

Advertising and Psychology: Strategies to Reduce Violence Against Women

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Abstract: The COVID-19 exacerbated violence against women. This study evaluated the possible efficacy of using advertising pieces containing the hypocrisy paradigm, the contrast principle, and moral disengagement mechanisms to prevent and reduce violence against women. We conducted two studies which included exclusively men as participants. Study 1 ($n=400$; $M_{age}=21.69$; $Me=20.00$; $SD=5.79$) used traditional pieces on violence against women, manipulating only their moral disengagement phrases. Results suggest that the phrase combined with traditional images is either ineffective or has a rebound effect. Study 2 ($n=303$; $M_{age}=21.38$; $Me=20.00$; $SD=4.94$) manipulated the image in Study 1, showing more effective results regarding hostility. However, physical aggression showed no significant differences. Finally, some pieces generated a rebound effect, increasing participants' self-perception of aggression. The use of advertising can act as an ally or an enemy of public policies if their effectiveness lacks proper testing.

Keywords: violence against women, advertising, morality, social technology

Publicidade e Psicologia: Estratégias de Redução da Violência Contra a Mulher

Resumo: A violência contra mulheres é um problema pandêmico agravado pela COVID-19. Esta pesquisa objetivou verificar a eficácia de peças publicitárias em reduzir a violência contra mulheres por meio do paradigma de hipocrisia, o princípio de contraste e os mecanismos de desengajamento moral. Realizaram-se dois estudos com amostras masculinas. O Estudo 1 ($n=400$; $M_{idade}=21,69$; $Me=20,00$; $DP=5,79$) utilizou peças tradicionais, manipulando apenas as frases de desengajamento moral. O resultado sugere que a frase combinada com imagens tradicionais são ineficazes ou geram efeito rebote. O Estudo 2 ($n=303$; $M_{idade}=21,38$; $Me=20,00$; $DP=4,94$) manipulou a imagem e os resultados indicam maior efetividade das peças em relação à hostilidade. Entretanto, a agressão física não demonstrou diferenças significativas. Finalmente, algumas peças geraram efeito rebote, levando ao incremento da autopercepção de agressividade dos participantes. O uso da publicidade pode prejudicar políticas públicas de combate a violência contra mulheres quando sua eficácia não é devidamente testada.

Palavras-chave: violência contra mulher, propaganda, moral, tecnologia social

Publicidad y Psicología: Estrategias de Reducción de la Violencia Contra la Mujer

Resumen: La violencia contra la mujer es un problema pandémico agravado por el COVID-19. Esta investigación verificó el grado de eficacia de anuncios publicitarios para reducir la violencia contra la mujer utilizando el paradigma de la hipocresía, el principio de contraste y los mecanismos de desconexión moral. Se diseñaron dos estudios con muestras masculinas. El Estudio 1 ($n=400$; $M_{edad}=21,69$; $Me=20,00$; $DT=5,79$) utilizó anuncios tradicionales, manipulando únicamente las frases de desconexión moral. El resultado sugiere que la frase combinada con imágenes tradicionales es ineficaz o tiene efecto rebote. El Estudio 2 ($n=303$; $M_{edad}=21,38$; $Me=20,00$; $DT=4,94$) manipuló la imagen, y los resultados indican mayor eficacia respecto a la hostilidad. Pero la agresión física no mostró diferencias significativas. Finalmente, algunos anuncios generaron efecto rebote, incrementando la autopercepción de la agresividad. Así, el uso de la publicidad puede actuar como enemiga de las políticas públicas contra la violencia a la mujer cuando no se comprueba adecuadamente su eficacia.

Palabras clave: violencia contra la mujer, publicidad, moral, tecnología social

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Violence against women (VAW) increased in various countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, thus requiring interventions (United Nations Statistics Division, 2020). This research aimed to evaluate how effectively advertising pieces can reduce VAW via the moral disengagement mechanisms, the hypocrisy paradigm, and the contrast principle.

We may deem VAW as gender-based violence, the product of a socialization process that attribute different social roles to men and women (Jesus & Silva, 2018; Muniz & Fortunato, 2018) or domestic violence, which shares similarities with VAW (discussed below). Women have long suffered the notion of being inferior to men and their property, causing their submission and denying their rights (Jesus & Silva, 2018; Muniz & Fortunato, 2018).

Although women currently participate more prominently in several areas of society, we still find an asymmetry between genders. However, Brazil and the rest of the world still show alarming levels of VAW (Jesus & Silva, 2018; Muniz & Fortunato, 2018), despite the rights women have achieved and the public policies in force. Reports from the United Nations Women indicate that, although at least 153 countries regulate what the UN calls gender-based violence, at least one in three women have experienced intimate partner violence in 2020 (United Nations Statistics Division, 2020).

This type of violence is also associated with victims' mental disorders, such as depression, phobias, anxiety, suicide attempts, among others (Souza & Rezende, 2018), impacting their quality of life (Lucena et al., 2017) and constituting a safety and public health matter (Prado & Sanematsu, 2017). Strategies are needed to combat it, such as legal devices and mass media and advertisement (this study directly focuses on the latter).

In Brazil, the fifth country that kills most women in the world, half of the feminicides involve perpetrators with intimate and affective relationships with women, i.e., the danger lies in their homes, rather than on the streets (Prado & Sanematsu, 2017). According to Prado and Sanematsu (2017), 85% of people believe that women who report violence have a higher risk of being murdered and 92%, that frequently recurring violence leads to murders. This portrays a situation which includes the social belief that women have no alternatives to or security from this type of aggression. Domestic violence occurs in the intimate, domestic context, in which women sometimes have hetero-affective relationships dominated by men which, however, differ in their causal link (domestic intimacy with their partners). Some widely disseminated myths still highlight the naturalization of this violence, including common arguments such as healthy women being able to resist violence if they so desire.

Among these factors, moral disengagement mechanisms stand out as they enable cognitive distancing and naturalize, trivialize, and institutionalize violent behaviors (D'Urso et al., 2019; Rubio-Garay et al., 2019; Russo et al., 2020). Moral disengagement enables individuals to behave in a socially reprehensible manner or to cause pain to others without suffering from the cognitive dissonance stemming from guilt and self-condemnation for deviating from their values and those of their community (Bandura et al., 1996; Scarpati & Pina, 2017). Bandura et al. (1996) suggest eight mechanisms in four loci: behavior; agency; action result; and action recipient.

Behavior locus, deemed the most effective, finds individuals seeking to eliminate self-blame for their

actions and generate self-exoneration. It consists of moral justification, advantageous comparison, and euphemistic language. Precisely due to its diffusion, individuals avoid self-censorship by exempting themselves of a sense of personal responsibility. Thus, it also contains the displacement and diffusion of responsibility mechanisms. The action result locus minimizes, disregards, and contests the harmful effect of individuals' actions via the consequence minimization, ignorance or distortion mechanism. Finally, the action recipient locus marginalizes, depersonalizes and holds victims accountable for their negative experiences. It contains the dehumanization and attribution of blame mechanisms (Scarpati & Pina, 2017).

Considering these psychological mechanisms and the potential of the media, we proposed a strategy so public policies can focus on preventing VAW via advertising campaigns and social marketing, offering information, assisting in the solution of social problems, influencing and modifying people's behavior (Silva & Mazzon, 2016), and targeting potential aggressors, i.e., men. For this, we proposed the use of advertising pieces containing phrases which represented moral disengagement mechanisms regarding VAW.

We used phrases highlighting moral disengagement mechanisms based on the hypocrisy paradigm (Aronson, 2019). It proposes that confronting people with their own hypocrisy leads them to cognitive dissonance and to behave as they preach. Moreover, according to Batista and Pérez-Nebra (2015), advertisement should consist of images inversely opposite to what is expected and drawing greater attention from participants. This is known as the contrast principle. Regarding VAW, this inversion would include images that would lead to this contrast would show a man, as the theme usually focuses on victims.

Thus, we hypothesized that showing participants such advertisement will cause them to relate to the man in it by the contrast principle, exposing them to moral disengagement mechanisms and the hypocrisy paradigm and promoting cognitive dissonance, which would resume self-regulation, avoid these mechanisms, and decrease their aggressiveness, helping to prevent and combat VAW.

This research conducted two studies to assess how efficiently advertising pieces can reduce VAW via the disengagement mechanisms, the hypocrisy paradigm, and the contrast principle. Both studies employed cross-sectional and experimental group designs, applying seven of the eight moral disengagement mechanisms by showing participants advertising pieces which would induce hypocrisy in participants. We chose to discard diffusion of responsibility as we were unable to adapt it to our procedures since the examples in the literature and its concept often intermingle with displacement of responsibility.

Previous studies have found that images and slogans constitute the main elements rendering advertising pieces memorable (Santana & Pérez-Nebra, 2008). Thus, our first study used advertising pieces with a photography of a male hand, a standard of this type of media. Manipulation took place only in its phrases, which sought to make hypocrisy

explicit. Based on the results of Study 1, the second study manipulated the images in the advertising pieces, showing a man pondering and a moral disengagement phrase.

Study 1

Method

Participants

Men aged over 18 years were included in our sample. Participants were randomly assigned to groups of at least 30 individuals, based on G*Power and considering an average effect size (0.25), a 0.8 power, and a 0.05 significance. In total, 400 men participated in this study ($M_{age}=21.69$; $Me=20.00$; $SD=5.79$; 23.43% of missing data), of which 65

belonged to the control group which evaluated an advertising piece for an electronics store. Other participants were shown our advertising pieces. Volunteers were mostly middle-class university students residing in the Brazilian Federal District and surrounding areas. Several strategies were used to invite them, including asking professors' authorization during their classes and approaching students during their breaks, at nearby bus stations, and via their colleagues and family members. Participants with more than 5% of non-responses and those who identified with a gender other than men were excluded from our analysis.

Instruments

In total, seven advertising pieces were elaborated containing phrases which referring to moral disengagement mechanisms, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Relation of the Mechanisms for Moral Disengagement and Sentences Used in Advertising Pieces

Locus	Moral Disengagement Mechanism	Used phrase
Action Recipient	Attribution of Guilt	"I came home and there was no food."
Agency	Responsibility Displacement	"I drank and lost my temper."
Behavior	Euphemistic language	"A little slap doesn't hurt."
Behavior	Moral Justification	"I needed to defend my honor."
Result of the action	Minimization or distortion of consequences	"I hit my daughter because I'm her father. I had to correct her."
Behavior	Advantageous Comparison	"But I didn't even hit my wife. I just cursed her. It could have been worse."
Action Recipient	Dehumanization	"I had to shut her up. Women talk too much."

After participants were shown an advertising piece, a questionnaire evaluating it was applied as a deception strategy, containing questions on its details (colors, typography, and government trademark) and content (if it were creative, drew their attention or pleased them, etc.), to focus participants' attention on the image.

The Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (adapted by Gouveia, Chaves, Peregrino, Branco, & Gonçalves, 2008) was used to assess aggressiveness via a Likert scale ranging from 1 (extremely uncharacteristic) and 5 (extremely characteristic). Overall, six items were included in the questionnaire to use version closer to the original and to focus on an adaptation which participants could more easily understand, considering the studied population and phenomenon. Analyses maintained its original four-factor structure (physical aggression, anger, verbal aggression, and hostility), with acceptable psychometric indices (all above 0.70, except for verbal aggression – 0.67).

Procedures

Data collection: Individual and group applications were defined based on participants' convenience. Data were personally collected from 2015 to 2017, usually lasting 20 minutes per participant.

Volunteers were informed that they would participate in a study to evaluate the effectiveness of an advertising

piece against domestic violence. Thus, a piece was randomly selected and projected to groups or individually shown in a smartphone/tablet. Participants were then asked to answer our piece evaluation questionnaire. This strategy aimed to ensure that participants would carefully examine the shown piece, guaranteeing that they would direct their attention to it. Completion took five minutes on average.

The advertising piece was then shut off and participants were asked to respond to the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire. A deception strategy was used. In it, participants were told that this second questionnaire was linked only to a research project on violence. Application lasted 15 minutes on average.

Finally, informed consent forms were given to volunteers. Information was provided in this specific order to avoid biases regarding our research goal, which was only completely explained at the end of participants' involvement, in which they were debriefed.

Data analysis. A descriptive and inferential analysis was used. Missing data above 5% were eliminated, whereas listwise deletion was used for the remaining data to make up the analysis factors. No extreme multivariate cases and only a few ($n < 10$) univariate ones were found. To test the hypothesis, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and the post-hoc Tukey's test were performed. Following Fidler and Loftus (2009), a graphical representation with error

bars was chosen, while the statistical descriptions with confidence intervals and p-values are to be found in the Supplementary Material.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Brasília University Center under opinion No. 55391916.5.0000.0023. Care in safeguarding participants' data confidentiality was followed throughout data collection and analysis. Willingness to participate and the possibility of withdrawal at any time were informed to participants and informed consent forms were provided, which explained the research goal and guaranteed the

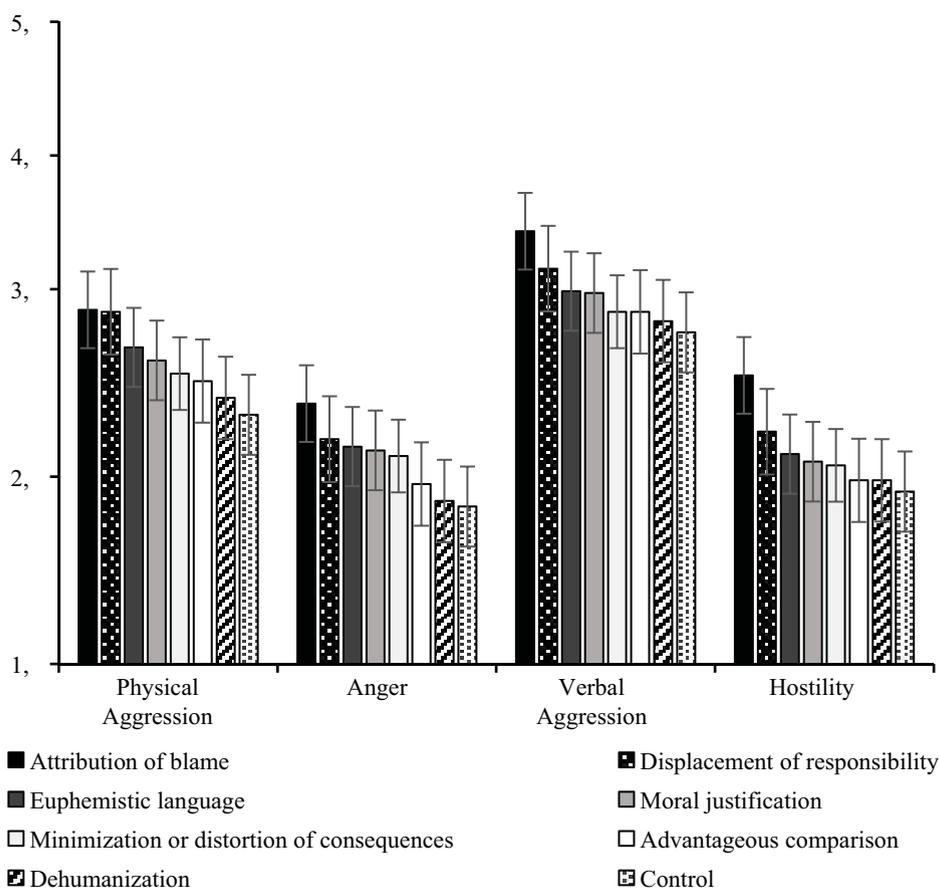
confidentiality of participants' information. These were signed by volunteers. The email of one of the researchers was made available to volunteers in case they wanted to contact us.

Results

The control group scored the lowest in the piece “A little slap doesn't hurt” for the anger factor ($M (diff) = -0.56$; $p = 0.021$; 95% CI [-1.06; -.045]). This piece significantly and marginally significantly differed from other pieces in other factors. Figure 1 shows these results, which our Supplemental Material further details it.

Figure 1

Average (bars) and Standard Deviations (Error Bars) in Advertising Pieces for the Aggressiveness Factors in Study 1



Discussion

Results show that our pieces poorly reduced violence. No piece in this study could reduce participants' self-perception of aggressiveness when compared to our control group. In some cases, they generated a rebound effect, indicating their ineffectiveness. Thus, our design was unable to cause cognitive dissonance in participants and reduce their aggressiveness via moral disengagement phrases, hypocrisy paradigm, and contrast principle.

The significant and marginally significant differences found between “A little slap doesn't hurt” for the behavior and other loci suggest that it increased participants' self-perception of aggressiveness. Thus, publicizing this sentence would increase VAW. Perhaps the background image we used — common to VAW campaigns (Batista & Pérez-Nebra, 2015) —, which highlights female suffering (Green et al., 2020), fails to enable relatedness and activate the contrast principle, thus justifying another study which would manipulate these images.

Study 2

Method

Participants

In total, 303 men volunteered for this study, of which 71 were included in the control group and the remaining observed the advertising pieces. This study followed the same criteria as the previous one, thus randomly distributing participants into groups with at least 30 men. Those with more than 5% of non-responses and those who identified with a gender other than men were excluded. Participants were aged from 18 to 56 years ($M_{age}=21.43$; $SD=4.94$).

Instruments and Procedures

The image and a phrase were changed in this study. The image was replaced by a man with a serious, middle-aged face who sat in a 3/4 profile. The image was pre-tested by 12 members of a research group, which evaluated several male features for the one most resembling that in Batista and Pérez-Nebra (2015). As dehumanizing moral

disengagement in the action recipient locus failed to show any significant difference in Study 1, the phrase describing it was reformulated: "I had to shut her up. Women talk too much," replacing it by "Some women deserve to be treated like animals given how incompetent they are."

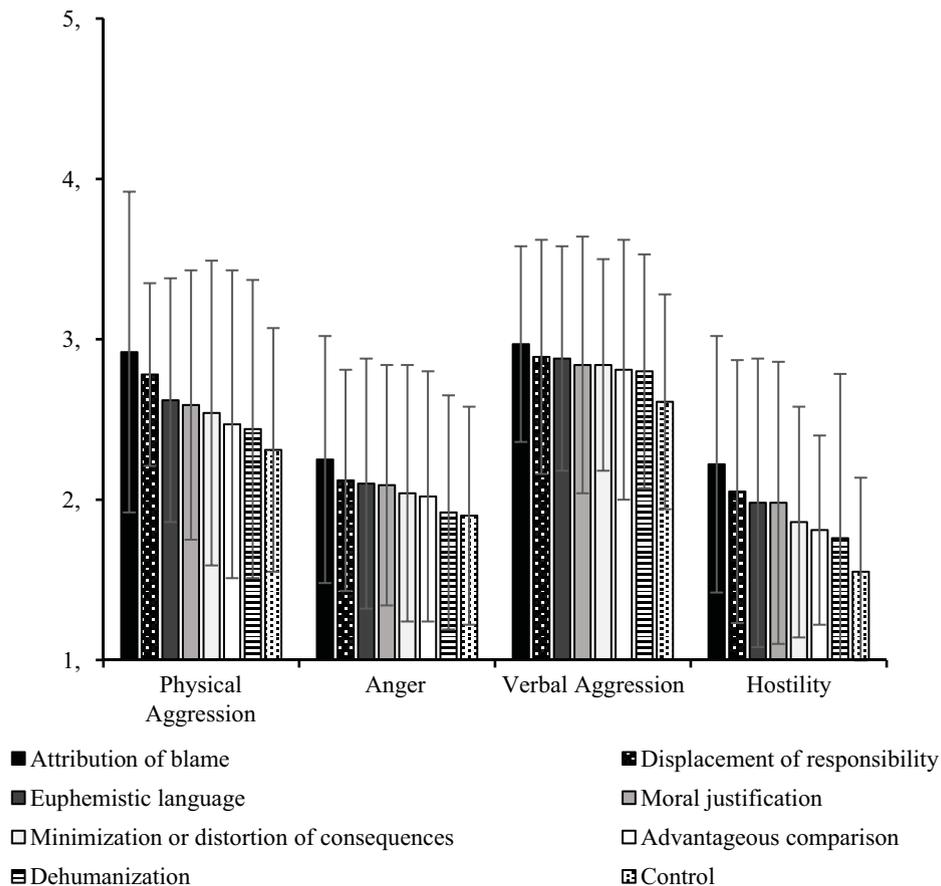
As before, individual and group applications were performed based on participants' convenience. Data were personally collected from 2017 to 2019, usually lasting 20 minutes per participant. Volunteers answered the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire and the same deception strategies were used. As in Study 1, ANOVAs were used to compare the pieces according to an aggressiveness scale.

Results

We found no significant differences in the control group, but observed a significant difference only for hostility between the behavior locus "A little slap doesn't hurt" and the action result with the phrase "I hit my daughter because I'm her father. I had to correct her" ($M(diff) = 0.67$, $p = 0.016$; 95% CI [0.07; 1.26]), in which the first features again more intensely. Figure 2 shows these results, which our Supplemental Material further details it.

Figure 2

Average (bars) and Standard Deviations (Error Bars) in Advertising Pieces for the Aggressiveness Factors in Study 2



Discussion

Our pieces usually showed a low impact on the difference between groups regarding violence, only offering significant results for hostility. Thus, although this study aimed to test the hypocrisy paradigm, moral disengagement, and the contrast principle, it failed to, from a practical point of view, satisfactorily reduce participants' aggressiveness.

Of the loci in Bandura et al. (1996), none showed particular relevance. The following three pieces showed slightly lower means than the control group: the agency locus "I drank and lost my temper"; the action result locus "I hit my daughter because I'm her father. I had to correct her"; and the behavior locus "But I didn't even hit my wife. I just cursed her. It could have been worse." Moreover, although "A little slap doesn't hurt" showed an insignificantly higher average for physical aggression and hostility, it would have generated a rebound effect, as in Study 1.

General Discussion

Our overall goal was to assess how effectively advertising pieces could reduce violence against women via moral disengagement mechanisms, the hypocrisy paradigm, and the contrast principle. Although we managed to do so, our pieces failed to effectively reduce aggressiveness in participants despite our conceptual care in elaborating this research. This highlights the importance of applying the full-cycle model (Mortensen & Cialdini, 2009) to advertising campaigns before they begin circulating, avoiding public spending on campaigns with a poor or even a rebound effect, as per one of our pieces.

Comparing Studies 1 and 2 shows that no advertising piece could reduce participants' self-perception of aggressiveness in relation to our control group. Both studies, by comparing their results, found that the behavior locus "A little slap doesn't hurt" averaged higher than the other pieces for other factors, indicating that it can both increase participants' self-perception of aggressiveness and violence against women, rather than reducing them. Previous studies have reported greater volunteers' moral disengagement acceptance (Russo et al., 2020) after exposure to this mechanism.

We may explain this by associating the phrase and its homonymous song, which enjoyed great success in Brazil. Songs such as this, when propagated, endorse and normalize discourses of violence as they associate it with sexual play and pleasure, creating and reinforcing the idea that women are sexual objects who ask to be hit, disguising and softening their degree of violence (Garcia & Santana, 2020; Scarpati & Pina, 2017). Another explanation lies in familiarity or exposure. Results from other experimental studies suggest that the mere fact of seeing films containing violent sexuality increases sexist attitudes toward women (Malamuth & Check, 1981).

Despite their small effect size, results show that our pieces more effectively reduced hostility. This could relate to the hierarchically lower position of hostility in aggressiveness,

suggesting that advertising pieces will initially act at a primary level of violence. It remains to be seen whether this would concomitantly reduce other factors or be unable to modify intensely aggressive behaviors (Gouveia et al., 2008) but these conclusions require further empirical corroboration.

The contrast effect may also explain our absence of significant results. The image in Study 1 shared the common approach to VAW campaigns, failing to both find the aggressive potential and activate the contrast principle, whereas the image in Study 2 of a man in profile looking away from recipients would have failed to activate the contrast principle. Thus, research may also evaluate contrast by increasing participants' exposure to walks of life in which women are depicted as qualified professionals, business managers, or in positions of authority (Jensen & Oster, 2009).

Another point refers to the induction of hypocrisy. Although we designed our pieces to induce hypocrisy into participants, research is unable to guarantee its obtention. Hypocrisy induces cognitive dissonance as a primary mechanism of cognitive action. However, a secondary mechanism of action could include meta-cognition, i.e., individuals must both reflect on the received stimulus and rely on their judgment (Briñol et al., 2019). Thus, the hypocrisy stemming from exposure to advertising pieces must suffice for individuals to invalidate their judgment on the addressed object and reassess their original evaluations. A command before moral disengagement phrases such as "Stop with the excuse that..." may evidence hypocrisy and increase the chances of it occurring, a hypothesis for future research.

Thus, we suggest that future studies use images in which a man faces recipients and in which a command, such as the aforementioned one, is set before the moral disengagement phrase to test whether these changes would give rise to the hypocrisy paradigm. Another line of studies could include examples of women's positive societal position and in healthy relationships. Unfortunately, several studies using suffering and media show discouraging results regarding changing men's attitude and behavior, thus requiring the proposal and test of other strategies (Green et al., 2020; Jesmin & Amin, 2017).

Important limitations in our studies may also have affected our findings, such as our sample only involving university students; the deep roots of violence against women hindering the effectiveness of punctual interventional strategies; and the lack of the experimental guarantee of hypocrisy. Thus, we hypothesize that we would have found more robust results via a more socioeconomically, geographically, and age varied population.

This study tested the use of moral disengagement phrases, the hypocrisy paradigm, and the contrast principle in advertising pieces. Results suggest that pieces under this model could more effectively reduce participants' hostility, highlighting the importance of empirical evidence before advertising campaigns are circulated. Advertisement should avoid using the phrase "A little slap doesn't hurt" and researchers and policymakers who act against this type of violence should pay attention to the risk of rebound effect

that socially naturalized phrases such as this one show and care about the used images. As VAW is a serious phenomenon causing suffering and representing alarming data in Brazil and abroad, this study can contribute to future research on VAW and to the development of media strategies to prevent and combat it.

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Authors’ Contribution:

ARP-N supervised the conception and design of this study; ARP-N, ANGPS, and CC performed the statistical analysis and elaborated the figures; and ARP-N, AJGPS, CC, and MTP wrote the first draft of this manuscript, with support from JGM. AJGPS, MTP, CTH collected data and ARP-N, CC, and JGM revised this manuscript. All authors approved this final version. All authors assume public responsibility for the content of this manuscript.

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