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# Would you share that? How the intensity of violent and sexual humor, gender and audience diversity affect sharing intentions for online advertisements

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*Would you share that? How the intensity of violent and sexual humor, gender and audience diversity affect sharing intentions for online advertisements*

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**ABSTRACT**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to understand the effect of increasing the intensity of sexual or violent content on consumer responses to online video advertisements, with a particular emphasis on sharing intentions.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper uses a between-subjects experimental design across two studies using new to the world online video advertisements as stimuli.

**Findings** – Study 1 finds that increasing the intensity of sexual and violent humor improves advertisement effectiveness amongst men but leads to significantly more negative attitudes toward the advertisement and brand amongst women. Study 2 identifies gender and humor type as moderators for sharing intentions in the presence of audience diversity. While men are more likely to publicly share sexual and violent humor advertisements, social anxiety mediates intentions to share sexual humor advertisements in the presence of greater audience diversity.

**Practical implications** – The paper offers insights to practitioners regarding the use of risqué forms of humor as part of a digital marketing strategy.

**Originality/value** – Drawing on and extending benign violation theory, the paper introduces and verifies a theoretical model for understanding consumer responses to the use of risqué forms of humor in online advertisements. It identifies how audience diversity affects sharing intentions for sexual and violent humor-based advertisements on social media.

**Keywords** – Humor, Advertising, Social Media, Sharing, Facebook, Audience Diversity

## INTRODUCTION

Social media advertising is an ever-growing market. As of 2022, it is estimated that 4.62 billion people globally used a social media platform at least once a month, with an average time spent per day of 147 minutes (Statista, 2022). To capitalize on extensive usage, social media has become a key component of the advertising strategies of almost all consumer brands (Voorveld, 2019). However, social media is an extremely cluttered environment with advertisers searching for strategies to capture attention and generate engagement (Ashley and Tuten, 2015; Fransen *et al.*, 2015; Angell *et al.*, 2019). To cut through, marketers deploy increasingly risky strategies to persuade consumers to respond to their advertising, including the increased use of risqué and potentially offensive content (Huang *et al.*, 2013; Lee *et al.*, 2017).

One such strategy is the use of humor in online advertising, which has increased substantially in recent years (Spielmann, 2014; Weinberger *et al.*, 2017), with the types of humor employed changing substantially (Smith *et al.*, 2008; Yoon, 2016; Weinberger and Gulas, 2019). Violent humor has become more prominent (Brown *et al.*, 2010; Swani *et al.*, 2013; Yoon and Kim, 2014; Gulas *et al.*, 2019; Yoon *et al.*, 2021), as witnessed in the Snickers 'Betty White' advertisement depicting an old lady being body slammed to the floor going viral, Dollar Shave Club's online campaign, which included the depiction of men being tasered and forcefully punched in the crotch, and a Pepsi Max campaign depicting a man being electrocuted and thrown into the side of a trailer. The use of sexual humor is also on the rise (Das *et al.*, 2015; Sparks and Lang, 2015; Ivanov *et al.*, 2019). Recent examples include Volvo's depiction of happiness coming in the form of a phallic handbrake and Skittles' recent portrayal of a sex scene, exemplifying a stretching of boundaries regarding the use of sexual content in mainstream advertising.

Violent humor portrays ‘actual or threatening physical harm’ (Brown *et al.*, 2010, p. 49) while sexual content involves sexual innuendo (Lin, 1998), depictions of partial nudity (Alexander and Judd, 1978) and/or implied or tangible sexual behavior (Reichert, 2002). Both sexual and violent types of humor can enhance advertising effectiveness (Chan *et al.*, 2007; Beard, 2008a). However, there is no guarantee of positive reactions, which depend heavily on the nature of the audience; advertisements that create a positive impression with one group may seriously offend another (Yoon and Kim, 2014; Eisend, 2021; Yoon *et al.*, 2021). In this increasingly complex online arena, gender is one such audience-level variable that is frequently overlooked (Weinberger *et al.*, 2017; Mayer *et al.*, 2019). Gender has a direct effect on reactions to advertising (Weinberger *et al.*, 2017), and Swani *et al.* (2013), Yoon and Kim (2014), Warren *et al.* (2019) and Ivanov *et al.* (2019) establish that gender also plays a pivotal role in the mediation of perceived humor (PH) on attitudes towards advertisements and brands. However, despite the exponential rise in short-format video content designed for online social media advertising, most contemporary empirical studies on violent and sexual humor in advertising tend to be based on print advertisements, a very different environment compared to online video content (Ha and McCann, 2008).

The most popular social networking site (SNS) globally is Facebook with an estimated 2.91 billion active users worldwide (Statista, 2022). Facebook offers marketers the potential to reach their target audiences through viral marketing and electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), with advertisements organically shared through pass-along messages if users value the content (Ho and Dempsey, 2010). However, very few advertisements, including video-based ones on Facebook, go viral (Berger, 2013). To counter this, marketers often look to humor due to its ability to grab attention and users’ general willingness to share humorous content (Lee *et al.*, 2017; Lee-Burton *et al.*, 2019). Risqué humor, involving heightened sexual or violent content

may be relatively more successful at garnering attention (Kim and Yoon, 2014; Paramita *et al.*, 2021) but unanswered questions remain regarding the factors that affect users' willingness to share advertisements employing sexual and violent humor. Specifically, while sharing content on social media is becoming increasingly easy across multiple platforms and to wide ranging audiences (Fu *et al.*, 2017; Lee *et al.*, 2019; Yuan and Lee, 2021), such a strategy is not without risks. On the one hand, sexual and violent humor may create attention and sharing intentions in one audience, but create offence amongst others, damaging the associated brand (Yoon and Kim, 2014).

In summary, the literature on sexual and violent humor in advertisements focuses overwhelmingly on print materials and is not designed for digital research. For instance, there is a lack of attention to factors affecting the sharing of sexual and violent humor-based advertisements on social media and how this may be contingent on the nature of the audience. Within the digital marketing literature, there is extensive research on factors affecting the sharing of online content (Berger and Milkman, 2012; Tellis *et al.*, 2019; Sabermajidi *et al.*, 2020), as well as how users create and manage digital personas on SNSs (e.g., Oh and LaRose, 2016; Oeldorf-Hirsch *et al.*, 2017; Ranzini and Hoek, 2017; Zhu and Bao, 2018; Yuan and Lee, 2021; Aw *et al.*, 2022). However, little attention has been given to how the diversity of one's network (i.e., the range of audience types within the network, such as work contacts, family members, etc.) impacts on intentions to share online content. Audience diversity refers to "the diversity of people from different contexts within each user's network" (Kitirattarkarn *et al.*, 2022, p. 277). Consequently, audience diversity remains under-researched, with online audiences typically treated 'as a single entity, often under the umbrella term, "public"' (Marder *et al.*, 2017, p.211). As far as we are aware there is a lack of previous research on how audience multiplicity affects sharing intentions for sexual and violent humor-based advertisements on

social media. Thus, there is a lack of guidance to brand and advertising managers regarding the use of sexual and violent humor in a digital environment.

Drawing on benign violation theory, this paper addresses a gap in the literature concerning appraisals of humorous advertising in the presence of audience diversity and its impact on sharing intentions through two, sequential studies. Study 1 examines the impact of perceived offence (PO) and PH on the effectiveness of both violent and sexual types of humor in online video advertisements and by doing so, offers digital marketers' greater insight into the way in which men and women react to these two types of humor. Specifically, the study explores the implications of offence, and demonstrates that PO stemming from humorous content, whether sexual or violent, negatively impacts on attitude toward the advertisement (Aad), brand attitude (Ab), and purchase (PI) and sharing intentions (SI).

Study 2 investigates how sharing intentions differ between humor types in the presence of audience diversity, an important consideration for marketers on SNSs (Marder, 2018). A key finding is that whilst higher *intensity* sexual and violent humor is positively received by men, greater audience diversity lowers sharing intentions for sexual humor only. Women's evaluations are obverse in terms of perceived humor and offence, and women have lower sharing intentions regardless of the presence of audience diversity.

The next section introduces the conceptual framework which underpins the two studies and outlines the development of the hypotheses. Subsequently, the research methodology and results for Studies 1 and 2 are presented in turn, followed by a discussion of theoretical and managerial implications. The paper concludes with a reflection on limitations and suggestions for future research.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### ***Benign violation theory and humor***

Benign violation theory (BVT) integrates ideas from a variety of popular theories of humor including misattribution theory (Zillmann and Cantor, 1976) and theories of incongruity (e.g., Alden *et al.*, 2000; Woltman Elpers *et al.*, 2004; Galloway, 2009). BVT posits that three conditions lead to humor: (1) an appraisal of a violation, (2) appraisal of the violation as benign, and (3) the two appraisals occurring concurrently (Veatch, 1998; McGraw and Warren, 2010; McGraw *et al.*, 2012). According to BVT, a violation refers to anything that threatens one's sense of how things should be (Veatch, 1998). Such a violation could be the threat of physical harm, but also includes violations of social norms and practices (e.g., norms related to identity and how one thinks, behaves, and communicates) (McGraw and Warren, 2010; McGraw *et al.*, 2012; Warren and McGraw, 2016; Warren *et al.*, 2019).

Humor is an emotional response which results from an appraisal of something being funny (McGraw and Warren, 2010; Warren *et al.*, 2019). An appraisal of a stimulus (e.g. joke, situation, behavior) as humorous is thus the result of a psychological reconciliation of a violation of a social norm (McGraw and Warren, 2010), which is typically an incongruity or juxtaposition of events that do not usually occur together (Beard, 2008a; Beard, 2008b). Humor is, therefore, often an emotion of relief when an incongruity is resolved (Beard, 2008a). If a violation of a norm is perceived to be benign, the resulting emotion is positive in the form of humor (McGraw and Warren, 2010; Warren and McGraw, 2016; Warren *et al.*, 2019). Thus, BVT (McGraw and Warren, 2010) asserts that a perception of a stimulus as being humorous occurs when it is subjectively appraised as containing a benign violation of a social norm. Attempts at humor regarded non-benign are considered offensive (McGraw *et al.*, 2012).



Both violent and sexual humor contain such violations, which push the boundaries of what is perceived to be either benign (and thus, funny) or offensive in line with a social benchmark for acceptability (Warren and McGraw, 2016). Typically, the greater the violation of the social norm, the more humorous the psychological reconciliation will be (McGraw and Warren, 2010; Warren *et al.*, 2019; Paramita *et al.*, 2021). However, stronger violations of social norms are less likely to be perceived as benign, and thus offensive rather than humorous (Warren and McGraw, 2016; Gregory *et al.*, 2019). Increasing the intensity of sexual and violent humor therefore, according to BVT, has the potential to lead to higher payoffs (being funnier, greater cut through) but also greater risks of offending. This has implications for the use of humor in advertising.

As the use of humor becomes ubiquitous, advertisers are increasingly deploying riskier strategies to stand out from the clutter of competing messages (Weinberger *et al.*, 2017). This includes the frequent use of content that pushes the boundaries of acceptability (Yoon, 2016). Specifically, sex, violence, and other offensive themes to create humorous content are more commonplace (Gulas *et al.*, 2010; Swani *et al.*, 2013; Kiefer, 2020), and levels of offence tend to be higher when advertisements contain norm violations, (Christy, 2006). As marketers use increasingly risqué content in their online advertising strategies, there is a need to understand how the *intensity* of violent and sexual humor impacts on the effectiveness of advertisements and how this might vary between men and women and their appraisals of norm violations in advertising content.

Table 1 summarizes recent studies of sexual and violent humor. It details how previous work identifies differences between men and women in response to sexual and violent humor. However, previous work pays little attention to perceived offence – when norm violations are

not regarded as benign. Moreover, there is a lack of consideration of sharing intentions for sexual and violent humor-based advertisements, which is particularly important in a social media environment, as well as how audience diversity may affect such sharing intentions. These gaps in the literature inform the development of our hypotheses.

### **Table I about here**

## **HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT**

### **Violent and sexual humor in advertising and gender**

Social conditioning and biological differences between men and women offer a theoretical lens for explaining why the use of sexual and violent content causes a differential evaluation towards advertisements. Social conditioning of gender identity starts at a young age (Yoon and Kim, 2014). Broadcast advertising and wider media targets girls with more sensitive emotional content, whilst boys engage with more aggressive content, for instance through character portrayals (Campenni, 1999). Such socialization at a young age works to *mold* perceptions towards aggression and violence in advertising experienced in adulthood (Swani *et al.*, 2013).

Social conditioning enforces gender identities, with stereotypes and expectations about the meaning of gender embedded within social institutions, such as workplaces and the family (Meyers-Levy and Loken, 2015). Gender as a social construct often divides men and women based on pre-set social requirements to conform to heterosexuality, leading to further institutionalization of masculine sexual dominance and feminine sexual submission (Cooper, 1989). These stereotypes shape portrayals of gender in advertising (Goffman, 1979; Sengupta and Dahl, 2008; Eisend *et al.*, 2014), with male characterizations more closely allied with aggression, protection, dominance and forcefulness (Swani *et al.*, 2013; Yoon and Kim, 2014).

In contrast, depictions of women are more closely associated with motherhood and caring (Goffman, 1979; Das *et al.*, 2015).

In relation to understanding gender-based differences to violent humor, Zillman and Cantor (1976) argue that people often exhibit an initial inability to discern what is funny about a malevolent action such as violence: the actual suffering of the victim (the violation), *or* the relief generated when they realize it is just a joke (the appraisal of the violation as being benign). The latter tends to prevail once the social norm violation (or offence) is resolved, with the viewer feeling permitted to enjoy the suffering free of offence, guilt or anxiety (Yoon, 2016).

Empirically, Yoon and Lee (2019) found significant differences between men and women in terms of their responses towards humorous advertisements. As men are typically less offended by depictions of violent acts, they tend to be more permissive of violence (Weinberger *et al.*, 2017), suggesting that a violence based violation of a norm is more likely to be regarded as benign by men. Men also tend to enjoy humorous advertising at a more general level than women (Beard, 2008b), especially if it has sexual (Das *et al.*, 2015; Mayer *et al.*, 2019) or malicious content (Smith *et al.*, 2008). Thus, through social conditioning, violent and sexual based humor attempts in advertising are more likely to be regarded as a benign violation by men than by women.

Therefore:

***H1:** For higher-intensity violent humor based social media advertisements, attitude towards the advertisement will be more negative (H1a), attitude towards the brand will be more negative (H1b), purchase intentions will be lower (H1c), sharing intentions will be lower*

*(H1d), perceived humor will be lower (H1e), and perceived offence will be higher amongst women than amongst men (H1f).*

***H2:** For higher-intensity sexual humor based social media advertisements, attitude towards the advertisement will be more negative (H2a), attitude towards the brand will be more negative (H2b), purchase intentions will be lower (H2c), sharing intentions will be lower (H2d), perceived humor will be lower (H2e), and perceived offence will be higher amongst women than amongst men (H2f).*

### **Perceived humor and offence**

What if no one laughs? Attempted humor differs from perceived humor (Swani *et al.*, 2013; Warren *et al.*, 2019). That is, humorous content is only effective if the receiver perceives it to be funny, regardless of intent (Beard, 2008b). Perceived Humor (PH) is important to advertisers as it positively affects advertisement liking, as well as improved brand appeal and purchase intentions (Weinberger and Gulas, 1992; Eisend, 2018; Yoon, 2018; Warren *et al.*, 2019).

Swani *et al.* (2013) discovered that violations of social norms directly affect PH in the case of violent advertisements. They found for higher-intensity violent advertisements, when the violation of a social norm is perceived to be too severe, it leads to a decrease in PH, and more negative Aad. This is consistent with BVT, PH being the resulting positive emotional response when a norm violation is considered benign (McGraw and Warren, 2010). However, the relationship between offensive content and PH is nuanced, in that humor can ‘mask’ offensive themes (Gradinaru, 2015; Förster and Brantner, 2016). Regarding advertising effectiveness, we assume PH mitigates the negative impact of offensive content in a similar manner regardless of gender, so that:

**H3:** *Perceived humor mediates the negative effect of perceived offence on attitude towards the advertisement (H3a), attitude towards the brand (H3b), purchase intentions (H3c), and sharing intentions (H3d).*

The model underpinning H3 proposes that PO has a negative effect on Aad (c') and PH has a direct positive effect on Aad (b). While PO has a negative effect on PH (a), the model proposes that the negative effect of PO on Aad through PH will be reduced (ab) (Figure 1). The model proposes the same mediation process for Ab, PI and SI as for Aad.

**Figure 1 about here**

### **Self-presentation, audience diversity and sharing intentions**

Self-presentation refers to the act of managing impressions one wants to instill within others based on their perceived expectations, standards and values (Goffman, 1978). While several authors employ BVT to explain an *individual's* response to humor in advertising in isolation (McGraw and Warren, 2010; Warren and McGraw, 2016; Warren *et al.*, 2019; Paramita *et al.*, 2021), no study has yet considered BVT in relation to self-presentation in the presence of audience diversity. The consideration of how the nature of the audience affects responses to the use of humor in advertising is particularly important in public online settings such as SNSs. While SNSs, such as Facebook, provide a particularly rich platform for self-presentation (Bareket-Bojmel *et al.*, 2016), the segregation of how one presents oneself to different audiences is complex. SNSs collapse multiple audiences into single contexts and make it difficult for people to separate audiences as they would in offline face-to-face domains which are often easily segregated by time and place (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). For example, in an

offline setting, a professional identity presented to work colleagues in an office is separated in time and space to a vivacious character that might be shown to friends on a night out (Goffman, 1978).

While Facebook users may want to share content which they perceive to be humorous with friends as an expression of their fun and outgoing persona, the presence of audience diversity may inhibit their intentions to share such content due to self-presentation concerns among audiences where the sharing of such content might negatively impact on the impression they wish to portray to those audiences. Thus, one may be comfortable sharing sexual and violent content with friends, but not with colleagues or close family members who may not appraise norm violations in the same way. Yau *et al.* (2020) found audience diversity to impact on the sharing of content by acculturating international students on SNSs. For example, their participants revealed that they wanted to share photos of themselves in drinking establishments as these would be appreciated by friends of a similar age but because of their connection to family members and religious stakeholders in their SNS network, they held back. Thus, audience diversity within one's Facebook network will affect public sharing intentions. In particular, sharing behavior will be constrained by what the user perceives to count as a non-benign norm violation amongst the user's strictest audience (Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Marder, 2018). Therefore:

***H4:*** *Greater audience diversity in a Facebook user's network is associated with reduced intentions to share sexual (H4a) and violent humor based social media advertisements (H4b).*

*H5: Greater audience diversity in a Facebook users' network is associated with increased social anxiety felt by a user regarding sharing sexual (H5a), and violent humor based social media advertisements (H5b).*

According to self-discrepancy theory, individuals compare 'actual' and idealized versions of themselves, seeking to align their self-concept with personally relevant self-guides or standards (Higgins, 1987). Consequently, an emotive response arises if there is a discrepancy between the actual and idealized self. Research widely contends that emotion from a self-discrepancy is required to motivate a change in one's behavior (e.g., Mandel *et al.*, 2017; Marder, 2018). Without an emotional response, behavior remains unchanged as the self-discrepancy is insufficient. In a social setting, one emotional response to a self-discrepancy is anxiety (Higgins, 1987). Furthermore, the greater the anxiety felt from the discrepancy, the greater the need for a behavioral change to resolve the discrepancy. Connecting self-discrepancy theory with BVT, the initial appraisal of a norm violation as benign is an emotive response of the actual self. However, this may differ from what is evaluated as benign in relation to the idealized self. In the presence of audience diversity, the greater anxiety felt from the discrepancy between actual and idealized selves may alter whether violations of norms are appraised as being benign.

Audience multiplicity increases social anxiety as the more diverse the group, the greater the potential is for the emergence of discrepancies between the idealized and actual self. For instance, amongst only friends, a Facebook user may present themselves as a fun and outspoken individual, so that they will share, without anxiety, material consistent with this self-presentation. However, a Facebook group of both friends and work colleagues provokes greater social anxiety, as being an employee, as opposed to a friend, calls for a different presentation of the self, making the reconciliation of actions with contrasting audiences problematic. For

instance, the likelihood of fun and outspoken material, which is consistent with self-presentation as a friend, offending a professional self-presentation associated with work, is high. Prior work has provided support for the link between audience diversity and social anxiety within the context of acculturating international students (Yau *et al.*, 2020), and the ‘Liking’ of political content on Facebook (Marder, 2018). Following this logic, the more diverse an audience, the greater the level of social anxiety, reducing the motivation to share content on Facebook irrespective of the perceived humor of the content. Therefore:

*H6: Social anxiety mediates the relationship between audience diversity and intentions to share sexual (H6a), and violent social media advertisements (H6b).*

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This paper draws on two studies, keeping the number of conditions in each study manageable, with common stimuli. Study 1 tests H1 to H3, which draw on BVT to explain individual responses to sexual and violent humor. Study 2 extends this by considering how audience diversity and social anxiety affect sharing intentions for sexual and violent social media advertisements (H4 to H6). The remainder of this section describes each study in greater depth.

### **STUDY 1**

#### **Method**

A between-subjects,  $5 \times 2$  experimental design was employed. Independent variables were humor type (incongruity-resolution, higher-intensity violent, lower-intensity violent, higher-intensity sexual, lower-intensity sexual); gender (men versus women). Incongruity-resolution (IR) is the most widespread form of humor (Spielmann, 2014; Weinberger *et al.*, 2017), with plain silliness and absurdity being typical examples (Speck, 1991). It was used as a control in



the experiment for comparing with sexual and violent humor types. Dependent variables were PH, PO, Aad, Ab, PI and SI. Need For Humor (NFH), a trait that refers to an individual's tendency to seek out or generate humor (Cline *et al.*, 2003) was included as a control variable.

### *Sample and data collection procedures*

Qualtrics recruited 456 subjects from its UK panelists, who received a fee for participation. Gender was the key sampling unit, and the final sample consisted of 55% men. The age profile of subjects resembled that of the UK population with 20% of the sample aged between 18 and 34, 45.8% 35–54, and 34.2% aged 55+. Overall, 97.8% of the final sample were non-students. Subjects were assigned randomly to one of five advertisements (ad<sub>IR-control</sub>:  $n = 90$ , ad<sub>Sexual-Lo</sub>:  $n = 92$ , ad<sub>Sexual-Hi</sub>:  $n = 94$ , ad<sub>Violent-Lo</sub>:  $n = 91$ , ad<sub>Violent-Hi</sub>:  $n = 89$ ). After viewing the advertisement, subjects completed questions evaluating its content.

### *Stimuli*

New-to-the-world video advertisements, developed for online use, were employed. As real brands tend to work better than fictitious products in humorous advertisements (Weinberger and Gulas, 1992), we used the actual brand Sprite Zero, which possesses a high rate of awareness. To ensure high-quality stimuli, a professional filmmaker produced the advertisements, and a professional situation-comedy writer wrote the scripts. Professional actors portrayed two supporting characters and a professional comedian played the lead protagonist.

The format for each advertisement was adapted from Brown *et al.* (2010). The lower-intensity humor (Violent-lo) and higher-intensity (Violent-hi) advertisements were direct adaptations of

those of Brown et al. (2010), whilst the lower (Sexual-lo) and higher-intensity (Sexual-hi) advertisements were variations of the original to maintain consistency between all five versions.

Each advertisement begins with a projector on an office table and a male voice audible in the background. An office manager delivers a work-related presentation to two office workers (a man and a woman). The office manager throws a bottle of Sprite Zero (brand visible) between his hands while talking. The female actor follows the bottle's movement with her eyes while looking bored before the office manager eventually places the bottle on the desk. Each advertisement then uses a humorous play-signal, based on the premise that the woman is bored and in need of a break. This was an intentional fit, with Sprite strongly associated with refreshment (Mintel, 2022), and is consistent with the brand's key communication strategy used in its real-world advertising.

In the IR-control advertisement, the female office worker pulls a bear costume from under the desk and places it over her head. While making playful noises she slowly reaches for the bottle and grabs it before running out of the room. In the two sexual advertisements, the female office worker asks for a break. When her request is refused in the Sexual-lo advertisement, she grabs the bottle and approaches the office manager, saying "but you can help me take the top off" before walking out of the room. In the Sexual-hi advertisement, she says "but I'll take the top off." While doing so she removes the top of the bottle, a carbonated hiss is audible, and she suggestively looks the office manager up and down, before leaving the room.

In the two violent advertisements, the female office worker stands up and approaches the office manager. In the Violent-lo advertisement, she forcefully pushes the office manager, who shrieks, before grabbing the bottle and leaving the room. In the Violent-hi advertisement, the

female office worker forcefully places a waste bin on the manager's head and hits the bin, before grabbing the bottle and leaving the room. In the latter, the office manager falls to the floor incapacitated.

All five advertisements then cut back to the male office worker looking flabbergasted. The rear of the projector is visible (on the table) in a now empty office alongside a new bottle of Sprite Zero. The logo appears with the tagline 'How far would you go?', spoken by the female actor as it appears on the screen. For the IR-control, Sexual-lo and Violent-lo advertisements the office desk is empty. For the Sexual-hi advertisement a bra drops onto the table as 'How far would you go?' appears on the screen. Similarly, in the Violent-hi advertisement, wastepaper from the bin used in the violent act drops onto the table.

#### *Dependent measures*

For all dependent measures, normality and multicollinearity were considered and tested for providing satisfactory results within common thresholds (Field, 2018). Convergent validity was confirmed using a factor analysis with all items loading on their respective constructs as expected ( $p < 0.001$ ), with standardized loadings above 0.79. The average variance extracted (AVE) by each factor exceeded the 50% threshold recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Discriminant validity was confirmed as each factor's AVE was greater than the size of its squared correlation with all other constructs in the study. Unless otherwise mentioned, all measures were captured on seven-point Likert scales. PO, the degree to which a stimulus is regarded as offensive, was adapted from Adams *et al.* (2012): 'This advertisement makes me feel offended,' 'This advertisement makes me feel insulted' and 'This advertisement makes me feel upset.' The scale was reliable ( $\alpha = .93$ ). PH, the degree to which a stimulus is regarded as funny, consisted of the items: 'I found the advertisement humorous,' 'I found the advertisement

funny,' 'I found the advertisement playful,' 'I found the advertisement amusing' and 'I found the advertisement dull (reverse coded)' ( $\alpha = .95$ ) (Zhang, 1996). Aad was measured using a semantic differential scale with endpoints (dislike/like, bad/good, unfavorable/favorable and negative/positive) ( $\alpha = .93$ ) (Stafford, 1998). Ab ( $\alpha = .96$ ) was taken from LaTour and Rotfeld (1997). A three-item scale derived from Bower (2001) measured PI ( $\alpha = .94$ ), whilst a two-item scale taken from Chiu *et al.* (2007) measured SI ( $\alpha = .97$ ). A ten-item scale, introduced by Cline *et al.* (2003), captured NFH ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

## **Results**

An initial screening question checked subjects' attention towards the task. Directly after viewing their designated advertisement, they were asked to identify the focal brand (Sprite Zero). In total, 44 (9.8 percent) participants failed this check, selecting an incorrect brand from a list of options. They were removed from the subsequent Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) for scales comprising three or more items, which revealed the expected underlying patterns between measured variables and anticipated corresponding constructs.

### *Interaction effects of humor type and gender on advertising effectiveness*

To test H1 and H2, interactions between gender (male, female) and humor type (Violent-hi, Violent-lo, Sexual-hi, Sexual-lo), a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was performed with PH, PO, Aad, Ab, PI and SI as dependent variables. NFH was included as a control variable, but was non-significant (Wilk's  $\lambda = 0.992$ ,  $p > 0.01$ ). The Bonferroni correction was applied throughout ( $p < 0.01$  – Bonferroni corrected significance value =  $0.05/5$ ).

Both H1 and H2 were supported in our model ( $\lambda = 0.880, p < 0.01$ ). The interaction was mirrored in all the dependent variables, except for PI ( $p > 0.01$ ). The interaction effect was statistically significant for PH ( $F = 4.265, [9, 446], p < 0.01$ ), PO ( $F = 5.629, [9, 446], p < 0.01$ ), Aad ( $F = 4.223, [9, 446], p < 0.01$ ), Ab ( $F = 4.840, [9, 446], p < 0.01$ ) and SI ( $F = 3.801, [9, 446], p < 0.01$ ).

The Bonferroni correction was applied to account for the five conditions tested (thus accepted  $p < 0.01$ ). For the Violent-hi version, women were, as expected, less favorable towards the advertisement than men ( $M_{Women} = 2.77; M_{Men} = 4.23$ ) ( $t = 4.484, df = 87, p < 0.001$ ). Similar results were obtained for PH, PO, and SI (Figure 2). As such, only H2<sub>b</sub> and H1<sub>c</sub> were not supported. For the Sexual-hi version of the advertisement, women also reacted less favorably than men ( $M_{Women} = 3.18; M_{Men} = 4.47$ ) ( $t = 3.674, df = 92, p < 0.001$ ). Consistent results were found for PH, PO, Ab, PI and SI (Figure 2). Thus, H2 is fully supported.

**Figure 2 about here**

For the Sexual-lo advertisement, women ultimately reported lower Aad ( $M_{Women} = 3.38$  versus  $M_{Men} = 4.05$ ), but this difference was non-significant ( $t = 2.025$ ) following the Bonferroni correction. No differences were observed between men and women for the Violent-lo version of the advertisement.

*The mediating effect of perceived humor on offence and the role of gender*

H3 proposes that PH mediates the effect of PO on Aad, Ab, PI and SI (Figure 1). To test H3, four mediation models were specified using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2013). We report bias-corrected estimates with 95% confidence intervals (CI) from 5,000 bootstrapping re-samples. For Model 1, the dependent variable was Aad, the predictor variable was PO, and the mediating

variable was PH. In Models 2, 3 and 4, the only change was the dependent variable, which became Ab, PI and SI in that order (Table 2).

**Table II about here**

The results of the mediation analysis show a significant negative direct effect (path  $c'$ ) of PO on Aad [ $\beta = -.12$ ; CI<sub>95%</sub>: from  $-.19$  to  $-.06$ ]. The coefficient of path  $a$  [ $\beta = -.45$ ; CI<sub>95%</sub>: from  $-.54$  to  $-.35$ ] shows that PH has a positive effect on PO. The PH coefficient of path  $b$  ( $\beta = .77$ , CI<sub>95%</sub>: from  $.72$  to  $.83$ ) shows that PH also has a positive effect on Aad. The indirect effect (path  $a*b$ ) of PO on Aad through PH is significant [ $\beta = -.34$ ; CI<sub>95%</sub>: from  $-.43$  to  $-.26$ ]. In other words, PH has a meaningful mediating effect, reducing the negative effect of PO on Aad. Similar results were obtained for PI and SI. However, there was no mediating effect of PH on PO for Ab. Therefore, H3a, H3c and H3d are fully supported.

Finally, for completeness, PROCESS Model 59 was used to examine the moderated mediation effect of gender. That is, whether gender moderates the direct and in-direct effect of PO on Aad through PH. The results show that gender plays a moderating role in the direct effect of PO on Aad [PO\*Gender;  $\beta = -.22$ ; CI<sub>95%</sub>: from  $-.35$  to  $-.09$ ]. For women, the negative direct effect of PO on Aad is significant [ $\beta = -.24$ ; CI<sub>95%</sub>: from  $-.33$  to  $-.15$ ]. While for men, there is no direct effect. For both men [ $\beta = -.27$ ; CI<sub>95%</sub>: from  $-.41$  to  $-.15$ ] and women [ $\beta = -.37$ ; CI<sub>95%</sub>: from  $-.47$  to  $-.27$ ], the indirect effect is equivalent. Similar results were obtained for Ab. For SI and PI, the negative effect of PO is not moderated by gender. The results indicate that the mediation effect of PH on PO is moderated by gender with the mediating effect of PH being stronger amongst women compared to men.

In summary, Study 1 identifies significant differences between men and women regarding sharing intentions, especially in the case of sexual humor. As an advantage of social media advertisements is the potential for secondary audiences viewing the content through sharing, Study 2 uses the same stimuli as Study 1 to consider how sharing decisions are affected by self-presentation and social anxiety in the presence of audience diversity.

## **STUDY 2**

### *Method*

In Study 2, only the high intensity sexual and violent versions of the advertisements used in Study 1 were employed in a  $3 \times 2$  experimental design. The IR version of the advertisement was again used as a control. Dependent variables were audience diversity, social anxiety, and sharing intentions (publicly, privately, and within groups). Need for Humor (NFH), Perceived Humor (PH), and Perceived Offence (PO) were included as control variables.

### *Sample and data collection procedures*

Prolific recruited 553 subjects from its UK panelists, who received payment for their participation. Being active on Facebook was the key sampling unit, as was gender with the final sample consisting of 49% men. The mean age profile of subjects was 32.7 ( $SD = 11.3$ ). Subjects were assigned randomly to one of three advertisements ( $ad_{IR-control}: n = 184$ ,  $ad_{Sexual}: n = 184$ ,  $ad_{Violent}: n = 185$ ). After viewing the advertisement, subjects completed questions evaluating its content.

### *Measures*

*Sharing intentions* were measured in three ways: intentions to share advertisements publicly, within groups, and privately on Facebook. In the presence of lower audience diversity and

reduced anxiety, it is expected that in testing H4-6, sharing intentions will decline between doing so publicly and within groups, and within groups and private messages, as users feel freer to express their own opinion of the content. For each variation, intentions to share the advertisement were measured using three-item questioning on the likelihood that the participant would “share the advertisement” along a 7-point Likert scale (very likely/very unlikely). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  were  $>.95$  for each scale.

*Social anxiety* was measured by asking participants how they would feel if others saw that they had ‘Liked’ the advertisement publicly on their Facebook feed ( $\alpha = .92$ ). Adapted from Feldman (1995), and previously used by Marder *et al.* (2016b) and Marder (2018), a seven-point, four-item semantic differential scale was used with endpoints (unhappy/happy, relaxed/anxious, calm/tense, and not worried/worried).

*Audience diversity* was calculated using the lowest-common-denominator effect which follows that behavior is constrained by the standards of the strictest audience within one’s Facebook network of friends as a whole (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). In other words, the overall constraint of an audience in an online setting is the distance between the standards and values of the most lenient and strictest audience in one’s network. Given the present study focuses on differing types of content with the potential to cause offence, a liberality measure for audience diversity was used along a 7-point Likert scale (very liberal/very strict). The selection of audience types used was drawn from Marder *et al.* (2016a) and Marder (2018) which used the common denominator effect to measure audience diversity in the same field of research. A range for audience diversity within the sample was determined by subtracting the score of the most liberal audience from that of the strictest. A higher score on the scale represents greater audience diversity.



Several control variables were included, namely: *NFH* ( $\alpha = .80$ ), *PH* ( $\alpha = .89$ ), and *PO* ( $\alpha = .91$ ). *Age*, *number of Facebook friends*, *Facebook usage*, and *sharing frequency* were also included as control variables.

## **Results**

Like Study 1, a brand identification attention check was undertaken. Participants who failed the attention check were removed from the subsequent analysis ( $n = 39$ ). Participants who identified that they did not have an active Facebook account were also removed from the dataset ( $n = 12$ ). The sample consisted of 51.6% women, and each had on average 399 Facebook friends, and spent 188 minutes per week on the platform.

### *Hypothesis testing*

To test H4-H6, three moderated mediation models were specified using PROCESS Model 60 (Hayes, 2013) to examine the effect of gender and humor type on the relationship between audience diversity and social anxiety on intentions to share Facebook advertisements. The model was designed to test whether gender and humor type moderate the relationships between audience diversity and social anxiety on intentions to share publicly, within groups, and privately on Facebook (Models 1-3 respectively). We report bias-corrected estimates with 95% confidence intervals (CI) from 5,000 bootstrapping re-samples. For Model 1, the dependent variable was public sharing intentions, the predictor variable was audience diversity, and the mediating variable was social anxiety. The two moderators selected were gender ( $w$ ) and humor type ( $z$ ). In Models 2 and 3, the only difference concerned the dependent variable, which became intentions to share within groups (Model 2) and privately with individuals on Facebook Messenger (Model 3). *PO* and *PH* were selected as covariates. Figure 3 summarizes the model.

### Figure 3 about here

For the moderated mediation model (Figure 3), the results show a significant negative direct effect (path  $c'$ ) of greater audience diversity on intentions to share publicly on Facebook [ $\beta = -.15$ ;  $CI_{95\%}$ : from  $-.22$  to  $-.08$ ] (Table 3). The coefficient of path  $a$  [ $\beta = .31$ ;  $CI_{95\%}$ : from  $-.02$  to  $-.60$ ] shows that social anxiety has a negative relationship with audience diversity. The social anxiety coefficient of path  $b$  ( $\beta = -.46$ ,  $CI_{95\%}$ : from  $.24$  to  $.68$ ) shows that social anxiety also has a negative effect on intentions to share publicly on Facebook. The indirect effect (path  $a*b$ ) of audience diversity on public sharing intentions through social anxiety is only significant for men [ $\beta = -.26$ ;  $CI_{95\%}$ : from  $-.37$  to  $-.15$ ], with gender moderating the relationship between social anxiety and audience diversity. In other words, social anxiety mediates the higher public sharing intentions of men in the presence of greater audience diversity. Furthermore, by humor type, the moderated mediation of social anxiety on audience diversity only holds for sexual humor [Men\*Sexual;  $\beta = -.04$ ;  $CI_{95\%}$ : from  $-.07$  to  $-.01$ ]. For the violent humor-based advertisement, the indirect effect was insignificant. For women, there was no indirect effect for either sexual or violent humor further supporting the findings of Study 1.

### Table III about here

To validate the impact of audience diversity on intentions to share sexual and violent humor advertisements on Facebook and to gain additional insights into the impact of the control variables, a between-subjects MANCOVA was performed. The three variations of sharing intentions (publicly, within groups, and privately) were selected as the primary dependent variables, with social anxiety, PH, and PO selected as secondary dependent variables. Humor type and gender were selected as independent variables, and audience diversity was selected as a control variable along with the above control variables used in the moderated mediation

model. The Bonferroni correction was applied throughout ( $p < 0.02$  – Bonferroni corrected significance value =  $0.05/3$ ).

The interaction between gender and humor type for the dependent variables was significant ( $\lambda = 0.951, p < 0.01$ ). Audience diversity as a covariate was significant ( $\lambda = 0.952, p < 0.05$ ). The interaction was mirrored in dependent variables except for private sharing intentions within Facebook Messenger with individuals ( $p > 0.02$ ). The interaction effect was statistically significant for sharing intentions publicly ( $F = 8.309, [9, 446], p < 0.01$ ), sharing intentions with Messenger Groups ( $F = 5.225, [9, 446], p < 0.01$ ), and social anxiety ( $F = 5.726, [9, 446], p < 0.01$ ). PH ( $F = 6.734, [9, 446], p < 0.01$ ) and PO ( $F = 5.849, [9, 446], p < 0.01$ ) were also significant offering further support to Study 1.

For the Violent version of the advertisement, women reported lower public sharing intentions ( $M_{Women} = 1.41; M_{Men} = 1.88$ ) ( $t = 2.793, df = 183, p < 0.001$ ), and higher social anxiety than men ( $M_{Women} = 3.92; M_{Men} = 3.35$ ) ( $t = 3.219, df = 183, p < 0.001$ ). Sharing intentions within Facebook Messenger groups and individuals were both insignificant ( $p > 0.05$ ).

For the sexual humor advertisement, women also reported lower public sharing intentions ( $M_{Women} = 1.31; M_{Men} = 2.26$ ) ( $t = 4.916, df = 182, p < 0.001$ ), and higher social anxiety than men ( $M_{Women} = 4.72; M_{Men} = 3.495$ ) ( $t = 3.810, df = 182, p < 0.001$ ). Similarly for this advertisement, lower scores among women also carried for sharing intentions within Messenger groups ( $M_{Women} = 1.81; M_{Men} = 2.44$ ) ( $t = 2.901, df = 182, p < 0.01$ ), and intentions to share with individuals ( $M_{Women} = 2.11; M_{Men} = 2.80$ ) ( $t = 2.650, df = 182, p < 0.01$ ).

For the sexual humor advertisement, men reported higher social anxiety ( $M_{Sexual} = 3.87$ ;  $M_{Violent} = 3.35$ ) ( $t = 2.459$ ,  $df = 178$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), higher sharing intentions within Facebook Messenger groups ( $M_{Sexual} = 2.44$ ;  $M_{Violent} = 1.90$ ) ( $t = 2.851$ ,  $df = 178$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and higher private sharing intentions than they did for the violent humor advertisement ( $M_{Sexual} = 2.82$ ;  $M_{Violent} = 2.30$ ) ( $t = 2.065$ ,  $df = 178$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). While public sharing intentions were ultimately higher among men for the sexual humor advertisement ( $M_{Sexual} = 2.26$  versus  $M_{Violent} = 1.88$ ), the difference was non-significant ( $t = 1.656$ ).

## DISCUSSION

To cut through in a cluttered online media environment, advertisers increasingly intensify sexual humor within video advertisements (Sparks and Lang, 2015), believing that if sex sells, more sex sells better (Kiefer, 2020). The present study reveals, however, that the effectiveness of this strategy varies by gender. For men, turning up the intensity of sexual content increases attitudes to the advertisement and brand, as well as improving purchase and sharing intentions, while perceived offence decreases. For women, however, no such pattern exists, for whom increasing the sexual content of the advertisement increases perceived offence. The results thus extends the findings of Sengupta and Dahl (2008), which was based on print advertisements, to an online video environment - that men on average exhibit more positive responses to gratuitous sex appeals in advertisements than women.

Increasing the intensity of violent humor leads to less dramatic changes than the case of sexual humor, although for men it improves attitude to the advertisement, as well as PH and sharing intentions but not attitude to the brand and purchase intentions. For women, the use of Incongruity-resolution (IR) based humor, associated with silliness and absurdity, appears far more effective than using or increasing the intensity of either sexual or violent humor. This

supports notions that women generally prefer humor that is more whimsical in nature (Beard, 2008b; Swani *et al.*, 2013). For the IR-control, women's Aad and PH is significantly higher, and their PO significantly lower, in comparison to both the high and low intensity sexual and violent humor advertisements.

It is not just the type of humor but the quality of execution that matters. Specifically, the degree to which the viewer finds the advertisement humorous, mediates the effect of perceived offence on advertising outcomes. If viewers regard an advertisement as funny, then the negative effect of PO on Aad is significantly reduced. Similarly, PH reduces the negative effect of PO on SI. These findings are consistent with Gradinaru (2015) and Förster and Brantner (2016) who identified PH as having a masking effect on the offence caused by violent humor. The present research confirms these findings and further identifies that PH has a similar influence on PO in the case of sexual humor. This demonstrates that any adverse effects of violent and sexual content in advertisements can be reduced significantly if the audience finds them funny. This holds for both men and women.

Brand managers regard social media as a 'viral environment', often deliberately seeking to develop material that will be shared within personal networks (Berger, 2013), begging the question what factors affect sharing intentions for sexual and violent humor based online advertisements? In answer to this, Study 2 identifies that audience diversity and social anxiety matter, and that their effects vary by gender and whether the humor is sexual or violent in nature. Consistent with self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1978) and difficulties associated with maintaining competing idealized notions of the self in an SNS environment (Hollenbeck and Kaikati, 2012), we find that in the presence of audience diversity, social anxiety inhibits public sharing intentions for higher intensity sexual humor advertisements for both men and

women. In men, despite any increased intention to share high intensity sexual humor advertisements through increased perceived humor, social anxiety created through increased audience diversity reduces intentions to share sexual humor content. For higher intensity violent advertisements, the relationship between social anxiety and audience diversity does not apply for men.

While Study 1 indicates that men like more sexual forms of humor, Study 2 shows that despite this preference, men are sensitive to whom they will share such content with, regardless of their own perceived humor of the content. For women, as there is low perceived humor and high perceived offence as shown in Study 1, there is no intentions to share sexual humor advertisements explaining a lack of sensitivity to audience diversity in Study 2. The findings show that, although men prefer sexual over violent humor, their intentions to share sexual humor publicly are lower due to concerns about who they are sharing the content with. However, the social anxiety felt by men in the presence of a public audience does not carry into sharing intentions within Messenger Groups and for private messages.

### **Theoretical contributions**

BVT suggests that humor occurs when the appraisal of a violation of a norm is deemed benign (funny) rather than offensive (Beard, 2008a; Beard, 2008b; McGraw and Warren, 2010; Warren and McGraw, 2016; Warren *et al.*, 2019; Paramita *et al.*, 2021). BVT is useful in relation to online advertising as it helps explain how the success of humorous advertisements depends on violating norms in a benign manner. What counts as a benign violation of a norm will vary culturally and depends on social conditioning (Veatch, 1998). In applying BVT to two specific types of humor, using violations based on sexual and violent content, we identify how what

counts as a benign violation of a norm varies by gender, with significant differences between men and women regarding perceived offence and advertisement effectiveness.

Furthermore, we extend BVT through theorizing how audience diversity affects appraisals of norm violations and content sharing behaviors in an online setting, particularly on SNSs. Specifically, Study 2 demonstrates that regarding sharing intentions, a SNS user will consider not only whether they consider the advertisement a benign violation of a norm but also whether their audience will make a similar appraisal. The greater the degree of audience diversity, the more likely it is that a discrepancy between a user's appraisal of a norm violation will differ from another viewer of the same stimulus. A key contribution, therefore, is that in the presence of audience diversity, even when appraisals of norm violations are deemed to be benign (or funny) by men, there is still a reluctance to share such content. In the present study, sexual humor is evaluated as a more sensitive violation of social norms when compared to violence. Consequently, the evidence provides the basis for extending BVT to conceptualize how assessments of whether others are likely to regard a norm violation as benign affects user behaviors.

The extension of BVT is relevant to the eWOM literature, where research on the intentions of SNS users to share advertising content is scarce. Several studies examine sharing intentions on SNSs, but few have examined intentions to share differing content types with the same emotional appeal. Furthermore, while earlier work examined motivations to share content generally in a public setting, the findings of the present study identify differences in the ways content is shared on SNSs, both publicly and within closed groups, consistent with BVT and considerations of audience diversity, providing a more complete picture of how content is shared through eWOM processes.

Lastly, our research contributes directly to work by Information Systems scholars examining the impacts of audience diversity with online networks (e.g. Marder et al 2018; Binder et al 2009). Whereas prior work established that self-censorship occurs (i.e. people don't post content perceived to be offensive to one or more audiences), we extend that in the presence of diversity, users may indeed still communicate such offensive content in private channels by strategically switching sharing within a technology to a private means to avoid the gaze of multiple audiences simultaneously (e.g. choosing Facebook Messenger over a public Facebook post). Moreover, our results are supported on sites where multiple audiences are present (e.g. Facebook), users may switch to different social technologies altogether to share risqué content with lower audience heterogeneity (e.g. Snap, TikTok).

### **Implications for practitioners**

The findings offer valuable insights for advertisers, detailing the trade-offs involved in the use of sexual and violent humor. The results indicate that where advertisers wish to use humor for products targeted at women, IR based humor is the best strategy. Furthermore, for products targeting both men and women, the results identify that the use of IR humor is overall a safer strategy, but one that may be less effective with men compared to women.

Products targeted at men can benefit from using sexual or violent humor, with better results garnered from turning up their intensity. However, there are drawbacks. Few products solely target men (Wolin, 2003) and while higher levels of sexual and violent content are appealing to a male audience, it draws adverse responses from women. Even if a product targets only men, in an era of sharing advertisements online and heightened media and industry scrutiny (Åkestam *et al.*, 2017), the notion that women would never view the advertisement appears



unrealistic. For sexual humor-based advertisements, greater audience diversity reduces men's public sharing intentions, curbing eWOM. For violent humor-based advertisements, audience diversity does not deter men from sharing publicly, so it is more likely to reach unintended audiences such as women as identified in the present study.

When making decisions about the use of sexual and violent humor, brand managers should also consider potential spillover effects. Many multinational companies produce multiple versions of very similar products, targeting different audiences (e.g., Coke Zero – men and Diet Coke – women). If Coca-Cola, for example, employed highly sexualized or violent humor in its advertisements for Coke Zero, when viewed by women, it is likely to hurt the Diet Coke brand. In other words, perceptions towards one product line stemming from such content spills over and affects other lines, and the parent brand (Logkizidou *et al.*, 2019).

In understanding outcomes, the study demonstrates that PO from humorous content, whether sexual or violent, negatively affects both Aad and PI. Digital marketers should be aware of these negative consequences and factor the potential for 'offence' into all levels of decision-making. On a more positive note, if advertisers engage with offensive themes, be it sexual or violent, but audiences find the advertisement funny it can partially mitigate any negative effect on attitude to the advertisement as well as sharing and purchase intentions. Moreover, without the mitigating influence of perceived humor, the offence caused by an attempt at humor using sexual or violent content has no justification. In the same way that stand-up comedians pilot, test and hone their routines in small-scale venues before embarking on major tours, advertisers should take great care to pre-test audience reactions to attempts at humor. Not doing so could have serious implications for advertising effectiveness.

A final insight is that when adopting risqué humor, practitioners should carefully consider the relative merits of sexual and violent humor in their advertising. Both gain men's attention and increased Aad and PI, but the impact of peer-to-peer sharing on SNSs differs between the two types of humor. On the one hand, men are less likely to publicly share sexual humor advertisements in the presence of audience diversity meaning the reach of such content through sharing may be lower. On the other hand, for violent humor advertisements, sharing intentions are not inhibited by greater audience diversity, suggesting that it will be relatively easier for such advertisements to go viral. However, this comes with the drawback of being negatively received by secondary audiences. Overall, for most brands increasing the intensity of sexual humor in an advertisement carries more risks than potential advantages.

### **Limitations and future research**

The studies presented in this paper have several limitations. They both address consumer responses at one point in time only and fail to capture long term behavioral effects. There may be other important behavioral effects, beyond sharing intentions, which we do not capture in this research. For instance, do viewers offended by sexual and violent humor post negative comments or unfollow a brand on social media?

The present study found women's brand attitudes to be more sensitive to increasing the intensity of sexual humor when compared to violent humor and generally sexual humor works better with men. However, as indicated by Mayer *et al.* (2019) further research on gender and sexually humorous advertising is warranted, especially in digital environments. For instance, does the gender and sexual orientation of protagonists affect outcomes? A further consideration is how long the masking effect of perceived humor (Warren *et al.*, 2019) on offensive content lasts. Specifically, do levels of offence change after multiple exposures to the advertisement?

Future research would benefit also from including cultural dimensions, particularly when assessing the role of gender on humor and offence. Research suggests that the uses and appreciations of humor between some Western cultures, such as the UK and USA are comparable, yet vary significantly from others (Toncar, 2001; Beard, 2008b). Hatzithomas *et al.* (2011), for example, found a significant difference in humor appreciation between UK and Greek audiences using Hofstede's (2001) cultural values model. Likewise, Gregory *et al.* (2019) identified humor appreciation differences between the USA and China, indicating that a comparison between the effectiveness of sexual and violent humor based advertisements on USA- and China-based social media platforms such as WeChat might offer valuable insights into consumer responses. Hofstede's power-distance and masculinity/femininity cultural dimensions could potentially explain cross-national variations in what counts as a benign norm violation.

Lastly, we focused on content sharing through posts and private messages, both having a high level of permanence (i.e, they remain unless intentionally deleted). Future research should consider ephemeral sharing, that which disappears after a certain period such as Instagram or Snapchat stories as a strategy for sharing risqué content in the face of audience diversity.

**Table I: Recent studies of sexual and violent humor in advertising**

Study	Humour Type	Response Variable	Sample	Key finding(s)	Consider gender differences	Measure perceived humor	Measure perceived offence	Consider different types of SI	Consider audience diversity
Brown et al. (2010)	Violent	Aad, Ab, message involvement, pass-along probability	n=162; n=157, Australia, adults	Comedic violence influences levels of ad interest, Aad, pass-along activity and brand memorability.	No	Yes	No	No	No
Gulas et al. (2010)	Violent	Analysis of Super Bowl ads over three decades	Super Bowl ads from 1989, 1999, 2009	Ads depicting violence towards men are increasing decade on decade.	No	No	No	No	No
Blackford et al. (2011)	Violent	Longitudinal analysis of Super Bowl commercials over a five-year period	Super Bowl telecasts for 2005, 2007, 2009	Ads that combine humour and violence are more popular and the combining of humour and violence is increasing year on year.	No	No	No	No	No
Swani et al. (2013)	Violent	Aad, Ab, brand familiarity	n=81; n=254, USA, adults	Violations of social norms and gender influences responses to comedic violent ads.	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Das et al. (2015)	Sexual	Aad, Ab, PI	n=162; n=301, Netherlands, adults	Sexual ad appeals outperform non-sexual ad appeals including humor.	No	No	No	No	No
Sparks and Lang (2015)	Sexual	Aad, post-auricular reflex, orbicularis oculi reflex	n=81; n=77, USA, adults	Both sexy and humorous appeals positively influence responses to unpleasant content.	No	Yes	No	No	No
Yoon and Kim (2014)	Violent	Aad, Ab, PI, SI	n=390; n=400, USA, adults	PH, Aad, Ab mediate between comedic violence and PI and SI. Gender influences responses to comedic violence.	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Gradinaru (2015)	Violent	Content analysis of YouTube ad comments	n=812, UK, adults	Cultural contexts influence PH in comedic violent ads.	No	No	No	No	No
Yoon (2016)	Violent	Aad, Ab, PI, SI	n=390, USA, adults	Norm beliefs influence responses to comedic violent ads.	No	Yes	No	No	No
Lee <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Violent	Aad, Ab, SI	n=78, n=129, n=63 USA, adults	People viewing taboo-themed ads in dark (vs light) settings are less inclined to share such ads on SNSs.	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Weinberger <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Violent	Aad, Ab, PI, SI	n=198; n=173, USA, adults	Gender identity (masculine/feminine) influences responses to comedic violence.	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Gulas <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Violent	Aad, Ab, PI, SI	n=130, n=127 USA, adults	Gender responses to violent ads may occur due to men having greater prior exposure to violent media.	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Mayer <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Sexual	Aad, Ab	n=160; n=174 USA, undergraduate students	Sexual humor positively influences Aad and Ab for male targeted brands more than female-targeted brands.	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Hatzithomas <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Violent	Ab	n=547, n=324 Greece, adults	Perceived inferiority and superiority mediate the relationship between disparagement-based humor ads and PH.	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Paramita <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Violent	Aad	n=220, n=104 n=330 USA, adults	Consumers with higher levels of moral identity react more negatively to violent humor ads, and that this effect is driven by the emotional response of disgust.	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Yoon <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Violent	Aad	n=144, n=136 n=140 USA/Korea/Croatia, undergraduate students	Appraisals of comedic violence ads are more positive in the USA compared to Korea and Croatia. Considers cultural differences including masculinity/femininity.	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
<i>This study</i>	<i>Sexual and violent</i>	<i>Aad, Ab, PI, SI (public, groups, private), SA, AD*</i>	<i>n=456, n=553, UK, adults</i>	<i>See results</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>

\*Aad (Attitude towards the ad), Ab (Aad (Attitude towards the brand), PI (purchase intentions), SI (sharing intentions), SA (social anxiety), AD (audience diversity)

**Table II: Empirical model and indirect coefficients (models 1–4)**

n = 456 per condition

Paths	Aad (Y)	Ab (Y)	PI (Y)	SI (Y)
Baseline model				
Perceived Offence (X) → (Y)	-.12***	-.01 <sup>NS</sup>	.16***	.09**
Perceived Offence (X) → Perceived Humor (M)	-.45***	-.45***	-.45***	-.45***
Perceived Humor (M) → (Y)	.77***	.56***	.70***	.85***
Indirect effects (CI <sub>95%</sub> )				
Perceived Offence → Perceived Humour → (Y)	-.34 (-.43, -.26)	-.25 (-.32, -.18)	-.31 (-.39, -.23)	-.38 (-.48, -.29)

\*\*\*Sig < .001, \*\*Sig < .05, <sup>NS</sup> > .05. Bootstrapped indirect effects based on 5,000 resamples, with 95% upper and lower CI.

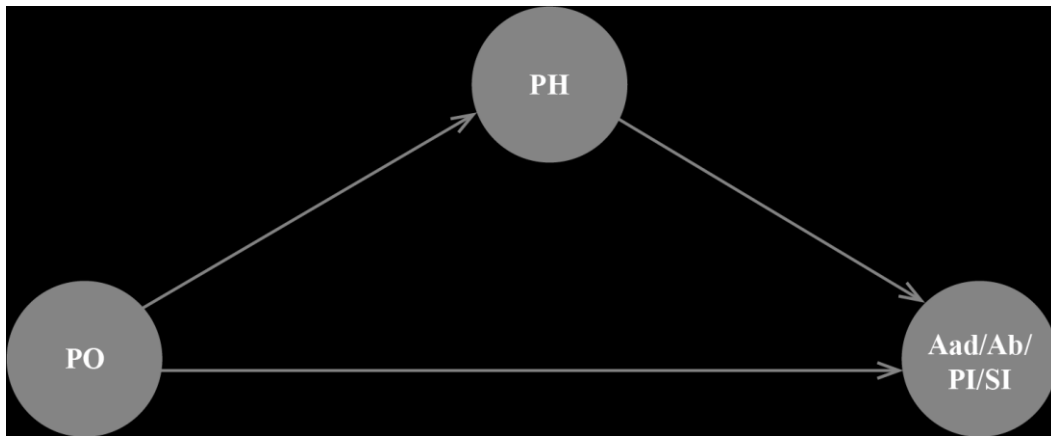
**Table III: Empirical model and indirect coefficients (models 1–3)**

n = 553 per condition

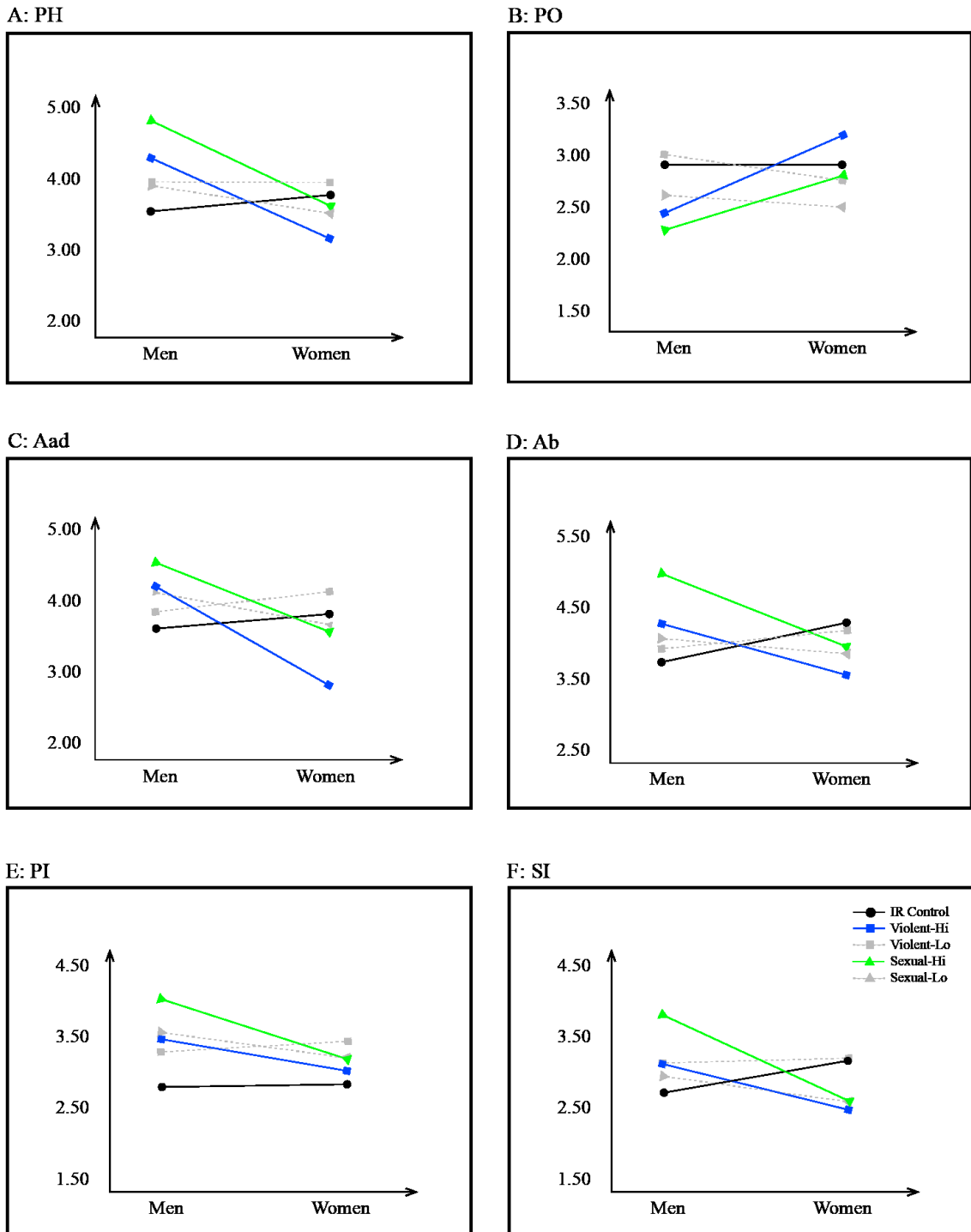
Paths	SI [Public] (Y)	SI [Group] (Y)	SI [Private] (Y)
<i>Baseline model</i>			
Audience Diversity (X)	-.15***	-.00 <sup>NS</sup>	.04 <sup>NS</sup>
Social Anxiety (M)	-.46***	-.17 <sup>NS</sup>	-.42***
Audience Diversity (X) → Social Anxiety (M)	-.31**	-.31**	.31**
Gender (W)	-.81***	.00 <sup>NS</sup>	-.40 <sup>NS</sup>
Gender x Social Anxiety	.20***	.02 <sup>NS</sup>	.14 <sup>NS</sup>
Perceived Offence	.07 <sup>NS</sup>	.09 <sup>NS</sup>	.07 <sup>NS</sup>
Perceived Humor	.39***	.35***	.35***
<i>Conditional effect of gender</i>			
Audience Diversity → Social Anxiety → (Y)			
Men	-.26***	...	...
Women	-.05 <sup>NS</sup>	...	...
<i>Indirect effect (gender x humor) (CI<sub>95%</sub>)</i>			
Audience Diversity → Social Anxiety → (Y)			
Sexual*Men	-.04 (-.07, -.01)**	...	...
Violent*Men	-.02 (-.07), .01) <sup>NS</sup>	...	...

\*\*\*Sig < .001, \*\*Sig < .05, <sup>NS</sup>> .05. Bootstrapped indirect effects based on 5,000 resamples, with 95% upper and lower CI.

**Figure 1: Mediation Model**

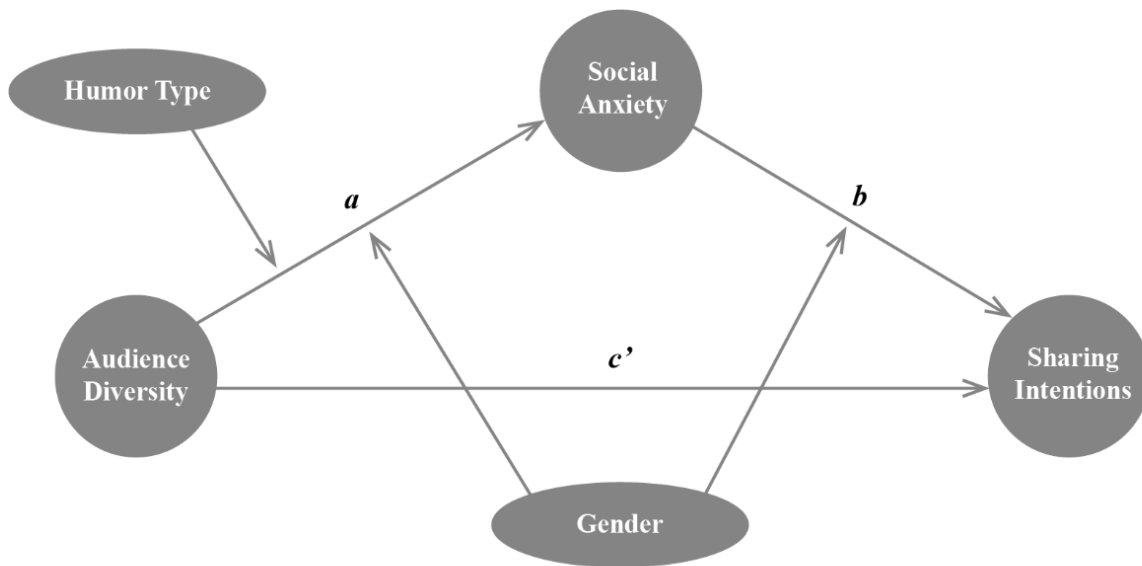


**Figure 2: Interaction between advertisement humor types for perceived humor, perceived offence, attitudes towards the ad, attitudes towards the brand, purchase intentions, and sharing intentions.**





**Figure 3: Moderated mediation model**



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