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FEMALE NUDITY IN ADVERTISING: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Female nudity in advertising varies greatly across Europe and the world. However, in studying extant literature regarding nudity in advertising a number of limitations emerge. The aim of this research is to explore and describe consumer attitudes to the depiction of nudity in advertising in a previously overlooked context. Additionally, in order to overcome omissions in extant empirical research a secondary aim is to explore such issues from a variety of perspectives. The paper does this specifically through the categories of gay men, straight men, gay women and straight women. The literature review concentrates on the key areas of sex roles in advertising, sex appeal and arousal in advertising and nudity in advertising. Thereafter follows a discussion and justification of the chosen method, including a breakdown of the choice of advertising material. Following from this are the results and discussion, broken down into three key themes: ‘opposite sex approval’, definitions of sexual vs. non-sexual nakedness and femininity and product congruence. The paper draws a number of conclusions with suggestions for further research and implications for practice.
Depictions of nudity in advertising, both male and female, vary greatly across Europe (e.g. Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau, 2002) and the world (e.g. Boddewyn, 1991). Interest in gender and advertising is popularly credited as beginning with Goffman (1976). There was also work during the late 1970s focusing on sex roles in advertising (Lungstrom and Scigliominagilia, 1977; Peterson and Kerin, 1977). Work in this area continued to be developed into the 1980s and 1990s (Gilly, 1988; Elliott et al., 1993; Simpson et al., 1996). A further area studying gender and advertising was concerned with nudity, arousal or sex appeal (Tinkham and Reid, 1988; Severn et al., 1990; LaTour et al., 1990; Boddewyn, 1991; LaTour and Henthorne, 1994; Henthorne and LaTour, 1994; Reichert and Ramirez, 2000). Furthermore, Aaker and Bruzzone (1985) and Venzina and Paul (1997) respectively looked at irritation and provocation in advertising and offered perspectives on nudity.

However, in studying extant literature a number of limitations emerge. First, the majority of empirical work is conducted in the American context. Indeed, Gilly (1988) observes that cultures and attitudes may differ in other countries and this needs further exploration. Second, many of the existing studies use convenience samples gathered from the student community and it is widely argued that more representative samples should be studied (LaTour et al., 1990; Tinkham and Reid; 1988; Reichert and Ramirez, 2000). Third, in addition to material being gathered from an excessively narrow sociodemographic group, existing studies typically examine solely female attitudes (Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau, 2002; James, 2002) and generally the heterosexual community, ignoring wider, more diverse and more representative samples (Stern, 1999; Burnett, 2000). Cumulatively, these limitations constrict the reliability and generalisability of existing research into these issues. Consequently, the aim of this research is to explore and describe consumer attitudes to the depiction of nudity in advertising in a previously overlooked context. Further, in order to overcome omissions in extant
empirical research a secondary aim is to explore such issues from a variety of perspectives. The study aims to help academics develop greater and wider understanding of consumer attitudes towards nudity in advertising. This study is also designed to contribute pragmatic suggestions for practitioners who should find the results useful for planning advertising strategies for products/brands and strategic placement of such advertisements.

The paper begins with a review of existing literature, concentrating on the key areas of sex roles in advertising, sex appeal and arousal in advertising and nudity in advertising under scrutiny. Thereafter follows a discussion and justification of the chosen method, including a breakdown of the choice of advertising material. Following from this are the findings, broken down in to three key themes and conclusions with suggestions for further research and implications for practice.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review begins with depictions of sex roles in advertising and utilizes the research of Goffman (1976) *Gender Advertisements* as a starting point (considered a seminal piece (Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau, 2002)). This literature is relevant to the current study since as well as considering the sex role stereotypes presented in advertising it also addresses nudity. An historical analysis of this area of the literature, from the late 1970s to the present day then follows. Thereafter the literature considering sex appeal within advertising is examined, culminating with a review of nudity in advertising.

**Depictions Of Sex Roles In Advertising**

During the late 1970s a body of literature developed that studied the representation of women within advertising in terms of sex roles. Goffman (1976) interprets in excess of four hundred print advertisements including images of women. Loosely grouped into categories including ‘The Feminine Touch,’ ‘The Family,’ and ‘Licensed Withdrawal’, Goffman (1976) documents various portrayals of the female (and the male) role in society and the family. Goffman (1976:33-35) demonstrates how patriarchy is represented in advertising and provides some focus on how males are depicted in advertisements containing images of
stereotypically female roles. In this regard, he suggests that men are usually featured as not participating at all in the ‘female’ tasks, are given comedic value, or are depicted as being given guidance in unfamiliar environments. However, Goffman’s conceptual perspective is more aligned to literary theory and a sociological perspective than advertising theory (Hoggart, 1976).

Concurrently the advertising and broader marketing literature examine the notion of sex role portrayal within advertising. Lundstrom and Sciglimpaglia (1977) analyze sex role portrayals in advertising, in particular, how men and women consider these portrayals and if these feelings affect their attitude towards the products within the advertisements. They deduce that there is criticism about the portrayal of women in advertising, in particular from “women from higher income households, younger women, more highly educated women, women whose personal role orientations are less traditional and women from higher occupational status households” (1977:76). Particularly interesting is Lundstrom and Sciglimpaglia’s (1977) further reflection on respondents future purchase behavior. Responses range from being annoyed by the advertisements but not intending to change behavior as a result (the authors suggest that this may be because respondents see so many advertisements as annoying but “not sufficient to cause to alter past purchase behavior” (Lundstrom and Sciglimpaglia,1977:78)) to those who would change their behavior. They did find that those who were most critical were not those people who were most likely to change. Further, aside from stereotypical role portrayals, Lundstrom and Sciglimpaglia (1977:78) draw from campaigns that include “dual roles, role switching and role blending” and make suggestions for practitioners to alter the traditional roles depicted in their advertisements.

Noting that the advertising literature had established that women were portrayed in stereotypical roles in the US advertising market, Gilly (1988) juxtaposes television commercials from Australia, Mexico and the USA to see if such stereotypical role portrayals appeared elsewhere. Employing content analysis Gilly (1988) compares many aspects including whether products for men and women were advertised by men or women, where the characters were likely to be portrayed (home, office etc), activities portrayed and
sex of voiceover artist. Gilly (1988) finds that Australian commercials hold the fewest men/women differences and reflects that advertisers may have responded to recommendations made to them by a ‘women’s organization’ (1988:83). As Gilly (1988) anticipates Mexican advertisements did contain more traditional sex roles, however Gilly (1988) contends that the difference between the USA and Mexico was not as great as expected perhaps due to the number of US companies advertising products in Mexico. This leads Gilly (1988:83) to concur with Peterson and Kerin (1977:62) and argue that the effect of advertising on cultural/social values needs to be further explored.

While considerable time has been spent studying female role portrayals within advertising Elliott et al. (1993) deem it necessary to revisit role portrayals in the 1990s. Elliott et al. (1993) note that advertising has attempted to address changing societal roles by engaging in the “dual roles, role switching and role blending” suggested in extant literature (Lundstrom and Sciglimpaglia, 1977:78). Elliott et al. (1993) comment on the repositioning of traditionally male and traditionally female products to reflect society’s changing environment and focus their attention on the conventionally female role of household cleaning and the consequential adjustments of advertising of household cleaning products. In discussing ‘new man’s’ depiction in advertising the authors are interested by Charlier’s (1987) suggestion of a potential backlash from women. Elliott et al. (1993:317) find six themes “situation disbelief, sex-role disbelief, subtle supportive influence, denigration of women, product benefit and crude manipulation” with the attitudes of the women ranging from “weary skepticism” to “easy acceptance” or “angry resistance.”

conclude “that the gender portrayals in print advertising media remain disappointingly sexist, stereotypical and limiting”. They argue that levels of sexism have not dropped since the 1970s.

**Sex Appeal And Arousal In Advertising**

Developing alongside the literature focusing on sex roles within advertising is literature exploring sex appeal within advertising. Tinkham and Reid (1988) attempt to replicate an earlier study by Richmond and Hartman (1982) that suggests that sex appeal in advertising falls into four dimensions that they label; *functional, fantasy, symbolism* and *inappropriate*. Furthermore, in supporting this earlier work and that of Peterson and Kerin (1977), Tinkham and Reid (1988) suggest that in terms of sex appeal ‘*functional*’ ads are more effective in terms of recall because there was a ‘natural congruity’ between the product and the advertisement. This underpins notions of a congruence between nudity and advertising in other studies.

While Tinkham and Reid (1988) are concerned with product and advertising recall Severn, Belch and Belch (1990) referred to copy content as well as the visual sexual appeal. Working with alternative definitions of sex appeal in advertising; ‘*double entendre, decorative models* and *nudity*’, Severn *et al.* investigate if sexually explicit advertising would affect brand recall. Developing the conclusions of earlier studies Severn *et al.* (1990) regard ‘higher order’ cognitive processes for example evaluation about the product and execution related thoughts and finally attitudes towards the advertisement, brand and product. The results are that copy recall is affected by more explicit sexual appeal, making it difficult for the reader to process the information provided. Sex appeal also affects other areas of cognitive response at the expense of the product or message. Severn *et al.* (1990) propose that sex appeal in the advertisements improved purchase intentions but concede that the sample advertisements are targeted to the respondent group and that this may affect the respondent group’s approval of such sex appeal.

judgments of a current print advertisement. Despite existing evidence that male respondents are more receptive to female nudity in advertising (only the female in the suggestive advertisement is naked, although covered) LaTour and Henthorne (1994) conclude that both men and women were troubled. This adversely affects respondents’ attitudes towards the advertisement, brand and purchase intentions and could potentially lead to an avoidance of that product (Henthorne and LaTour, 1995).

The topic of sex appeal in advertising covers many different aspects of sex appeal and types of sex appeal (see Tinkham and Reid, 1988; Severn et al. 1990). Consequently, Reichert and Ramirez (2000) argue that sexual appeal in advertising is not simply about nudity and explore what consumers find sexy in advertising in an effort to refine definitions of sex appeal and develop understanding of why some advertisements are received more favorably than others. The results from a study of college students indicate four characteristics that made an advertisement ‘sexy’ (physical features and physical attractiveness of the model(s), behavior/movement, intimacy between models and contextual features).

Interestingly, more men favor physical features/attractiveness than women, while women emphasize behavior/movement, intimacy and contextual features more than men.

In addition to nudity being described as a facet of sexual appeal in advertising (Reichert and Ramirez, 2000) and potentially a cause of irritation in advertising (Aaker and Bruzzone, 1985), the extant literature includes it as a element of provocative appeal in advertising (Vézina and Paul, 1997). In describing what may be provocative for the audience of an advertisement Vézina and Paul (1997:179) cite sexual appeal or nudity. Here Vézina and Paul (1997) stress that the previously linked nudity/product congruence may not only have an effect on how much the advertisement is liked/disliked but also how provocative the advertisement is (the less congruence the more provocative). In support of previous research Vézina and Paul (1997) concur that age and gender are variables that affect the evaluation of advertisements. Disapproval of the more provocative advertisements used tend to come with the older respondents. More men approve of the suggestive advertisement containing nudity.
The above review analyzed nudity as part of a variety differing perspectives. However extant literature also offers studies researching more specifically on the use of nudity in advertising. Early work on female nudity in advertising begins with Peterson and Kerin (1977) who focused their attention on the female in advertising. Reflecting the view of the critics that advertising is “presenting women as simple-minded, non-career oriented, and male dependent” and that it “perpetuates archaic and distorted sex role stereotypes” Peterson and Kerin (1977:59) criticize the increasing numbers of advertisements including nudity and the range of products using such images. Peterson and Kerin (1977) argue that male respondents are more impressed than females by nude female models in advertisements. However, they observe that overall nude female models in advertisements are not well received, in particular when there is not an obvious link between product and image (product/model congruency).

While Peterson and Kerin (1977) examine female nudity in advertising Simpson et al. (1996) regard male nudity in advertising, replicating the Peterson and Kerin (1977) study. Exploring the question of respondents preferring opposite sex nudity in advertising they test hypotheses concentrating on the effects of the amount of clothing worn by the male model and product congruency with nudity. In studying a large group of male and female respondents they argue that female respondents did prefer a partially clothed male model. However, female respondents prefer to see nudity included in advertisements where the product was congruent with the nudity. In contrast, Simpson et al. (1996) contend that any form of male nudity is disapproved of by male respondents.

LaTour, Pitts and Snook-Luther (1990) describe nudity as being used in a ‘sanitized’ context but propose that some nudity may cause arousal (not necessarily sexual arousal) and refer to previous studies commenting on negative effects. The authors propose that despite the increasing use of nudity in advertising, responses continue to be negative in many situations to such stimuli (1990:59) and especially so for women (1990:60). The studies of LaTour et al. (1990), Simpson et al. (1996) and Peterson and
Kerin (1977) all concur with the concerns of LaTour and Henthorne (1994) and Henthorne and LaTour (1995) that sex does not necessarily sell.

In addition, while the extant research indicates that there is stronger male approval of female nudity in advertising (Peterson and Kerin, 1977; Simpson et al. 1996) and that product congruence is important when using a nude model in advertisements (Simpson et al. 1996) Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau (2002) aim to offer further perspectives on female nudity in advertising. While Gilly (1988) notes that little international research has been undertaken Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau (2002) aim to explore and describe in depth women’s reactions to nudity in advertising in a different national context. Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau (2002:89) find five themes emerge from their data; the denial of women to admit they are shocked by the ads, the representation of women and of nudity, sexual content, congruence with the product and the importance of aestheticism and nature. As Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau (2002) note there is some consistency here with the results of Reichert and Ramirez’s (2000) study. In calling for future research Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau (2002) suggest that further studies should include men.

The preceding review demonstrates that there has been detailed research into sex roles in advertising, more research into attitudes towards advertising (in terms of the advertisement, product and company/brand), further, academics have looked at nudity within the context of sex appeal, provocation and arousal in advertising. However, much of this research has been conducted in a single country, often using non-representative samples and usually within large, homogenous and heterosexual communities.

**RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN**

The aim of this research is to explore and describe attitudes towards nudity in advertising in other previously ignored and understudied research contexts, using samples designed to explore and describe wider groups and contexts than those that simple convenience samples can provide and from broader social and cultural groups.
In this regard, a focus group approach was considered a suitable means of collecting data. Focus groups provide the exploratory research design needed, allowing for the deeper exploration of people’s opinions (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999) and a rich and intimate data (Oakley, 1981). Particularly important in the research was not to lead the groups and allow them to steer their own conversations, focus groups provided an excellent vehicle for this (Malhotra, 2000). Once an appropriate method was chosen it was felt that the dynamics of the groups were of key consideration.

In order to achieve the aim of the study and overcome limitations in extant research it was decided that the sample should represent a wide group of people with varying gender, sexuality, age and occupations. In total 22 focus groups of varying size were carried out with 54 participants involved, including a wide range of male, female, straight and gay respondents. In order to overcome issues of respondents behaving in a different or inappropriate manner due to the construction of their group (see Morgan, 1997) the groups also consisted of varying types. Some groups consisted of members of the same sex, others opposite sex or third with partners (both in gay and straight relationships). All respondents were assured confidentiality and given pseudonyms. The group sizes were small to ensure that the participants were not intimidated by the subject matter or talking about sensitive issues among a large group of strangers. In the pre-tests group discussions took approximately 30 minutes and this was felt to be a comfortable length of time, however, the groups were allowed to continue their discussions until they felt that they had covered all issues with each advertisement. This meant that in practice the groups took between 30 and 90 minutes. Morgan (1997) argues that groups can include low or high levels of moderation. A low level of moderation was considered appropriate to allow the groups to fully explore and describe their reaction to each advertisement. Furthermore, as Merton et al. (1990) suggest this also allows group to introduce ideas that the researcher has not previously considered.

In order to explore issues of female nudity in advertising a series of advertisements were compiled to facilitate discussion. In preparing the advertisements to be used two issues were of key consideration,
content of the advertisements and sourcing of the images. Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau (2002) defined nudity very clearly within their study and elected to use advertisements that included images of women with bare breasts and/or bare buttocks exposed. In order to allow comparison it was decided to use a similar approach in the UK study. After consideration, it was deemed appropriate to use images of sole females within the study, allowing for further parallels with Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau (2002). This was with the exception of one advertisement that contained two people but was included on the basis that it contained frontal pubic nudity, obviously rarely seen in mainstream advertising.

In order to use a representative sample of advertisements containing female nudity, all advertisements featuring sole nude females were gathered from a variety of UK magazines over a two month period. These magazines included those targeted to all sample segments. According to Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau’s guidelines (2002:89) the advertisements were sorted on the basis of product congruence and level of overt sexual content. On this basis the advertisements were narrowed down to a set of ten advertisements. Within the focus groups participants were allowed to peruse the material at their leisure moving backwards and forwards through the material as ideas came to mind. Upon completion of the focus groups the data were coded using open, axial and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

FINDINGS

This study attempts to explore and describe attitudes toward nudity in the UK environment. It does this using a comprehensive sample selection of gay and straight men and women in the UK research context. The findings are broken down into three key areas; opposite sex approval, sexual vs non-sexual nakedness (incorporating definitions of femininity) and product congruence.

Opposite Sex Approval

During data analysis opposite sex approval emerged as highly important. Two issues were important here, first the notion of opposite sex approval and second, how the model’s gaze was important to opposite sex
approval. First, ‘opposite sex approval’ constitutes a useful generic term in categorizing reader reaction to opposite sex model nudity. In this regard, there is an implication in extant literature that men are more likely to find advertisements containing female nudity more appealing than women because they are more likely to find the women depicted in the material more sexually attractive (Peterson and Kerin, 1997). Similarly the concept can be reversed. This study was fortunate enough to have participants who have stated their sexuality in order to explore this area more fully. The data was particularly evident for gay women, gay men and straight men.

The gay women did appreciate the images presented to them. One participant, Alison (G, 35-44) commented on each of the advertisements in terms of how attractive she found many of the images, stating “that is tastefully done” and “it is beautiful”. By contrast, the advertisement taken from a key lesbian magazine was the piece that she was least impressed by “It is distasteful…. Too full on.” Furthermore, one gay female group Jackie (G, 25-34) and Rebecca (G, 25-34) were happy to comment on how appealing (or not) they found the images and also how they perceived others would find them.

Rachel: I don’t find that appealing.
Jackie: It wouldn’t make me buy it. They have sexy images of women, as far as the male market goes it will sell anything, it will sell a car… if it is appropriate to sell to women though”
Rebecca: Maybe it is just to make you remember the advert.
Jackie: They all have nice figures and things.

Upon reflection, Jackie and Rebecca suggest that lesbian models in lesbian magazines don’t have the “skinny and perfect” figures seen in other magazines where these women are “to appeal to men more really”. This supports Peterson and Kerin (1977) who note that female’s found the nude model in their survey least appealing and that male respondents were more impressed by the use of female nudity. It mirrors LaTour et al. (1990:60) who suggest that “the use of female nudity in perfume ads is significantly less effective for females than for males in the present study”.

By contrast, there was an expectation that the gay male respondents would be likely to find the advertisements least appealing because they are least likely to be stimulated by the nude female images
Edward (G, 16-24), Allan (G, 25-34) and Victor (G, 45-54) were clearly unimpressed by many of the advertisements featured. Their distaste did not seem to arise from a lack of appreciation of the physical attractiveness of the models “I like it because it is really simple and I love the way they have made her look almost like a Greek statue... I love the contrast, it works really well” (Allan). More as a comment on the total lack of morals of the advertising world “The eventual advert. We’ll get the ultimate one. The advert they want to make but they’d never be able to do it. It’s a woman’s face and she’s beautiful. The camera pulls back to her breasts. The camera pulls back and she sitting with her legs apart with two fingers there (gestures between his legs) and it just says drink Coke.” (Edward). Similarly Miles (G, 25-34), James (G, 25-34) and Reuben (G, 25-34) all described the images with favorable adjectives and did not seem to find them objectionable. “I quite like this one. I think it is quite feminine.” (James). These men used words like “sexy, feminine, pretty, sumptuous and natural” to describe the women and did not seem to admire the women any less or find them any less appealing than any of the other subject groups.

It would also be expected that straight males would make the most positive comments towards the advertisements, showing approval for the use of nudity in advertising. This was evident in certain circumstances, particularly in groups containing just straight males. Darrell (S, 16-24) commented about one advertisements “I wouldn’t mind her for my girlfriend” and Terry (S, 25-34) was quite lewd in his suggestion that he “would like to give her one”, in a straight male group charged with testosterone filled bravado. However, other straight men were not so forthright in their approval stating that “a little should be left to the imagination” in more than one group setting (John, S 45-54; Roger, S 35-44 and Martin, S 55-64).

This study gave the opportunity to explore who found the images more, or less appealing and to take into consideration the sexuality of the respondents. Indeed, completely unprompted to do so some of the groups commented directly on the sexual attractiveness of the advertisements to them and also how they felt other target groups may find the images sexually attractive. The extant literature (Peterson and
Kerin, 1977; LaTour et al., 1990) said that men find female nudity more appealing than women, however this data shows that sexuality and age affect these conclusions.

Second, analysis of the data demonstrated that the gaze of the model was important when evaluating an advertisement. Participants were keen to point out when looking at the image that they either liked or disliked the advertisement based on whether the woman depicted was looking at the viewer or looking away. This was extended by the participants to include when the woman’s body was pictured without including the face or head. The data suggests that the model’s gaze is important to a cross section of the population researched. It was noted by straight and gay respondents, both men and women. Within one gay male group Edward, Allan and Victor this was important for an image advertising shoes where the model was looking directly at the viewer “It is quite defiant. The facial expression, she is not doing the wide open body language, come hither or anything.” The issue arises again with a later advertisement “He is the one that is in control. The fact that you can’t see her face”. James and Miles (both gay) also comment on the use of the gaze commenting that in one image “the model is looking away, hiding her face” that “she has no face, dehumanizing” while in another she has a “strong gaze”. Again, these participants seem to approve more when the model is looking directly at the viewer.

Another gay male group (Russell, Monty, Stevie Ace, Richard and Elliott) commented a great deal during the interview on the “come hither” look of some models entering into debate about the expressions of the women. They also commented on how a model who “looked away” had greater anonymity and the final model was “nice and smiling”. Clearly this issue had become important to this group, without prompting from the moderator, to the degree where at the end they discussed it themselves:

Russell: How many of them didn’t have faces?
Elliott: Do you find it disturbing?
Russell: I just think it is a bit tacky really.
Elliott: 40% didn’t show a face, I think that does say something.
Russell: How many products show someone’s face?
Richard: But why were they even showing a person, do you know what I mean?

Reflecting further on the model who “looked away” in an image advertising cosmetic surgery this
was clearly important to several other groups. Georgina (S 25-34) and Paul (S 25-34) James and Miles (G 25-34) all commented on this posture of looking away, as did the gay male group Stevie Ace, Richard, Russell, Elliott and Monty. Additionally James and Miles were keen to note the medical textbook style of this particular image, an idea also posited by Snowy (G, 35-44) and Megan (G female, 16-24). Snowy and Megan entered into quite a discussion on this issue:

Snowy: You can see her ribs though. The way she is turning away from the camera, almost as if to protect her modesty.
Megan: Completely starkers
Snowy: No, that is the kind of pose you have in medical photographs. You know where like half a face is cut off. You turn away from the camera to stop it being personalized, it is not about the person.
Megan: It is not even vaguely sensual, sexy or nice. It is just a body.
Snowy: It is a product isn’t it? That happens to be a body, the product is her body. I think in this case you would really have to have an image of nudity. It could be anybody but the fact that she is turning away from the camera does protect her modesty and also the fact that she has got her hair tied back. They have gone out of their way to make this as not sexy and as practical as possible.

Snowy and Megan also remark on the facial expressions and gaze of some of the other models included in the portfolio, reflecting on the ‘Mona Lisa’ smile of one model. Similarly, Georgina (S, 25-34) observes other images, although she does contradict herself stating about one image “it doesn’t offend me because she is looking away” while with another “the good thing is the way she looks at you”. However, despite these contradictions the gaze and expressions of the models are clearly important to Georgina in her decisions about whether she approves or disapproves of the image. This is further exemplified with an advertisement that displays an image of a woman from the back with her bottom central to the frame. Georgina says “I just think that that is so in your face, right as arse level, in your face, you know what I mean” and later “The fact that your eye line is at her bottom level and there is no other place that you can look other than at her bottom really.”

The data clearly demonstrates that in accepting the nudity depicted in the advertisements participants are considering more than just the lack of clothing worn by the women. Participants are very interested by where the model is looking. There tends to be greater approval if the model is looking into
the camera. Participants are also disappointed if the model is depicted in such a way that you can’t see her face, for example when the frame only includes the lower half or if the image is concentrated on the bottom. This is consistent with Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau’s (2002:87) comparisons with art “Female nudity has always had symbolic meanings, from Eve’s nudity symbolizing the original sin to the Olympia by Manet, a prostitute with a direct glance”. It also concurs with Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau’s (2002) conclusion that their participants ‘need’ to see a face.

Definitions Of Sexual Vs Non-Sexual Nakedness And Femininity

Data analysis revealed that the groups had differing definitions of nudity when discussing the women in the advertisements. Where the dictionary defines nude as ‘naked, unclothed’ and naked ‘unclothed, nude, defenseless, bare, uncovered’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 1983) nudity meant more than just clothed or unclothed to these people in their responses. Groups were often describing the images presented to them as being “sexual or non-sexual nakedness”.

From the straight groups Georgina and Paul (both 25-34) discussed issues of how a naked image could be perceived as being sexual or non-sexual from the very first advertisement:

*Georgina:* I find it interesting that she is still wearing high heels and that makes it really sexual.  
*Paul:* Because you might be nude when you put your perfume on, nothing wrong with that, but you wouldn’t have your shoes on first would you?  
*Both:* It makes it a bit fishy.

And with a later advertisement:

*Georgina:* I think it is weird that they are trying to make it a sexual image. I think it is really half-hearted, especially, that is really like a flat boob. In a way it is kind of pointless. They should either have gone the whole hog and shown a bit more of the woman or they should not have bothered.

Dawn (S 45-54) and John (S 45-54) also discuss issues of non-sexual and sexual nudity. Here the conversations dwell on where an advertisement might be placed:

*Dawn:* Appropriate, wouldn’t offend anybody.  
*John:* you could put that one on a billboard or in a paper.  
*Dawn:* Or show it to your mother?  
*John:* Or show it to my mother.
With a later image:

John: That is a bit raunchy, you wouldn’t want to see that staring out from The Sun.
Dawn: Or be in the same room as your mother looking at it.

From a gay male perspective, Reuben (G, 25-34) again offers an interpretation of sexual and non-sexual nudity:

Reuben: It is not sexually aggressive but it is very sexual, perhaps in a more traditionally feminine way… It is sexy, it is fun, she isn’t making a direct sexual come-on I guess. She is just being sexy being herself.

James and Miles (G 25-34) talk about the appropriateness of nudity in some of the images, being concerned with if the image is gratuitous or not. Furthermore, Russell (G, 25-34) comments “I find the overt sexuality of this image a bit eeky” when discussing one of the images.

Interlinking with the notion of nudity as being sexual and non-sexual are the participants ideas of femininity and what was a good or bad image of a woman. Cleary the groups were interested in the shapes of the bodies portrayed within the advertisements. With one of the images the woman was pictured from below the chest and many of the groups expressed that this model looked like a mannequin and had “no life” but “great legs” (Debbie, S 45-54). Edward, Allan and Victor (gay males) were amused by advertising’s pursuit of the perfect body and even suggested in two cases that the images displayed may well be male bodies portrayed as those of women.

Edward: Why do they have to show you the breast, the arse is not enough?
Allan: Just in case anybody gets confused, to tell them that it’s not a bloke.
Edward: That is not always the case though.

The issue of male/female models came up later with Barbara and Caroline (G, 25-34) who even suggested that in one case “it could be a man with his bits tucked under” and that we were unable to tell because there was no chest to look at. Furthermore, Barbara was very specific in what parts of the body should be shown in order to demonstrate femininity and even sexual appeal. She suggested that straight males are now much more interested by pictures including female bottoms:

Barbara: Her bottom. It is supposed to be an advert for lingerie for women and it is very much pandering to the male sort of… they have this obsession with rap artists about women’s booties,
their bottoms, it is like men are becoming increasingly obsessed with bottoms more than breasts... I would much rather see a woman’s breasts than a woman’s bottom... you can’t tell the difference between a man, a breast says more femininity.

A further factor also appeared to be the “shape we should aspire to” (Paula, S, 25-34). Several women (in particular Paula, Emma, Louisa and Georgina) were very open in appreciating that the models were “airbrushed”, “have had curves shaved off”, “probably have spotty arses”. These comments tended to rise typically from the straight female community. Jackie and Rebecca (G, 25-34) commented that lesbian models were likely to be a different shape to models featured in straight magazines. What was interesting was that different groups independently concurred that the best body type was an athletic one; “the perfect body shape for the whole gym culture we are in, very hard bodied, toned woman, not necessarily sexy but...” (Ewan, S 35-44). Ann and Paula also comment on the athletic body type as being pertinent for women today, comparing one advertisement offering this shape “really like a male athlete” to another “a lot prettier, much more traditionally feminine”. This supports Joy and Venkatesh’s (1994:351) notion that:

Until the late 19th century, the slender body meant aristocratic status, but by the middle of the 20th century, in a culture of abundance, excess body weight began to be associated with moral inadequacy or lack of will. Today, the muscled body has become the symbol of the correct attitude”.

Participants seem in general agreement that femininity is defined by a “recognition of curves”. The models considered most feminine, and often most non-sexual are described as “nice, round, soft, warm, girl next door, happy, healthy and glowing” by the participants. The data implies that to evoke positive reactions from readers advertisements should portray non-sexual images of nudity. There should be a display of curves as consumers are skeptical of women’s bodies being used in advertising, they also seem to need assurance through these curves that these are not male bodies being used because they are more attractive. There is also a movement of opinion towards the athletic body as being the most approved of body shape, away from the ultra-slim ‘heroin chic’ seen in the 1990s.
**Product Congruence**

Analysis of the data led to product congruence as a key theme. Product congruence is where the respondents show greater approval of an advertisement because they feel the nudity is justified. The product is such that there is good reason to show a naked person (e.g. for underwear as it is worn next to the skin). Respondents were equally disparaging where they didn’t see a good link between the product and nakedness (e.g. a naked person holding do-it-yourself tools, Simpson *et al.*, 1996)

In support of extant literature product congruence became an important theme within this research, in particular when discussing one particular advertisement for bottled water. Allan, Edward and Victor (gay males) were particularly vocal about the very tenuous links between bottled water and nudity. Despite decoding the message in such a way that it was displaying the woman as a drop of water, or alternatively linking that humans are made up of a lot of water, this group were very annoyed by the use of a naked woman in this piece. Victor (G, 45-54) was considerably angered by the advertisement, suggesting that it was enough to stop him from purchasing such a product in the future should such an opportunity arise.

Similarly, several groups did not approve of the advertisement for a clothing brand featuring a model who was completely naked except for a white, lacey garment draped around her shoulders. The garment was described in a range of ways from lacy shawl, tiny shawl, scrap of lace, a scarf or a granny shawl. Some groups felt that the image would look better without it (Allan, Edward and Victor) but that it doesn’t really marry with a clothes shop (Jackie and Rebecca).

Groups were consistently critical of a jewellery advertisement that contained an image including a “pointless nipple”. Paul (S, 25-34) summed up feelings for this very well when he suggested “*again it's someone saying right lets get a naked woman in, it must be Thursday and we're stuck for ideas*”.

The advertisement that received the least criticism and seemed to be judged the most congruent with the product it was selling was for a body moisturizer. Participants appeared particularly interested in the fact that there was actually a hint of a flesh colored garment in this advertisement, possibly a thong. In
this instance, some people even considered that this was inappropriate, suggesting that the model should have been completely naked or that this small patch of garment should have been airbrushed out. In this example we see approval and disapproval (Charlotte and Jeanette, G 25-34):

Jeanette: Do you think that should still be there? The little thong?
Charlotte: No they should have definitely airbrushed that out.
Jeanette: At least you know her undercarriage is covered

Developing the notion of product congruence somewhat Georgina (S 25-34) and Ewan (S 35-44) talked about more than a congruence between the product and the nudity but that the nudity represented the brand in some way.

Georgina: I am not offended by it because it is a blatant reference to a logo. It is like imprinting a logo on your body. It is like people who have Nike tattooed on them. It is almost like your body is becoming part of the brand. It is almost desexualizing the person and that person is just a brand, you know. It just kind of takes away from the whole. I think that the model is selling (BRAND) as a kind of lifestyle option rather than as a particular element of clothing, bag or jewellery”

And in a different focus group:

Ewan: It is not to me a sexual advert in any way, it is the brand, it is the key thing. The viewer isn’t particularly sexualized.

As well as product congruence members of focus groups often debated who they felt the advertisements were aimed at. This was interesting because the groups were told that the advertisements were principally taken from glossy magazines. Despite the fact that most of them were taken from women’s monthly magazines there was a great deal of agreement that many of the advertisements were directed at men. As Wright (1986) suggested, consumers are now constantly concerned with trying to second guess marketers and work out how they are trying to influence us and affect our buyer behavior. Wright describes this as “Schemer Schema”. In particular we see this with Charlotte and Jeanette (G, 25-34) who comment upon perfume advertisements directed at men to buy for women, and a lingerie ad:

Charlotte: Again that is advertising for women and men so it wouldn’t necessarily jump out for a lesbian.
Jeanette: Well it is for straight people, that is fine, that is what I am used to.
Charlotte: We don’t know much different do we?
Alternatively from Jason (G 25-34):

Jason: I don’t think the advert should do anything for you. If it is not relevant to us. I think if the product is relevant to you as a woman, if they like that kind of underwear I think they will look at it. I think that you are likely to get some blokes look at it and have a bit of a chuckle about the strap line because they might find themselves in that position with a girlfriend, their wife or whatever… I suppose when you look at the target market in all of these it is really weird that they use women’s bodies to sell products to women as well as to men. I don’t know if that works in reverse format, do they use men’s bodies to sell products to women and men as well?

As in many of the studies cited within the literature review, product congruence was clearly important when considering nudity in advertising favorably. In their study Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau (2002) comment on how there is more nudity in advertising within France than within the UK. Perhaps this would lead the reader to think that French consumers would be more accepting of advertising where the product is not congruent than their British counterparts. Moreover, Tinkham and Reid (1988) suggest that there is greater product recall where there is a “natural” congruity between product and sexual appeal. Clearly, the data shows that British consumers are equally more accepting of advertisements containing nude females where they see a clear product congruence. However, how far the boundaries of congruency can be pushed is clearly open to debate.

Overall, the findings help to develop some of the wider issues already outlined in the existing literature. It is not enough to understand that men find advertisements featuring nude women more appealing than women and women find advertisements featuring partially clad men appealing while neither are stimulated by advertisements featuring naked men. These findings help to develop these ideas beyond these notions. The findings also provide greater depth in understanding what participants find sexual and non-sexual in advertisements and demonstrate that while product congruence is important ideas of product congruence are varied. In the conclusions some suggestions will be made about how useful this is for industry practice, as well as describing areas for further research.
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was designed to investigate attitudes towards female nudity in advertising in a number of previously under-explored contexts. A novel approach was to explicitly recognize the gender and sexuality of the participants involved. Second, in response to other studies that have exclusively focused on females (Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau, 2002) this paper has conducted in-depth research on both genders. Expanding on studies that have concentrated on a single national environment, this work contributes by examining the UK as an alternative perspective. The remainder of this paper is dedicated to the consideration of a range of contributions and their implications to both contemporary theory and practice.

First, a key contribution of this study is in refuting previous notions that men are more accepting of female nudity in advertising. Existing research has argued that men are more receptive to nudity of this type (Peterson and Kerin, 1977; LaTour et al. 1990). However, extant studies are limited in that they have not categorized the men and women sampled in the research to find out if they are straight or gay and there is little understanding of why men are more approving of female nudity. The implied assumption is because they find the images arousing. Existing studies do not investigate, specifically, the attitudes of straight men, gay men, straight women and gay women as this study does. The findings of this study suggest that such results may not be based on sexual attraction because some gay men approve of the featured model and approval of such advertisements, where a natural assumption would be that they would not. Similarly, this research provides mixed responses from gay women with some approving of the advertisements while others disapprove as much as, if not more so, than their straight female counterparts. In this sense it can be argued that, research that is more specific in categorizing it’s participants is required to ensure that general statements are not made about vast populations.

Although extant literature carried out in the USA suggests that men are more receptive to total female nudity than women and women are receptive to suggestively clad men (Simpson et al. 1996) this research contradicts those findings in a second iteration. This study suggests that nudity, specifically total
nudity, is not approved of. This could be reflective of changing attitudes towards nudity in advertising overall, or that attitudes towards nudity are less liberal in the UK. Certainly, Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau (2002) comment on French advertising containing greater nudity than that in other countries, for example the UK. This study was conducted in a different national setting to previous research that has most commonly been carried out in the USA and, more recently, France. These findings would certainly propose that in the UK context consumers are less appreciative of nudity in advertising and perhaps they reflect more a more prudish British stance?

This research found that the model’s gaze was important to respondents when making judgments about advertising. Indeed, it was important for the advertisement to show the model’s face and there was often a negative reaction when the image was cut off at the chest or neck. This supports the findings of Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau (2002) who describe “the need for a face” in a similar study. In agreement with Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau (2002) this research concludes that participants prefer advertisements that include a woman’s face and prefer the woman to be looking at the viewer in the pose describing these women as more assertive and finding women who look away more passive in contrast. Some participants linked the direct gaze of the one model to Manet’s Olympia and others made comments about art and how the advertisements were trying to reflect particular artists and art periods. Therefore, while this research supports existing findings on the “need for a face”, there may be clearer links here to theory developed on art rather than that in advertising (Schroeder, 2002).

The findings of this study concur with existing theories that consumers are more accepting of female nudity in advertising when they see a clear link between the product and the body. Specifically tested by Simpson et al. (1996), using excellent examples of body oil and a ratchet set the reactions of the participants clearly favor nudity used in a body oil advertisement. Mirroring the results of Simpson et al. (1996) this research found the greatest approval, from many groups, for an advertisement featuring body moisturizer. In particular participants commented that this was the most appropriate or best advertisement
in the collection. However, what did prove interesting was that while there was support for product congruence this was on the basis of a continuum of congruencies according to the inherently interpretive nature of consumer behavior. Furthermore, in some circumstances, as seen in Tissier-Desborde and Manceau (2002), some respondents were able to find greater congruence between product and nudity when they read the strap line of the advertisement.

This research develops theory on attitudes towards nudity in advertising in the gay community, previously ignored in research into attitudes towards nudity in advertising. Academics and practitioners are currently left to make assumptions about attitudes in this regard as previous research on nudity in advertising has only looked at consumers as a single homogenous group, or perhaps divided consumers by gender. Research exists on gay communities in advertising literature (see Stern, 1999 for a comprehensive overview), however as Stern (1999) suggests a great deal more research is required in this area. Grier and Brumbach (1999) evaluate the effect of advertising in non-target (gay) markets and many of the participants in this study were keen to note that they considered themselves non-target markets for such advertising. It is worthy of note that this paper did not intend to treat gay participants as non-target consumers, indeed gay targeted literature was searched as well as mainstream (heterosexual?) fashion magazines. However, in searching through a wide selection of key gay magazines little/no nudity was found in the advertisements therein. (There were nude images contained in the magazines, however, these images were found in the classified sections at the back of the magazines and were considered too explicit. It was only possible to include a single image from gay literature to the study. Furthermore, Burnett (2000) argues that general attitudes towards advertising from gay consumers are more negative. By contrast, the findings of this study were that many of the gay participants were very positive about the advertisements they were shown, despite being non-target viewers.

In conducting this study it is recognized that there are a number of limitations. This study makes no claims to be generalisable. It offers a broad sample of gay and straight participants. However, a sample
of 54 people is not considerable and further comparative studies may like to consider using larger numbers of participants. Similarly, there is an acknowledged age bias in the respondents used. However, this was deemed necessary because the magazines yielded greater examples of nudity from publications targeted at age groups up to 40 years old. Future work may like to cover a wider cross-section of age in order to compare responses by age as well as by sexuality. Unfortunately, the advertisement portfolio only contained images of white women. This was a concern when compiling the images, however, all of the images of nude women gathered for selection were white. Future studies may like to gather magazines over a longer period of time to overcome this flaw. Finally, male nudity is not analysed in this study. Research already exists examining this theme (Simpson et al. 1996), however there is clearly room for greater exploration of this issue. Unfortunately it was not possible to cover this within the remit of this study, not least because it was extremely difficult to find suitable images. During collection images containing both naked men and women were gathered so that a truly comparative study could be carried out. However, less than 6 images of men were found, perhaps due to legal regulations of what male anatomy may be shown in advertising. Future research may like to consider the approach Simpson et al.(1996) who created advertising images of naked men specifically for their work.

This research contributes to a growing theme in advertising literature. It is clearly important to ascertain attitudes towards nudity in advertising not least because academics suggest that advertising is reflective of attitudes in society, or perhaps more frightening societies attitudes are affected by advertising (Peterson and Kerin, 1977). Furthermore, if, as research suggests, at some level consumers are turned off by nudity and not turned on by it this will eventually lead to a complete contradiction of the common notion that sex sells. Future research is clearly required into these perplexing issues.
## Table 1: List of Participants (Pseudonyms used)

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sexuality</th>
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