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Let's talk about Guinness.....and sex

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After Independence, the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland took centre stage in everyday life and its influence left its mark on the legislative and moral codes by which people were governed. However, the 1990s was the decade when its grip was irrevocably loosened. High profile scandals involving priests and bishops came to light, while the number of priests ordained continued to fall significantly. Mass attendance, particularly in urban areas, declined sharply and social mores relaxed. Marriage rates fell, while attitudes to sex before marriage relaxed and the numbers of births registered to unmarried mothers rose sharply. Legislative reform was momentous. In 1993, homosexuality was decriminalised and contraception was legalised. Having previously rejected the introduction of divorce in the 1980s, the electorate voted “Yes” to divorce in the 1995 referendum. It appeared that the sexual revolution had reached Ireland and its arrival did not go unnoticed by advertisers. In this paper, two of Guinness’s TV ads from the 1990s are analysed in the context of the social change that occurred at that time. They are *Monogamy* and *Oysters*, both of which contain plots of a sexual nature. In particular, *Oysters* represents a significant change in direction for Guinness’s advertising and, while it features the familiar pairing of Guinness and oysters, its imagery is far removed from Gilroy’s innocent oyster illustrations that featured in some of the brand’s earliest ads.

The Roman Catholic Church’s fall from grace

Brown (2004, p.367) captures the demise of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland succinctly when he recounts that:

An individualistic morality, which took cognizance of specific circumstances, began to replace obedience to authority and its absolutes even among devout believers (in the matter of contraception it was obvious that many of the faithful had for years simply disregarded church teaching in that area of their lives), especially as revelations began to emerge that distinguished churchmen scarcely practised what they preached.

Bishop Eamonn Casey’s fall from grace in 1992 was just one of the many high-profile stories involving the Catholic Church that hastened the institution’s decline. Ferriter (2005) reminds readers of two incidents that undermined the Church’s credibility when it came to providing moral guidance. The first episode involved a Dublin priest who died in a gay sauna in 1994

while two brother priests, also clients of the establishment, administered the last rites. The second case followed the death of “celebrity” priest, Father Michael Cleary (also known as *The Singing Priest*) when the media exposed that he had enjoyed a double life. Unknown to his followers and parishioners, he had lived with his housekeeper Phyllis Hamilton and fathered two sons with her. While none of these occurrences were criminal in civil society, unlike many of the subsequent scandals, which would unfold throughout the decade, they damaged the moral authority of the Church irrevocably. According to Ferriter (2005), 31 Catholic priests and brothers were convicted of child sexual abuse between 1991 and 1998 in Ireland. Fittingly, the decade’s revelations came to a head in 1999 when the government issued an unequivocal apology to victims of clerical and institutional abuse. In May of that year, they backed this up with the establishment of a commission into the abuse at industrial and reformatory schools.

Consequently, many Catholics felt that they could ignore the Church’s teachings without feeling guilty. This is apparent in the change in attitudes among Irish people to sex before marriage. Fahey and Layte (2007) summarised the results of a number of surveys, which explored these attitudes. They found that in 1973, 71 per cent of those surveyed believed that sex before marriage was always wrong. By 1994, this figure had fallen significantly to 32 per cent, and by 2005, it had plummeted to a negligible 6 per cent. This change in attitude is evident from the rise in births to unmarried mothers, which increased from just 1,600 in 1921 to more than 15,000 in 1998 (Kennedy 2001). A sharp decline in marriage rates is indicative of changing attitudes and according to Redmond and Heanue (2000), by 1994 it had fallen sharply to 4.5 per 1,000 population from a peak of 7.4 per 1,000 in 1973. They go on to emphasise the implications of this variation when they report that by 1996, there were 32,000 cohabiting couples in Ireland, while the number of lone parents was 129,000. This means that by 1996, almost 25 per cent of the population lived a lifestyle that was in direct contravention of the Roman Catholic Church’s moral code.

Cosgrave (1998) disseminates the findings of a 1998 survey of Irish Catholics, which reveal a dramatic and steady decline in Mass attendance. In 1973, 91 per cent of Irish Catholics attended Mass every week, in 1983 it was 87 per cent, in 1994 it was 77 per cent, but just four years later, in 1998, only 60 per cent admitted to attending Mass once a week. However, the survey uncovered a significant difference between urban Catholics in 1998, where just 48 per cent attended Mass once a week, compared with 77 per cent of their rural counterparts. Tumbling numbers were not confined to Mass attendance. Redmond and Heanue’s analysis

of the 1996 census reveals that only 6,500 classified their occupation as Clergy and that half of them were aged 55 or over. When compared to the 1946 figure of 18,300, the extent of the drop is very stark. Meanwhile, according to Ferriter (2005), only 44 priests were ordained in 1998, down from 412 in 1965. Zachary's (1999, p.132) insightful account of the Church's demise contends that:

Rather than showing a positive commitment to secularism, the Irish display a growing disaffection from Catholicism, not because of any concern that the privileged position of the church makes a full commitment to diversity in Ireland impossible, but because a series of scandals have battered its reputation.

The inability of the clerics to lead by example rendered their admonishments and preaching null and void, thus making it easier for Catholics to ignore the rules. Zachary captured the Church's newfound impotence when he observed that in the main, the Irish population accepted its then Taoiseach's, Bertie Ahern, extramarital relationship.

Such travails were in stark contrast to the reforms, which occurred in the Protestant Church in Ireland. In 1990, that Church's hierarchy ratified the ordination of women priests. Following the majority "Yes" vote in the 1995 divorce referendum, the Protestant Church agreed to permit divorcees to remarry in the Church. No such allowance was sanctioned in the Roman Catholic Church, which further distanced itself from its congregation. In 1997, the then President, Mary McAleese received Communion in the Protestant cathedral, St Patrick's, which was seen by many as an act of defiance. As reported in *The Irish Independent* (1997), the Bishop of Killaloe, Dr Willie Walsh, struck a conciliatory note when he conceded that: "Many Catholics sometimes receive the Eucharist in churches of the Protestant faith. I have no doubt they do so with the best of intentions and according to their own conscience."

However, he concluded with an unyielding reminder to Irish Catholics: "The new Catholic catechism and the directory on ecumenism says: 'It is not permissible for a Roman Catholic to receive Communion in churches of the Protestant tradition.'" There is little doubt that McAleese's transgression, in the eyes of the Catholic hierarchy, was yet another setback for the beleaguered Church. O'Leary (2000, p.146) argues that it can be seen "as a challenge to traditional Catholicism, within an increasingly questioning and pluralist Irish society."

The time was right for the State to distance itself from the Bishops and, in response to public opinion and the influence of Europe, legislators reformed some of the State's more conservative laws throughout the 1990s. 1993 proved to be a momentous year. Following decades of lobbying and a series of high-profile court proceedings brought by Senator David

Norris to the highest courts in Ireland and ultimately to the European Court of Human Rights, homosexuality was decriminalised. In the same year, the Health (Family Planning Amendment) Act was passed, thereby legalising “artificial” contraception. In his report in *The Irish Times* the following day, Coghlan’s (1993) account reminds readers of the Act’s significance in light of the immense societal changes that had occurred in Ireland in a relatively short period of time. The unanimous result could not have been countenanced just a few years before and there were no dissenting voices among TDs present in the Dáil that day. The Act allowed for the sale of condoms from public vending machines and, so as to make sure that the public was aware of this, the Government broadcast Ireland’s first TV ad campaign to promote the use of condoms. The international AIDS epidemic, that first gained widespread awareness in the 1980s, enabled politicians to justify their support for the Act because condoms were essential in the fight against its spread. Further legislative reform ensued at the end of 1995. The electorate, which had rejected the Divorce Referendum in the 1980s, passed the 1996 iteration, paving the way for divorce being available in Ireland from 1996.

Guinness’s response to a more sexually liberated 1990s Ireland

Irish advertisers adopted the “sex sells” adage long before the more sexually liberal 1990s. Guinness incorporated women into their ads on a regular basis and in some instances, they appeared in scenarios that were deemed progressive in Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s. Sexual undertones might have been evident, but they were exactly that, undertones, and the conservative audiences at that time did not consider them offensive. Guinness’s *Irish Life* series of TV ads between 1965 and 1970 attempted to place women to the fore in a number of the ads. Some of the scenes might have been suggestive of more liberal associations between men and women than heretofore, but any hint of sexual relations was shrouded in respectability and conservatism. The 1965 ad, *Young Man – Dublin*, features a young couple ordering drinks at a bar. Clearly, they are on a date but there is no suggestion of impropriety and their behaviour is impeccable. The presence of women drinking in bars in Ireland was a relatively new phenomenon and reflected a change in Irish social mores. Nevertheless, an air of subservience is maintained (the man ordering the drink and influencing the woman’s choice, in his case a pint, and in hers a half pint), thereby perfectly reflecting the slow, deliberate pace at which women were being liberated.

In the 1990s, Guinness deployed overtly sexual imagery to promote the brand in some of its ads, satisfied that the more sexually liberated Irish audience would be comfortable with the change in direction. In her 1991 article, Stern employs Snitow's term "two pornographies" to highlight the fact that one uses hard-core imagery and is more likely to arouse men, while the other is soft-core, which is more appealing to women. Obviously, no advertiser intentionally deploys hard-core images in its campaigns but soft-core images became more commonplace in advertising in the latter part of the twentieth century. Stern (1991, p.385) categorises soft-core imagery as erotica, which "depicts sensual images of shared sexual joy." The concept of shared sexual joy is very important because advertising often stands accused of depicting a more pornographic understanding of the male/female relationship, albeit it in a way that is suitable for prime time viewing. Stern (1991, p.384) posits that the domination of women is implicit in pornography, and that: "the participants in the exchange are either male conquerors (sadists) or female victims (masochists)."

In 1996, Guinness broadcast the ad *Monogamy*.¹ It revisits a theme used in a 1966 ad *Party*. Like *Party*, *Monogamy* is set at a house party, but the later ad is much more sexually charged. The moral code in Ireland had changed significantly in the intervening 30 years and even though *Party* depicted what can be assumed to be a cohort of sophisticated, educated women, they were not portrayed as sexual predators. In terms of visual representation, the people in the ad seemed part of the Swinging Sixties, confident trend-setters. The gender divide was less evident than in previous ads and both sexes mingled and engaged with each other on an equal footing. Their behaviour and appearance seemed to symbolise the change that was taking hold in parts of Ireland and, while the men were dressed in shirts, ties and jackets, their female counterparts were wearing very contemporary (for that time), fashionable clothes, including above-the-knee dresses. One woman sat with her legs curled under her on a sofa and she had discarded her shoes. This pose was in stark contrast to the formalities typically portrayed in Guinness's ads at that time and some viewers in the 1960s might have deemed it *risqué*. While there were no shots of women drinking Guinness, they were not peripheral to the scene and they appeared to be enjoying the party just as much as the men. Sexual chemistry between the party-goers simmered but it was understated, innocent and

¹ All copy from print and TV ads cited in this paper is reproduced with permission of the Guinness Archive, Diageo Ireland. Guinness adverts have changed over the years and they are continually evolving to take into account the changing society, advertising rules as well as the internal standards that make Diageo a responsible business. These adverts may contain historical product claims that are not now endorsed by Diageo. In making those adverts available, the intention is not to promote benefits of drinking but to show Guinness advertising over more than 60 years.

uncomplicated. Hence, it is in marked contrast to the much more overtly sexual ad, *Monogamy*, in 1996.

Coulter (2003, p.2) grasps the significance of this metamorphosis when he consigns historical stereotypes of the Irish to the past. He contends that these were uncomplimentary and racist because they regarded the Irish as: “feckless, inebriated and violent.” Having seen an ad in a renowned popular music magazine while travelling in the United States in 2001, he was struck by the featured couple’s cosmopolitan and sexually confident appearance, visibly free of the conservative shackles that had confined Ireland’s young people for so long. The young male in the ad sported a tattoo on his back that proudly stated: “Irish.” Taking his lead from the ad, Coulter concludes: “To be Irish is to be young, fun, fashionable and, above all perhaps, belligerently sexual. Irishness has, in other words, become shorthand for ‘cool.’” Even though he came to this realisation in 2001, it had been a reality for much of the second half of the 1990s. For instance, *Riverdance* in 1994 gave international audiences of millions a different take on Irishness. The dancers were not demure and constrained. Rather, they were sexy and unbridled. They exhibited the characteristics contained in Coulter’s description of the new Irish persona, as captured so succinctly in the quote above. Similarly, the ad, *Monogamy*, moved with the times and tells a story of love, lust, betrayal and disappointment. At the start of the ad, an aerial shot shows a car pulling up outside a house. A beautiful, confident woman takes the hand of a young, attractive man who awaits her arrival. They enter the party, both smiling and surveying the scene. Having removed their coats, they move further into the house, where attractive young people are dancing, drinking and generally enjoying themselves. Despite arriving with a beautiful woman, the man returns the flirtatious stares of other women as soon as she leaves his side. At this point, the viewer assumes that the ad is taking the path most often travelled in ads and movies, that is that the man is anything but monogamous, while his partner is destined to be a victim of his philandering. The man is particularly drawn to a woman wearing a crop top (very fashionable at that time due to the popularity of pop stars like the Spice Girls). She is beautiful and confident, and interacts with him in a very flirtatious manner.



Figure 1

Her crop top bears the phrase, *Monogamy is unnatural*, and she makes sure that he reads it before heading up the staircase, willing and daring him to follow her (figure 1). He succumbs but momentarily falters at the top of the stairs when he sees an open door. Viewers expect the inevitable conclusion to the interaction and the formation of the ad thus far conforms to Stern's (1991, p.388) finding that many ads reinforce an "orgasmic sexual structure." The ad tells a story and excites the viewer by using sounds and images that build towards the climax. However, in this particular ad, the viewer is brought to a particular point and it finishes in an anti-climactic manner for the man. He goes into the bedroom and is taken aback by what he sees. A couple is engaged in deep and intimate conversation whilst sitting on the bed, the place where the viewer is led to believe that he expected to have sex with the woman in the crop top. Meanwhile, the woman whose tee-shirt derides monogamy, seems angry and distraught upon seeing her partner with another woman and runs from the bedroom, leaving him stunned. The couple on the bed is oblivious to the interruption but unbeknownst to the two of them, they have had the last laugh. They are the ones who have turned their backs on monogamy. She is the woman who arrived at the party with the man who was prepared to have sex with another woman. The ad concludes with the tagline: "Not everything in black and white makes sense," followed by a settled pint of chilled Guinness on a black background.

Dusty Springfield's sensual 1960s hit single, *The Look of Love*, written and composed by Burt Bacharach, is the soulful soundtrack to the ad. The ad's story of love and lust is played

out to the first two verses of the classic track, with the actions and expressions fitting each word:

The look of love is in your eyes
A look your smile can't disguise
The look of love
It's saying so much more than words could ever say
And what my heart has heard, well, it takes my breath away.

I can hardly wait to hold you, feel my arms around you
How long I have waited, waited just to love you
Now that I have found you.

The association between the Guinness brand and the song's lyrics is subtle. They might be construed to compare the excitement of newfound love, yet to be consummated, but keenly anticipated, with the discovery or rediscovery of a new product, in this case Guinness. The ad is aimed at a young, promiscuous (in terms of drinking habits) audience, who see Guinness as a drink for older, more mature men. Many of them have not discovered Guinness for themselves and this ad places the brand in a relevant, contemporary, urban setting, complete with a lifestyle to which they aspire or already enjoy.

While the sixties music and black and white tones are evocative of that decade, the clothes, hair and social mores on display clearly belong to a much more contemporary setting. No attempt is made to hide the sexual attraction between the main protagonists in the ad. Moreover, the innocence and formality of the sixties is gone. However, despite protestations from both men and women that they are liberal and favour monogamy, reality is different and it is this twist at the end that gives meaning to the campaign's tagline.

In 1999, the ad *Oysters* was broadcast. It resurrects a centuries old tradition of using oysters to promote Guinness, a duo that was enjoyed as far back as the 1800s. On 21st November 1837, Benjamin Disraeli, future Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, wrote to his sister Sarah, telling her how he had celebrated the opening of Queen Victoria's first Parliament:

There was a division on the Address in Queen Victoria's first Parliament, 509 to 20. I then left the House at ten o'clock, none of us having dined.....I supped at the Carlton, with a large party, off oysters and Guinness, and got to bed at half-past twelve o'clock.

Thus ended the most remarkable day hitherto of my life. (Yenne, 2007, p.33)

One hundred years after the letter was sent, Guinness published his sentiments in an ad in *Time Magazine* (Figure 2).

The top of the advertisement features a photograph of a handwritten note on aged paper. The note reads: "large part of the flower from side of oysters, Guinness". Below the note, the text reads: "DISRAELI SAYS: 'I supped at the Carlton—off Oysters and Guinness thus ended the most remarkable day hitherto of my life'".

Below the quote, there are two columns of text. The left column describes Guinness as a treat, brewed in Dublin from barley malt, hops, yeast, and water, and notes that it is the perfect accompaniment to oysters. The right column states that Guinness is also enjoyed before meals, after exercise, or when tired, and before retiring, and that it should be available wherever good beer or ale is sold.

In the center of the advertisement is a detailed illustration of a tall, dark glass filled with Guinness, topped with a thick, white head of foam. To the right of the glass, it says "Since 1759".

At the bottom of the advertisement, the word "GUINNESS" is written in large, bold, serif capital letters, followed by "IS GOOD FOR YOU" in smaller capital letters. To the right of this text is a circular seal with the words "GUINNESS" and "DUBLIN" around the perimeter, and a central emblem featuring a harp. Below the seal, there is fine print: "The story of Guinness since 1759: 168 pages, 62 illustrations. Write American Representatives: A. Colverson, Son & Co., Ltd., Dept. H-2, 100 Park Avenue, N.Y. 17." and "Copyright, 1929, by A. Colverson, Son & Co., Ltd. G. 11, 940-C".

Figure 2

According to Medcalf (2016), his statement singled out a gastronomic pairing between Guinness and oysters that would stand the test of time. References to Guinness and oysters were made in some of the earliest examples of its advertising in the United Kingdom. The campaigns were spearheaded by the advertising agency SH Benson, who employed the

services of the illustrator J. Gilroy. Consequently, his iconic work became synonymous with many of the beautifully executed illustrations that featured in Guinness's ads.

BBC Good Food (no date) ranks oysters alongside caviar, foie gras, and champagne as one of the world's luxury foods, an accolade that helps explain why they merit their very own festival. The Galway International Oyster and Seafood Festival began as a modest affair in 1954. According to Galway Oyster Festival's website (no date), only 34 guests attended the inaugural festival, but by 2012, this number had risen to 22,000. It has become a major attraction for many domestic and international tourists. Guinness is its longest standing sponsor, a relationship that has been celebrated and highlighted through its advertising since the 1960s.

Fast-forward to the *Oysters* ad from 1999, which was created by the London agency HHCL for an Irish audience. Clearly, it is targeted at a young, affluent, sexually liberated Irish audience that had found its feet in the Celtic Tiger economy. The ad motivated Linehan (1999) to write an article about it for *The Irish Times* and in it, the Guinness Brand Director, Kenny Jamieson explained what they were trying to achieve:

The strategy is a dual one. Guinness has a huge amount of existing drinkers, but its profile in the marketplace is older than we'd like it to be. Every year, there's 30,000 or 40,000 new potential customers entering the beer market, and it's important that we keep them aware of us. But even older drinkers don't want the product to be seen as fuddy-duddy.

The creative execution in the ad bears no resemblance whatsoever to what had gone before in Guinness's oyster-related ads. Instead, the oyster's age-old reputation as an aphrodisiac is unashamedly foregrounded throughout the ad, a method that was by no means new.

According to Buvelot (2017), it was a popular theme among seventeenth century Dutch artists, such as is found in Frans Van Mieris's *The Oyster Meal* (1661) in which a man presents a dish of oysters to a luxuriously dressed woman. In Gerard Borch's, *Gentleman Encouraging a Lady to Drink* (1658-9), a man woos a woman with drink and oysters. In a staunch defence of the Guinness ad's plot, Jamieson stated boldly: "I don't know about sexy. It's certainly sensual, and that will appeal to younger drinkers. But, in terms of older drinkers, there's a recognition that there's a historical link between Guinness and oysters." (Linehan 1999).

Shot in black and white, the ad features an attractive, sexually intimate young couple. In the opening shot, he is scuba diving. When he arrives back to his beautiful girlfriend with a cache of oysters, he sensuously feeds them to her while she is draped across some rocks. She helps him to remove his wet suit and there is a sense of urgency about her actions. The camera lingers provocatively on her toned, bare skin, which is dusted with sand and scantily clad in a black bikini. The flesh of the oyster unashamedly takes centre stage, functioning as a metaphor for the female genitalia (Figure 3).



Figure 3

He feeds her fresh oyster flesh from the shell, which she hungrily devours. Once more, the imagery conveyed is a metaphor, this time for oral sex. The sea's movement, which alternates with images of the couple, simulates a sexual rhythm and one that is about to reach a climax. Then, the camera cuts away from the scene abruptly, giving them some privacy and switches to a close-up of a woman drinking from a pint of Guinness. She licks her lips, while her expression suggests that the taste of the drink has conjured up an intimate memory.

The ad's backing track is the 1996 release, *Pleasant Smell*, which was a hit for the UK band, 12 Rounds. The lead singer, Claudia Sarne moans the lyrics in rasping tones and when married with the visual imagery, she intensifies the ad's aura of intense sexual pleasure:

Ooh you're such a good boy bringing in my tea
Scratching at my blood shoots me with sympathy.

Apart from this verse, two short excerpts from the track are included towards the end of the sea scene: "Dream on" and a final, climactic: "Come," as the camera closes in on the woman

licking her lips after drinking her Guinness. The ad concludes with a female voiceover, who whispers: “Live life to the power of Guinness.” The fact that the voiceover at the end is a woman adds strength to the ad and reinforces the idea of sexual equality. The ad seems to straddle Snitow’s “two pornographies.” In my opinion, it leans more towards the soft-core category because it portrays shared sexual joy. Some might argue that the woman is objectified, but it appears that she is an equal partner, confident enough to lead proceedings at times.

Overtly sexual to the end, it is surprising that the ad does not feature in the ASAI’s archive of complaints. Targeted media scheduling might explain why because it previewed in cinemas and was most likely screened during age appropriate movies. Cinema was a much more contained media platform than television in the twentieth century. However, by 1999 the growth in the number of commercial television channels and the ensuing programme choice facilitated better targeting, thus minimising the possibility of offending and alienating older, more conservative viewers.

Conclusion

With the benefit of hindsight, it was evident from the start of the 1990s that Irish society was on the cusp of immense societal and economic change. It started unexpectedly with the summer of “Italia 1990,” when the Irish soccer team’s army of loyal fans experienced their first ever World Cup tournament both at home and on the streets of Italy. They donned the Irish flag and showcased the tricolor to the world with pride. In another first for Ireland, Mary Robinson was elected as its first female President at the end of 1990. That this could happen in a country where, less than twenty years previously, women working in the public and banking sectors were forced to resign when they married, prompted many, particularly women, to believe that anything was possible. Peillon (2000 p.140) argues that Mary Robinson was a symbol of the “new” Ireland, a country ready to break with the old ways, and all of its failures:

She represented an Ireland from which the gloom was seemingly lifting. And this modern Ireland did not reject the past or exclude tradition: all could celebrate this Ireland. Mary Robinson was the medium of this celebration; or rather, Ireland celebrated itself through its President.

Lack of confidence gave way, on the surface in any case, to a golden decade for Ireland. The economic wasteland of the 1980s was transformed into a booming economy that prompted

the return of Irish emigrants, the same disaffected cohort who had been forced to leave Ireland in search of employment. They were not the only arrivals to Irish shores and soon, they were joined by immigrants from Europe and beyond. The influx of young people from a patchwork of backgrounds spurred on many of the changes that occurred in society, from the Irish electorate voting in favour of divorce, to the fallout of the scandals in the Catholic Church. With the widespread availability of contraceptives and the decriminalisation of homosexuality, the sexual revolution officially arrived in Ireland, some decades after it had taken hold in other Western societies.

Many of Guinness's ads mirrored the seismic societal and economic changes that occurred in Ireland in the millennium's final decade. This paper focuses on one particular facet of the new landscape by exploring two ads that reflected Irish audiences' increasingly open and liberal attitudes towards sex and sexual imagery. More and more, sex in Ireland was not considered a crime or frowned upon when people other than married, heterosexual adult couples engaged in it. Sexual boundaries were not constrained and choreographed by the Catholic Church, an institution that preached one doctrine, while living by a completely different set of rules. The sexual revolution had arrived in Ireland and many, including the advertising industry, welcomed it because it had known for many decades that sex sells!

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