

PAWEŁ BRYŁA  
University of Lodz

ANNA GRUCZYŃSKA  
University of Lodz

## The Perception of Sexually Provocative Advertisements of American Apparel by Generation Y in Poland

*Abstract:* In this paper we show results of a survey aiming to study the attitudes of young Poles towards sexual appeals and ethical issues in advertising on the example of American Apparel. A strong majority thought that the use of sex appeals was provocative and distasteful. The negative feelings about a sexually provocative advertisement of American Apparel were not compatible with the respondents' opinion about the ad. There were some notable gender differences. More women than men thought of the ad as distasteful and immoral. More women were indifferent to shockvertising, while more men were rather negative. Women thought more often than men that ethical problems in advertising should be solved using legislation and that ethical problems in advertising are culture bound.

*Keywords:* advertising ethics; sexually provocative advertising; sexual appeals; shockvertising; fashion; Generation Y; Poland; American Apparel.

### Introduction

While it may have been acceptable in the past for businesses to pursue profits with little consideration for the social impact of their activities, this is not the case anymore. The consumer movements are now firmly established as vigilant and powerful watchdogs, and have successfully brought about changes in business practice and in the laws which govern how businesses must operate (Grundey 2007). The purpose of this paper is to examine gender differences in the perception of advertising ethics by the young generation. It aims to answer selected questions about the attitudes of Polish generation Y students towards provocative appeals in advertising and verify if they differ by gender.

On the one hand, substantial evidence suggests that gender differences matter in the context of ethics, as men and women differ in terms of ethical beliefs, values, and behaviour (e.g. Bruce 2015; Cohen et al. 1998; Dawson 1997; Ameen et al. 1996; Beutel and Marini 1995; Arlow 1991; Peterson et al. 1991). In a study of ethics in advertising, female students held stronger ethical views than male students (Keith et al. 2008). Gender influences perceptions of ethical decision-making for some types of questionable behaviour, with women reporting higher ethical standards in these cases (Spake et al. 2007). The gender difference was most divergent on the issue of portrayal of women in advertising (Lane 1995). While most studies remain hesitant to conclude that women are more moral than men, it is gen-

erally accepted that women more often tend to possess some values that reflect a moral stance (e.g. having a greater sense of responsibility toward the less privileged; being more supportive of policies that regulate and protect citizens and the environment, and displaying a greater situation embedded ethical sensitivity) (Yates and Pillai 2003). On the other hand, considerable evidence also indicates that men and women do not differ significantly on these dimensions (e.g. Robin and Babin 1997; Thoma 1986; McNichols and Zimmerer 1985). Another study confirmed that men and women share very similar perceptions of own-gender and other-gender ethics, but these perceptions are often inaccurate (Schminke et al. 2003). Therefore, it is necessary to examine this issue in the context of Polish generation Y in order to see whether such gender differences exist.

Generation Y was chosen for the study due to the fact that they are the target consumers of American Apparel, as well as because they are the biggest generation since the baby boomers. Generation Y—Millennials—are people born between years 1980 and 2002, so around 15–37 years old. Generation Y is considered audacious and open to new challenges. It partially stems from their upbringing in the conviction that they can shape their own fate and partially from freedom and independence achieved thanks to information technologies. As a consequence, Millennials are resistant to the influence of authorities, but also they lack time for independent thinking, as Internet provides ready solutions. Theoretically, the multiplicity of available sources of information should enable a critical and objective approach to each subject, but in practice, it often turns out that the speed of acting and taking decisions results in a bigger susceptibility to follow schemes (Aniszewska 2015). Millennials in Poland are quite a big part of the population—around 30%. According to a recent study (Odyseja Public Relations 2014) the younger Millennials in Poland, so those between the ages 15 and 24, who are the focus of this study, are declaring that friends are the most important to them, they are physically active, 30% spend free time with friends in the city and same fraction go to concerts. They are willing to pay more for a brand product and value added value, but they are also not very brand-loyal. They are a shift of mindset from more conservative generation X to open-mindedness, flexibility and tolerance. They are very engaged in technological progress and their eager use of social media also contributes to creating publicity for companies such as American Apparel. They are more conscious about environment, minority rights and tolerance, which corresponds with American Apparel's ideas of sustainability, fair wages and support for rights of homosexuals. Millennials are more positively inclined towards using sexually provocative themes in advertising, due to their tolerance and acceptance, contrary to the older part of the population (Yan et al. 2010). Some of them even engage in a new phenomenon called sexting, which means electronic swapping of sexually provocative images and texts (García-Gómez 2017). While there are some similarities in Generation Y values across countries, many differences were noted as well (Schewe et al. 2013).

Ethical issues are present in all marketing environments and with the rising awareness of consumers as to how companies address them in their advertising, it seems that ethics will become even more crucial in the field of marketing. By ethics we understand the entirety of rules and norms of behaviour in force in a given time period and environment, while marketing ethics can be broadly defined as the study of “how moral standards are applied to marketing decisions, behaviors and institutions” (Schlegelmilch and Öberseder 1991). Mar-

keting decisions that this paper is concerned with include primarily advertising that is a part of marketing communications, which aims to effectively communicate customer value and build relationships between the provider and target groups. Nowadays, when marketers are sending their message, they want to receive a response from the target group and customers, as well as to change attitudes and raise awareness, especially connected to brands and their equity. The American Marketing Association defines the word “brand” as “name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller’s good or service as distinct from those of other sellers.” This definition is rather narrow, because a brand is much more than just a name and logo—with a brand come certain associations, emotions, values, ideas and even a personality. It is an essential part of marketing strategy and the perceptions that people have of a brand have a big impact on the brand itself. This is why marketers need to consider ethics while designing their brand and marketing communications, to avoid unethical associations which would have negative consequences for the brand.

Just less than 30 years ago, ethics was not a broadly discussed topic relating to marketing, but as the growing number of misconducts and unethical practices in advertising was revealed, researchers turned their attention to the multiple ethical issues (Reidenbach and Robin 1991). These years have passed and although the moral aspects of marketing decision making are widely discussed and have become the topic of many publications, the issues are still fresh. Marketers are more aware of ethics and morality, yet the number of advertisements that strike as unethical or simply wrong seems to be growing (Schlegelmilch and Öberseder 1991). It is also interesting that research showed a trend growing for the last 20 years: managers and professional marketers seem to be much more disapproving of unethical conduct than before, especially when it comes to online marketing than offline (Aggarval et al. 2012). It leads to a surprising conclusion—although marketers are more sensitive to ethics, they still do not abide the rules of ethical conduct. The ethical stance of advertisers should be analysed in the context of media social responsibility and ethics (see e.g. Nowakowski 2008). The value-related orientation of the audience, dependent on its age and gender, can be established by evaluation of advertisement elements (Sirtautiene and Sirtautas 2009). Gurreri et al. (2016) critically assess the societal implications of controversial advertising practices, moving away from the extant focus on managerial implications. They highlight how advertising plays an important role in shifting the boundaries whereby taboos come to be understood as generative and evolving. However, this carries moral implications which may have damaging societal effects.

To consider the relationship between marketing and ethics and the attitudes of young people towards it, we report the results of a survey aiming to study the attitudes of young Poles towards sexual appeals and ethical issues in advertising, focusing on their reaction to an American Apparel advertisement. American Apparel is a Los Angeles-based American company, which specializes in manufacturing, distributing and retailing clothing and accessories. It was founded in 1989 by a Canadian, Dov Charney, and nowadays has 260 stores in 19 countries around the world. Apart from the shops, the company also sells online to 30 countries worldwide. American Apparel was firstly a wholesaler of T-shirts and later moved on to retailing, on which part of their business we will concentrate. The product lines of American Apparel are based on simplicity. All the clothes are basic fashion, with either plain colours, or stripes and plaid, with occasional simple colourful designs. The gar-

ments are high quality, which is controlled more easily thanks to the in-house production. The target market of the company are primarily young adults, living in metropolitan areas. According to the most recent census of 2012, in the United States there are ca. 84 million people aged between 15 and 34, which is the main target market for American Apparel, and it constitutes 27% of the whole population. The products can also be appealing to people of various demographics, because of their timeless, basic designs — and thus can be worn by both 15- and 50-year-olds. American Apparel brand identity revolves around American values and connotations, which is seen even from the name, and smartly connects the “American dream” with controversy, which is the second ingredient of their core brand idea. Since the beginning of the company, their advertising has been controversial and provocative in nature, whether by its honesty or sexual innuendos. The company also emphasizes the issues of sustainability, fair wages and support for rights of homosexuals, which are very current topics.

The literature review led us to the formulation of the following research hypotheses referring to generation Y Polish students:

H1. The feelings aroused by an ethically controversial advertisement differ by gender.

H2. The opinions about an ethically controversial advertisement differ by gender.

H3. The attitudes toward shockvertising differ by gender.

H4. The opinions about the extent to which ethical problems in advertising should be solved with the use of legislation differ by gender.

## Methods

The aim of this research was to investigate the attitude of generation Y from the third-largest Polish city of Lodz towards provocative advertising and how it changes depending on different variables, such as gender and education, as well as to study if, and how, their perception of the brand changes after seeing a provocative ad.

The research was quantitative, performed in a form of an online survey, which contained 12 questions, 2 of which were open-ended, using one sample. At the beginning of the survey, the respondents were shown a sexually provocative American Apparel advertisement of underwear for women.

The criteria of sampling respondents for the research were as follows:

- resident of the city of Lodz, which is the third-largest city in Poland;
- student of University of Lodz or Lodz University of Technology;
- aged between 19 and 24 years old.

The research was performed among the student population of Lodz in April 2015 and was anonymous. The survey was posted on various Facebook pages and groups dedicated to students of University of Lodz and Lodz University of Technology. The use of Facebook was caused by the fact that 88% of the younger Millennials in Poland have a social media account, 92% of which have a Facebook account (*Odyseja Public Relations 2014*). The target respondents were students from the two biggest universities in Lodz—the University of Lodz and the Lodz University of Technology. This choice was caused by the aim to investigate whether a difference in education—emphasis on science or humanities—plays a role

in perceptions and feelings about shocking advertising. The research sample consisted of 100 students from the two universities mentioned above, representatives of generation Y, aged between 19 and 24 years old. The relevance of the generational approach in advertising studies was shown e.g. by Sirtautas and Sirtautiene (2009). The majority of our respondents were women—61%, while there were fewer men—39%. The first thing that the research has shown was that the inclination to respond was higher for women than men. This could be caused by the topic of the survey—fashion and advertisements, which is usually thought of as more interesting for women, or maybe by simple reluctance of men to answer surveys.

American Apparel is a controversial actor in the fashion retail industry, especially because of their advertising. Their brand identity is linked with sexual appeal quite strongly, which was the reason for choosing this company for the study. It is also not present on the Polish market which was regarded as an asset, because the respondents would not be familiar with the brand and its advertising, thus would not have previously formed opinions and knowledge about the brand. We have chosen this relatively unknown brand in the population under study in order to reduce any bias resulting from brand familiarity.

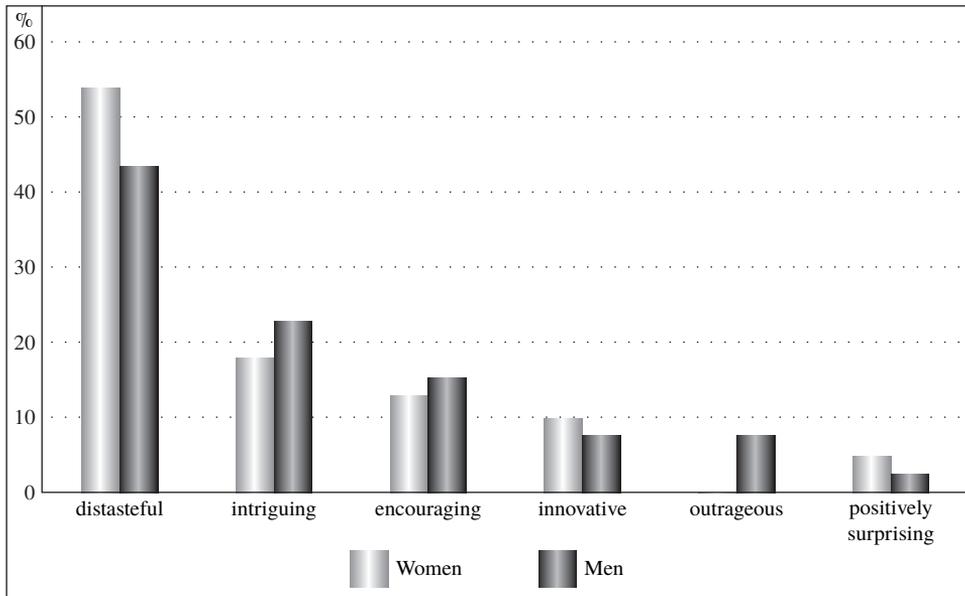
## Results

80% of respondents reported they did not know the American Apparel brand, while 20% claimed they did. As far as gender is concerned, the distribution is similar—the brand was familiar to 18% of women and 20% of men.

Next, the respondents were shown an American Apparel advertisement and asked whether they found the presented advertisement provocative, and the vast majority of them (85%) thought so. This might mean that the supposed openness and liberal views are not entirely true for generation Y, because so many representatives notice the provocative nature of the advertisement. According to gender, the results were quite similar: 83% of women answered “yes,” as well as 77% of men. This is a small difference, nonetheless it indicates that perhaps men are more open to provocative themes.

We examined the emotional reactions of the respondents elicited by the advertisement. The students could choose one answer which suited best their feelings about the advertisement. The answers were that the ad was: intriguing, encouraging, positively surprising, innovative, outrageous, distasteful. The most often chosen option was “distasteful”—exactly half of the respondents thought of the ad this way. The second option that was chosen often was “intriguing” with 20%, followed by “encouraging” with 14%. What is worth noting is that only 3% of respondents felt the advertisement was outrageous. This can lead to a conclusion that the stereotype about generation Y, claiming these young people do not mind provocation and sexuality in advertising, might not be entirely true. This conclusion is supported by the fact that 50% of respondents thought the ad distasteful. Still, 47% of students had rather positive feelings about the advertisement, which is why the mentioned stereotype is not entirely without justification. There is not much difference in opinion between men and women (Figure 1). Women found the ad distasteful a bit more often than men—by 10%. What is surprising, no woman thought of the advertisement as outrageous—only men did. Our data support hypothesis H1.

Figure 1  
 Respondents' Feelings About the Advertisement by Gender



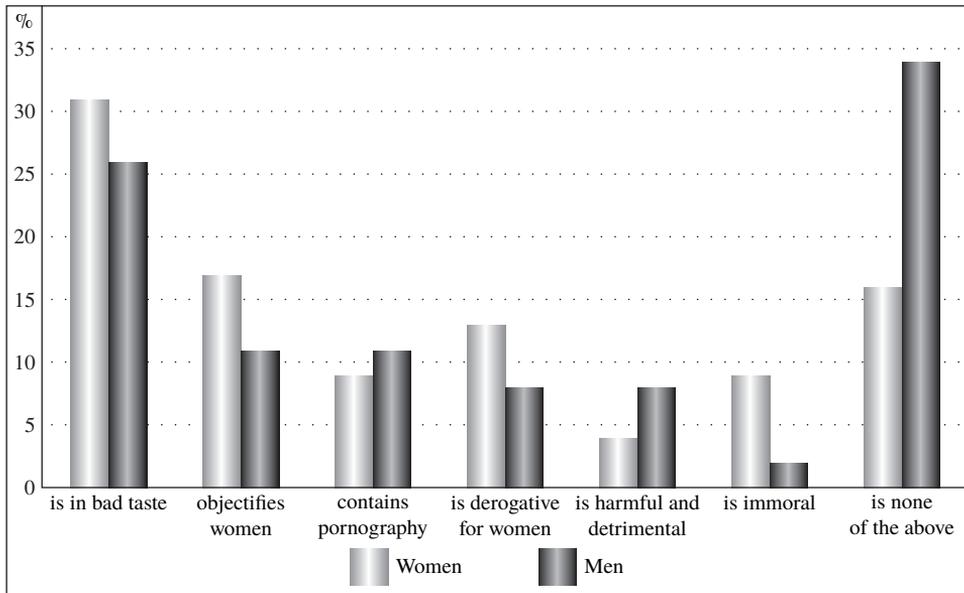
Source: own elaboration based on own research.

The next question was focused on another dimension of how the presented advertisement was perceived by the respondents. The respondents were asked about their opinion on the advertisement and could choose multiple answers that applied to them out of 7 possibilities. These possible answers were that the advertisement: objectifies women, contains pornography, is derogative for women, is in bad taste, is immoral, is harmful and detrimental, or none of the above. Most respondents thought the advertisement was in bad taste—29%, followed by an opinion that none of those statements reflected their view of the advertisement—23%. 15% of respondents thought the ad objectified women, 11% that it was derogative for women and 10% that it contained pornographic material. Only 7% viewed the advert as immoral and 5% as harmful and detrimental. It is visible that more men than women thought that none of the statements fit their opinion of the advertisement (Figure 2). In turn, more women found the ad immoral, in bad taste and thought it objectified women and was derogative for them. Our data support hypothesis H2.

77% of the students claimed they were not interested in the brand's offer after seeing the advertisement, while 23% were. Out of the respondents that have not heard about the brand before the survey, 23% claimed they became interested in the offer of American Apparel after seeing the advertisement. Out of the respondents that knew the brand beforehand, 25% said the advertisement aroused their interest in the company's offer. Women were interested in the retailer's offer a bit more often than men. 74% of women declared no interest in looking at the American Apparel offer compared to 82% of men.

The respondents were inquired about their attitude towards shockvertising—using shocking and provocative themes in advertisements. Most respondents were indifferent to

Figure 2  
 Respondents' Opinions About the Advertisement by Gender



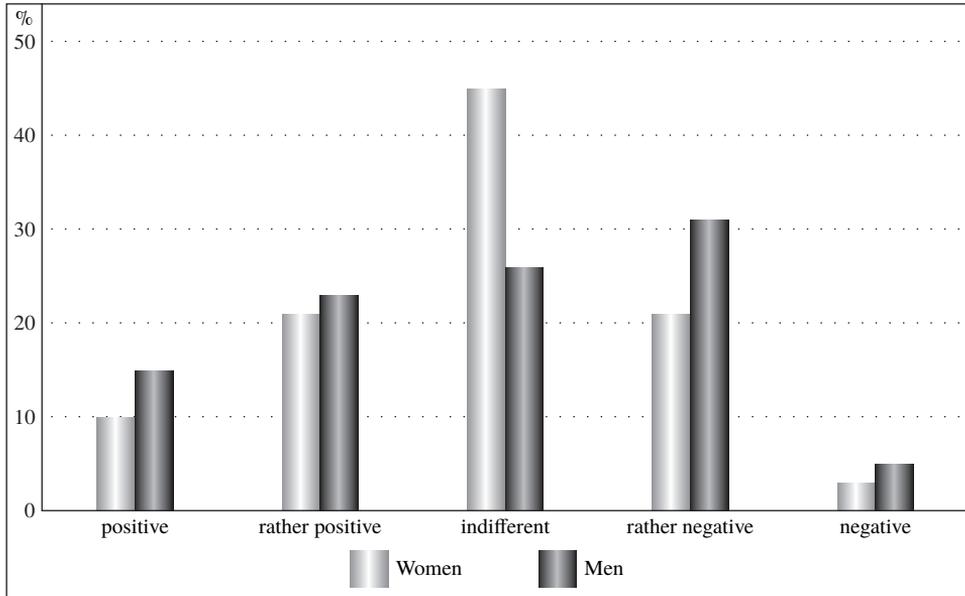
Source: own elaboration based on own research.

this practice (37%), with answers “rather negative” (25%) and “rather positive” (22%) in tow. This means that young people have no strong opinions about this issue, either because they are not interested in advertising or because they do not pay attention to it. Overall, 34% had more positive attitude towards shockvertising and 29% more negative, with 37% indifferent. This shows that there is no strong tendency in terms of attitude towards this practice, while it might be popular belief that young people are more enthusiastic about provocative ads. When it comes to distribution of answers depending on gender, more women were indifferent to shockvertising, and more men were rather negative towards it (Figure 3). Our data support hypothesis H3.

Furthermore, respondents were asked about their opinion about to what an extent ethical problems in advertising should be solved with the use of legislation. Most students answered “rather high” (39%) and “to some extent” (34%), with a low number of other answers, although 12% thought that law should be used to solve these issues to a low extent. More women than men—by 13%—answered that ethical issues in advertising should be solved with legal help, while men a bit more often thought it should be solved this way to low or no extent (Figure 4). This could mean that women have a bit more strong opinion on this issue than men. Our data support hypothesis H4.

We also elicited the opinion of students about to what an extent ethical problems in advertising depended on culture. Most students agreed with this statement. 41% of respondents thought that ethical problems in advertising were culture bound to a rather high extent, 25% agreed to a “high extent” and 22% “to some extent.” When considering the distribution of answers among genders, it is visible that more women answered “to a rather high

Figure 3  
**The Respondents' Attitude Towards Shockvertising by Gender**



Source: own elaboration based on own research.

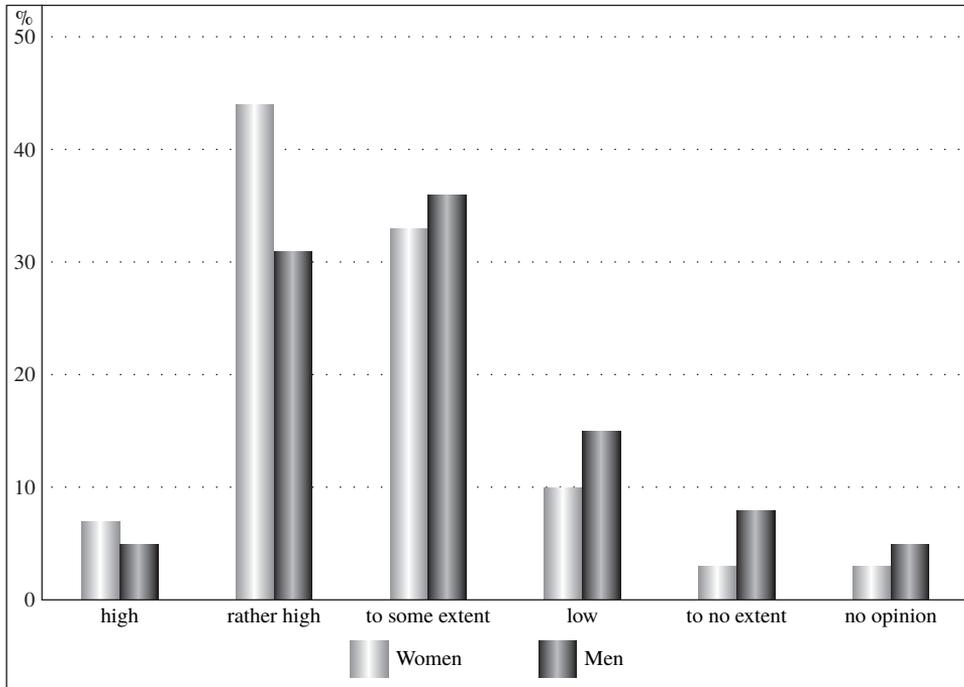
extent,” while men’s answers were distributed quite evenly among possible options. Only men have chosen the answer that ethical issues in advertising are conditioned culturally to a low extent. This, as in previous question, might suggest that women have stronger opinions on the topic of ethical problems in advertising.

## Discussion

It is popular practice in apparel industry to use sex appeal in advertising, perhaps because of the link between clothes—especially lingerie—and the human body and, therefore, sexuality (Yan et al. 2010). Sexual appeal is a subtype of provocative appeal, which in general refers to advertising that is meant to shock at least a portion of the audience. To trigger a provocation, three basic characteristics have to be met by the advertising: distinctiveness—meaning uniqueness and novelty; ambiguity—uncertainty of intention or meaning; transgression of norms and taboos (Vézina and Paul 1997). Research has shown that provocative ads attract customers and are more remembered by them than more traditional advertising, and thus lead to higher awareness with lower exposure. It was also concluded that using provocative themes in the adverts has minimal impact on the reduction of sales—which means that shock induced by the ad did not translate into dislike for buying the brand. The research has also shown that age is an important determinant in the reaction to provocative appeals—younger people are reacting more favorably to provocation in advertising. What is interesting, a research conducted by Pope et al. (2004) suggested that people even

Figure 4

**The Respondents' Opinion About the Extent to which Ethical Problems in Advertising Should be Solved with the Use of Legislation by Gender**



Source: own elaboration based on own research.

prefer sexual appeals and erotica in advertising, whether it is for a cause or a commercial product.

It is understandable that lingerie is primarily advertised with the use of sex appeal. Women portrayed in underwear are posed in a sexual way because of the connection between these parts of clothing and intimacy. The issue with the American Apparel advertisement considered, is that the sensuality behind these photographs appear to be going beyond simple sex appeal of lingerie promotion. This ad “seems to be primarily focused on titillation” (Herbertson 2014) instead of underwear, which may be viewed as offensive to women. Once again, American Apparel provides advertising that objectifies female models and uses sexual implications.

Millennials are more positively inclined towards using sexually provocative themes in advertising, due to their tolerance and acceptance, contrary to the older part of the population (Yan et al. 2010). Because provocation is more positively reacted upon by young people, American Apparel benefits from using sexual appeals in their advertising. It leads to segmentation of potential consumers—older people are discouraged to buy the products, while younger are more inclined to see what the provocation advertised. This also raises brand awareness and knowledge, which is one of the goals of the marketing communication operations of the company. There is a segment of consumers who like sexual appeals

and respond very favorably to them (Reichert et al. 2011). These people are adventurous, search for sensations, have positive self-sexual concepts and see sexual appeals as culturally relevant. This describes most millennials very well and thus using sexual provocation in their ads is an appropriate means of advertising for American Apparel.

On the other hand, it was proven that their tolerance depends on factors such as the context or how the sexuality is presented (Yan et al. 2010). It was also proven that females were more negatively inclined towards advertising using sexual appeals than men, although they are less offended by objectifying women than they used to be 20 years prior. It is also worth noting that even though sexual appeals might elicit negative responses, it does not affect attitudes towards the brand or purchase intentions (De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh 1996).

Payne and Pressley (2013) aim to create a rather simple code of ethics for marketers, using knowledge of previous researchers whose ethical guidelines are quite complicated and thus are not eagerly used by marketing professionals. The most common and troubling issues in marketing—and thus especially in advertising—are: stereotyping, controversy, targeting vulnerable groups, playing on emotions, covert marketing, puffery. Stereotyping refers to the use of “widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing” (Edwards 2014). They help people understand the world around them, but rarely are stereotypes positive in nature. They also do not reflect the reality and thus can easily create misconceptions and misperceptions about the reality, more often than not in a negative sense. There is a potential for misinterpretation, when a representation from one culture is applied to another culture, as illustrated on the example of “Lolita” in Japan and the West (Hinton 2013). A study cited by De Pelsmacker et al. (2010: 613) shows that in advertising women are mostly portrayed in a stereotypical way, for example as a housewife or just as a decorative element. The situation is similar for male portrayals in advertising. Stereotypes also influence the individual value of one’s self, for example through promoting a certain type of looks (skinny women, well-built men), especially when it comes to beauty products or clothing, but it is not necessarily limited to these dimensions. They create expectations as to how people should look like, which is nowadays even more deceptive because of the use of computer programs which can alter the way models look. Using stereotypes in advertising might in many cases have negative effect, because it supports the conservative view of people’s roles in society and promotes images that are not in line with reality. A study of portrayals of women and men on primetime television (Sink and Mastro 2017) indicates that while some gender stereotypes have declined compared to previous decades, others (e.g. dominant men and sexually provocative women) have persisted.

Using controversy in marketing is a popular way to gain a lot of attention to the product and it has been present for decades. But just because shocking advertising exists, it does not necessarily mean that it is desired and appropriate. Such advertising aims to purposefully shock and offend the audience through a variety of means. For example violating the law, moral or ethical codes of the society, using vulgarity, provocation, but also disgusting images. Eroticism is one of the appeals used in advertising—it might be obvious to use it while promoting lingerie, but provocative use of sexuality to introduce ice-cream to the UK market is definitely a shocking choice, especially when the people portrayed are two gay

priests, which adds to the offending experience. Targeting vulnerable groups is referring mostly to advertising aimed at children (Preston 2004). This is controversial because small children do not recognize commercial and non-commercial content and it is only at the age 10–12 that they realize that not all that is said in advertisements is true (De Pelsmacker et al. 2010: 619). Young people are particularly vulnerable to questionable claims and misleading messages (Yeung 2003). They are a vulnerable group because they easily believe in what they hear and are less able to make informed decisions than adult consumers. There is also a number of ethical issues emerging from the production of reality TV shows (intrusion, humiliation, misrepresentation, and appropriation) (Mast 2016; Kjus 2009).

Playing on emotions refers to the use of emotional appeals to obtain a certain response from the audience. Controversial might be the use of fear appeals, as it presents to the consumers a threat which might not necessarily be real. It has also been found in some studies that strong use of fear appeals reinforced the undesirable behavior (Manyiwa and Brennan 2012), thus achieving a contrary effect.

From our research, a few distinctive conclusions can be formed. Firstly, that a strong majority of young people of both sexes thought that the use of sex appeal was provocative, as well as distasteful. What is interesting, among nearly a quarter of participants, the negative feelings about the ad were not compatible with their opinion about the ad, which means they were either positively oriented or indifferent to the advert. To gain more insight on this issue and whether generation Y is indifferent or positive about provocative advertisements, it could be further studied in future research. The negative attitude towards such advertising might be a result of the fact that strong sexual content is thought of as unethical and resulting from an intention to manipulate the viewer of the advertisement (Sengupta and Dahl 2008). Most participants declared no willingness to look at the brand's offer after seeing the ad that contained sexual appeal. This means that the brand recognition estimated in the study did not translate into purchase intention. Moreover, it did not translate into even intention to acknowledge the retailer's offer. The study showed that generation Y is mostly interested in the practical dimension of the decisions to buy clothes. More important for them was the style and price of clothing than the brand. They also claimed that advertising did not have a lot of influence on their choice of clothes. This could mean that they did not pay a lot of attention to advertising or they simply made choices based on rational rather than emotional premises.

With regard to attitudes towards ethical issues in advertising, no single opinion prevailed. Mostly, the respondents did not have strong views about shockvertising—the majority was indifferent to it, and many were either rather positive or rather negative about it. A strong majority of respondents thought that ethical problems in advertising should be solved using legislative measures, which proves that students think that without at least some help from law enforcement, companies using unethical means of promotion might go unpunished. It could be the result of young people's belief that these companies would not correct their misbehaviors themselves and without the threat of punishment they would not reconsider their marketing campaigns. All of the respondents also agreed that ethical issues in advertising were culture bound.

Over half of the respondents were able to provide examples of the use of sex appeals in advertising, and nearly half could provide examples of advertisements that were provocative

for reasons other than sexual content. This proves that the use of appeals that seem unethical is quite widespread on the Polish market. The fact that men could remember advertising that used sexual appeal 1.5 times more often than women can result from the general tendency to target such provocative advertising at men and thus they recall it more often than women.

We observed notable differences depending on the gender of the students. More women than men thought of the ad as distasteful and immoral. There was also a slight difference between sexes while indicating factors that influenced buying decisions. For women, more important was the style of clothing, and then its price, while for most men the price was usually most important, and the design of clothes was placed second. This can be explained that women are much more interested in fashion and style of clothes, while men pay less attention to it and more to the price. There was also a difference in opinion between genders in regard to shockvertising—more women were indifferent to it, while more men were rather negative. Women also had agreed to a high extent more often than men as to what extent should ethical problems in advertising be solved using legislation and as to what extent ethical problems in advertising are conditioned culturally.

In a sample of 300 Polish Internet users of various age groups (Grębowiec 2010), more men (52.8%) than women (43.2%) reported positive perceptions of controversial advertising. While women slightly more often condemn violence and aggression in advertising (58.2% compared to 54.7% men), men are more critical to religious appeals in advertising (15.0% compared to 8.9% women). Erotical elements and sex in advertising were considered controversial by almost the same share of women and men (26.8% and 24.5% respectively). A vast majority of respondents from both genders believe that controversial elements facilitate remembering advertising messages. However, this view was expressed more often by men (75.4%) than women (68.6%). These findings are in line with our hypotheses about the importance of gender differences in the perception of controversial advertising.

The findings of Rome and Ibrahim (2015) among 204 female consumers in the UK and the Netherlands suggested that attitudes held between both nations were largely classified as negative towards all ads containing nudity. Some research (Yan et al. 2010) showed that generation Y females are less offended by the use of sexually objectifying women in advertising, which is confirmed in this study, but it was also shown that women's attitude towards the ad did not impact their purchase intention. This is not entirely confirmed by this study, because most participants showed no purchase intention of the brand after seeing the advertisement.

There has been a significant amount of research done that studied the perceptions about sexual appeal in advertising and people's attitudes towards it. Multiple studies showed that sexual appeals are received negatively. For example, LaTour and Henthorne (1994) proved that strong sexual appeal resulted in a less favorable reception of an ad, as well as attitude towards the brand and purchase intention than towards an ad that had mild sexual content. They have also shown that women had more negative attitudes than men. These results correspond with the ones obtained in our study. On the other hand, a study by Vézina and Paul (1997) showed that provocative appeals did not have an effect on purchase intention, although they confirmed that women reacted more negatively towards provocative advertising than men and more often found it indecent. An interesting study was conducted by

Maciejewski (2004), who studied the opinions of generation Y college students about the use of sexual and fear appeals. His research concluded that gender had a significant impact on the students' judgement of sexual appeals. Females thought of sexual appeals as unethical and were opposed to its use, contrary to males. Another study, performed by Sengupta and Dahl (2008), also supported the result that men and women viewed advertising with sexual content unfavorably, with women reacting more negatively than men. They also came to an interesting conclusion that women with conservative beliefs about sex were negative about these ads, while women with liberal sexual attitudes preferred sex-based ads to the non-sexual ads. While generation Y is often believed to have more liberal views on sex and to be less conservative, the study presented in this research showed that young women mostly found the ad distasteful, not likeable. A research done by Yan, Ogle and Hyllegard, studying the attitudes and purchase intention of generation Y consumers toward American Apparel when confronted with sexual appeal, showed that—again—women were more negative towards ads with sexual content (Yan et al. 2010). They have also showed that the negative attitude towards the ad did not translate into negative attitude towards the brand itself. While the ad with high sexual content was uniformly judged to be ethically more unjust (compared to ads with low sexual content), the adverse effect on attitude toward the ad is not obtained for all consumers. The results of Mittal and Lassar (2000) show that it depends on the sexual liberalism of the audience and on whether or not the use of sex is considered manipulative. The use of high levels of female nudity/erotic content in print ads may not be perceived as morally right or culturally acceptable to viewers of such ads. While the use of such stimuli may draw additional attention to the ad, the outcome of the use of such high degrees of erotic stimuli may, in fact, be negative (Henthorne and LaTour 1995). This was not entirely confirmed by the results of this study, where most participants declared no interest in the brand after seeing the ad.

While media globalization is sometimes perceived as promoting cultural heterogeneity and the diversification of program content, others see this trend as proliferating the homogenization of program content and American popular culture (Gordon 2009). It is worth noting that consumer preferences are affected by the globalization process (Włodarczyk-Śpiewak 2009). There is also an impact of political changes on the advertising behavior of firms (Lah et al. 2009). Sexism in advertising is a cross-cultural phenomenon, and Western advertising models are the trend setters of sexual images in Chinese magazine advertising (Huang and Lowry 2012). The use of a strong overt sexual appeal was not well received by Chinese consumers and resulted in less favorable attitude toward the ad itself and the purchase intention than using mild sexual themes. However, the degree of sexual content used in advertising has no direct influence on brand attitudes (Tai 1999). Sexual appeals elicit inferior (superior) ethical judgments, attitudes, and purchase intent among consumers high (low) in intrinsic religiosity (Putrevu and Swimberghek 2013). The level of religious commitment changes the ethical judgement—controversial advert perceptions relationship. The results of Kadić-Maglajić et al. (2015) also highlight that controversial advert perceptions negatively influence attitude towards the advert.

Comparing the results of this study with other research on this topic, one can see the general tendency to still judge sexual appeals in advertising rather negatively, especially by women. This might be not as strong in the generation Y as with older consumers, though

mostly only in cases when the appeal is in correspondence with the object that is being promoted. For example, sexual appeal will be more favorably perceived when it is used advertising swimsuits rather than a product not directly connected to sexuality or human body. The research also suggests that men are generally more positive towards such appeals than women.

### Conclusions

To sum up, marketing ethics is certainly one of the most important issues in advertising nowadays and whether marketers follow basic rules of ethical decision-making and marketing might deeply influence the shape of this field of knowledge, as well as every market and company in general. Consumers—and especially the youth—become more aware of the unethical appeals that marketers in their advertisements very often direct towards them, which should be a strong incentive for these professionals to make effort to avoid such appeals, and instead explore the vast possibilities offered by other creative manners of communicating their message or brand values.

Our findings indicate that the attitudes to and opinions about controversial advertising differ by gender in a Polish generation Y student sample. Women evaluated a sexually provocative advertisement shown to them as distasteful more often than men. They also more frequently indicated that this advertisement is immoral, in bad taste, derogative for women and objectifying them. However, women tend to be more indifferent toward shockvertising (a similar term to controversial advertising), while men express negative attitudes to this phenomenon more often. Finally, women think that ethical problems in advertising should be solved with the use of legislation to a higher extent than men.

Our research shows that sexual appeals in advertising should be used with caution, especially when it is targeted at women. Even though young women are less offended by objectifying females in advertising and seem to be more open and liberal in their views, it does not necessarily mean that sexual content in an advertisement will encourage a positive brand attitude and purchase intention. Sexually provocative content should also be in line with the advertised product—nakedness might be more positively reacted upon in an ad promoting lingerie, because it is corresponding to the physical dimension of the product advertised.

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*Biographical notes:*

Paweł Bryła, Ph.D., Associate Professor at the Department of International Marketing and Retailing, Faculty of International and Political Studies, University of Lodz. He graduated from international studies at the University of Lodz and was awarded the title of Master of Arts in European Political and Administrative Studies by the College of Europe in Bruges, Belgium. He obtained his Ph.D. in management in 2005 and the degree of habilitation in 2016. He has published 3 monographs and over 60 articles in leading national and international journals. He is the member of the editorial board at 11 international academic journals.

E-mail: [pbryla@uni.lodz.pl](mailto:pbryla@uni.lodz.pl)

Anna Gruczyńska, graduate of International Marketing studies at the Faculty of International and Political Studies, University of Lodz.

E-mail: [a.gruczynska@o2.pl](mailto:a.gruczynska@o2.pl)