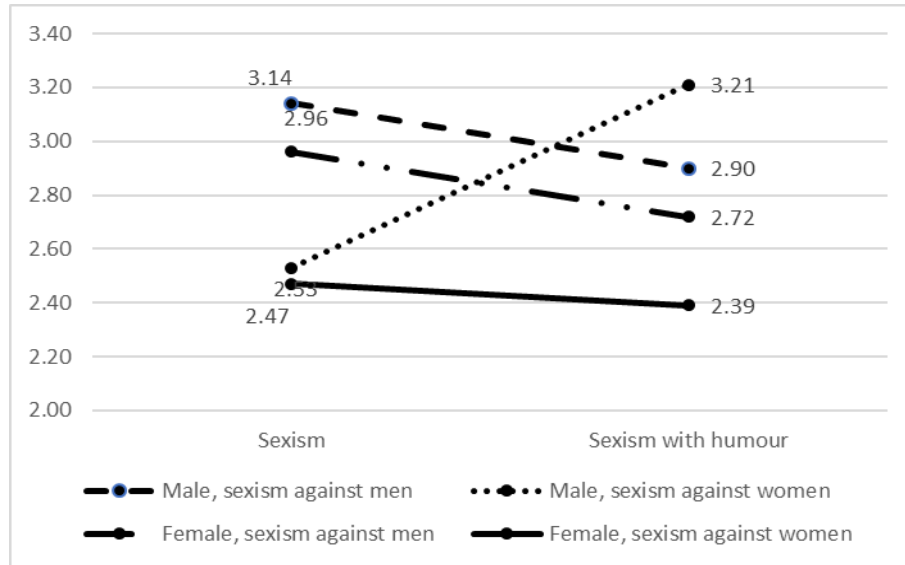


Figure 2. The effect of a three-way interaction on the perception of the advertisement's ridiculousness

Since both variables – perceived advertisement's violation and ridiculousness – had an impact on purchase intention, a three-way interaction shed some light on the relationship between the sexist advertisement and the intention to purchase the advertised product. The presence of humour in sexist advertisements usually decreases the intention to buy the advertised product. A significant drop in purchase intention was noticed when sexist advertisements were directed against women. Purchase intention decreased from  $M_{\text{Sexist}}=3.70$  to  $M_{\text{Sexist with Humour}}=2.76$  for male respondents and from  $M_{\text{Sexist}}=3.02$  to  $M_{\text{Sexist with Humour}}=1.90$  for female participants. Such results suggest that humour should not be used in sexist advertisements directed against women. However, the existence of humour in sexist advertisements directed against men had no statistically significant impact on purchase intention. Purchase intention ranged from  $M_S=3.30$  to  $M_{SH}=3.70$  for male respondents and from  $M_{\text{Sexist}}=2.64$  to  $M_{\text{Sexist with Humour}}=2.17$  for female participants (see Figure 3).

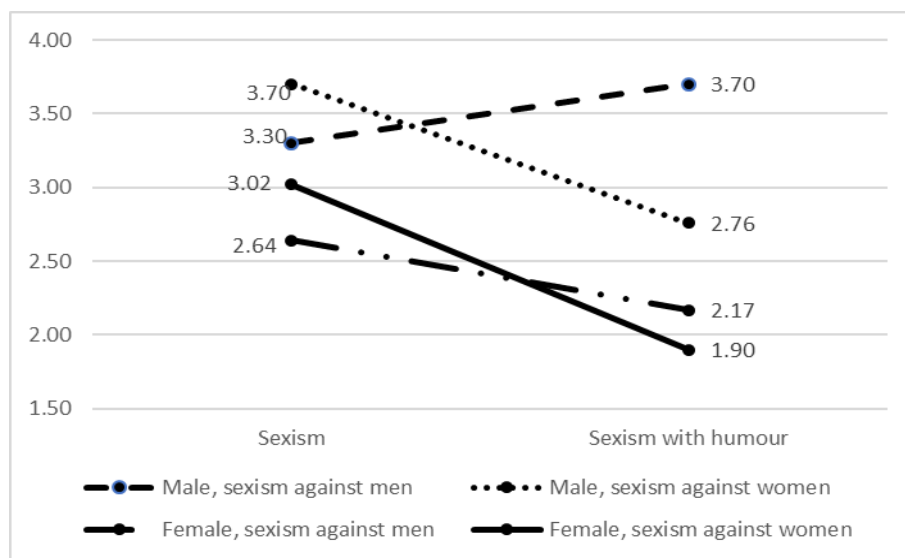


Figure 3. The effect of a three-way interaction on purchase intention

## **5. Discussion, conclusions and managerial implications**

### **5.1. Discussion and conclusions**

The most general objective of the study was to contribute to the knowledge regarding the impact of the sexist advertisement on perception of the advertisement and intention to purchase the advertised product. Though the overall scope of literature on this issue is substantial (Chang & Tseng 2013; Moses & Charles 2014; Ford et al. 2015; Lull & Bushman 2015; Sari et al. 2015; Mayer & Peev 2017), including research on the impact of sexism with humour (Mayer 2011; Sabri 2012; Damiano 2014; Sparks & Lang 2015; Das et al. 2015; Mayer et al. 2019), the importance of humour in sexist advertising and measuring its impact on the perception of the advertisement (via its violation of social norms and ridiculousness) and intention to purchase the advertised product has not been well assessed. The studies conducted by Mayer (2011), Sabri (2012), Sparks and Lang (2015), and Das et al. (2015) measured the inclusion of humour in sexist advertisements and its impact on the attitude towards advertising and the brand. However, they did not specifically concentrate on the impact of sexist humour on the perception of the advertisement via its ridiculousness, violation, and the intention to purchase the advertised product. Furthermore, the results of this study provide a comparison of two emotional stimuli (sexism without humour and sexism with humour). Previous research, to our best knowledge, analysed either a sexist message or just sexism with humour. The studies conducted by Das et al. (2015) and Sparks and Lang (2015) are the only publications close to this issue; however, Das et al. (2015) tested the persuasiveness of different emotional appeals (sex, humour, and control) by matching them on pleasure and arousal levels, while Sparks and Lang (2015) examined the impact of mentioned appeals on resource allocation and memory.

Moreover, most of the studies analysed sexist advertisements directed against women and their impact on the advertisement's perception based on gender (Ford et al. 2008; Infanager et al. 2012; Ford et al. 2015). Some of the studies explored sexism directed against different genders and how it affects the perception of the advertisement and opinions about the opposite gender (Peters et al. 2015; Huhmann & Limbu 2016). However, most of them focused on the sexist message directed against one gender and assessed its effects on both genders (Greenwood & Isbell 2002; Theodoridis et al. 2013). The results of this study contribute to understanding this issue, proposing a clear mechanism of how two types of advertisements (sexist with humour and sexist without humour) directed against both genders (women and men) are perceived by both genders (women and men).

Furthermore, most of the previous studies were conducted in developed countries (Das et al. 2015; Ford et al. 2015; Zawisza et al. 2018; Mayer et al. 2019). This study results contribute to understanding how two different types of advertisements (sexism with humour and sexism without humour) are perceived in a developing country like Lithuania and whether these types of advertisements may affect individuals' intention to purchase advertised products.

The findings of this study suggest three main conclusions. Firstly, the study results revealed that involvement of humour emotional appeal in sexist advertising has a negative impact on the perception of the advertisement and intention to purchase; more specifically, it increases the perception of advertisement's violation, it has no impact on the advertisement's ridiculousness and, moreover, it decreases the intention to purchase. These findings bring new substantial theoretical knowledge to the use of humour in sexist advertisements, showing that humour should be very responsibly paired with sexism to avoid negative consumer reactions.

Secondly, the direction of sexism appears significant when it is paired with humour. The findings show that a sexist advertisement with humour is evaluated as more derogatory when

it is directed against women and, on the contrary, a sexist advertisement without humour is perceived as more offensive when it is directed against men. In addition, intention to purchase is significantly reduced when a sexist advertisement with humour is directed against women. These findings show that even with humour added, sexism is still recognized by women as significantly negative. This can be explained by the fact that women perceive sexist humour as a hidden negative remark that strongly affects their self-esteem (Ford et al. 2015).

Thirdly, research results revealed the impact of the interaction between the type of advertisement, the direction of sexism and the respondents' gender on the advertisement perception and intention to purchase. Women perceive sexist advertisements as more offensive compared to men. Furthermore, perception of the advertisement's violation increases when humour is added to the sexist advertisement and it is directed against women; however, it decreases when a sexist advertisement with humour is directed against men.

Moreover, it was confirmed that the interaction of the selected factors has no effect on the advertisement's ridiculousness, except for one case. When a sexist advertisement with humour is directed against women, it is perceived as more ridiculous by men. Lastly, the interaction of the three variables also influences the intention to purchase. In many cases, the use of humour in sexist advertising directed against women reduces the intention to purchase a product. Meanwhile, the use of humour in sexist advertising directed against men has the opposite effect – the intention to purchase increases among men but decreases among women. This suggests that the success of the use of humour in sexist advertising largely depends on the interaction between the direction of sexism and the respondents' gender. Furthermore, women in developing, especially post-Soviet countries may have a more negative perception of sexist advertisements, as, in there, a woman was imagined to achieve her life success exclusively through her relationship with a man – either as his devoted housewife or sexy mistress (Rubchak 2015). In most countries, including developing ones, women's rights become equal to men's rights; therefore sexist advertisements directed against them, especially with humour, may lead to their negative perceptions and lessen intentions to purchase the advertised product. On the contrary, men from the above-mentioned countries perceived sexist advertisements with humour directed against women as more ridiculous, which confirms the results of previous studies stating that men use more sex and profanity in their humour (Mickes et al. 2011, Hooper et al. 2016).

In summary, it can be said that this study contributes to a broader understanding of the use of sexism and humour in marketing studies. The results of the study confirmed the relevance of the stereotyping problem in advertisements and showed that it is exceptionally sensitive when sexism with humour is directed against women. Several countries even took restrictions or even banned the use of this type of advertisements to avoid this problem. In response to this, companies attempt to cover sexism with humorous elements, thus reducing the negative effect of sexism and, in this way, promote their products. However, the results of our study showed that this decision may lead to an even more negative reaction of the consumers.

## **5.2. Managerial implications**

The current study concentrates on the interaction between the type of advertisement, the direction of sexism and the respondents' gender on the advertisement's perception and intention to purchase. Therefore, the obtained results suggest very concrete managerial implications regarding the ways sexist messages need to be developed.

In the development process, it is necessary to consider the characteristics of the target audience: whether it is men, women, or a mixed audience. The results of this study confirmed that male audience evaluated sexist advertisements with and without humour more positively compared to women. Therefore, in the case of male audience, both types of advertisements

(sexist without humour and sexist with humour) can be used equally successfully. However, considering mixed or female audience, it would be more appropriate to choose only sexist advertisements without humour.

Furthermore, intention to purchase strongly depends on the advertisement's type. The results of this study confirmed that intention to purchase is more encouraged by sexist advertisements without humour; the most stimulating to purchase were sexist advertisements without humour directed against women. Also, it was revealed that the presence of humour in sexist advertisements, in most cases, decreases an individual's intention to purchase the advertised product. A significant drop in the intention to purchase was noticed when sexist advertisements with humour were directed against women. Such results suggest that humour should not be used in sexist advertisements directed against women.

## **6. Limitations and directions for future studies**

This study has certain limitations. Though there are no obvious gaps in the methodology or the data obtained, a larger-scale study could help ensure the consistency of the observations.

One more limitation of this study is that non-identical products (soft drink and milk) were selected for the sexist advertisements without humour and sexist advertisements with humour. Furthermore, the perception of the advertisement and intention to purchase may also have been influenced by the attitude towards specific brands presented in these advertisements. Therefore, it is highly recommended for future studies to use an unknown brand or create all the advertisements with the same brand.

Previous studies have revealed that attitude towards an advertisement can strongly influence intention to purchase (Sallam & Algammash 2016; Hashim et al. 2018; Mandliya et al. 2020). This study is also limited to analysing the perception of advertisement's violation and the ridiculousness of an advertisement. Therefore, future studies can examine respondents' attitude towards sexist advertisements and sexist advertisements with humour.

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### **Advertising Material Used**

Advertisement 1 - Pepsi advertisement *The New Skinny Can*. Retrieved August 1, 2022 from <https://psupopculture.wordpress.com/2011/10/16/pepsi-the-new-skinny-can/>.

Advertisement 2 - Schweppes advertisement *Separating men from boys*. Retrieved August 1, 2022 from <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/491033165614775332/>.

Advertisement 3 - Fair Life advertisement *Drink what she's wearing*. Retrieved August 1, 2022 from

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2856961/Coca-cola-criticized-sexist-new-ad-campaign-features-naked-women-covered-dripping-milk.html>

Advertisement 4 - Maxi-milk advertisement *Milk for Real Men*. Retrieved August 1, 2022 from <https://seanlerwill.wordpress.com/2012/08/30/maximuscle-maxi-milk-milk-for-real-men-advert/>