The Effect of Sexual Imagery in Advertising

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ABSTRACT

Sex in advertising or "sex sells" is the use of sex appeal in advertising to help sell a particular product or service. Sex is ubiquitous in advertising, yet little research has explored the effect of exposure to sexual imagery on preferences. Sexual imagery is used to sell everything from clothing to food to auto parts to financial products, and it is particularly used to appeal to young men (Reichert, Childers, and Reid 2012).

Keywords: sex in advertising, sex, romance, preference, devaluation, products.

INTRODUCTION:

To illustrate the ubiquity of sexual imagery in the modern consumption environment, in a recent survey of full-page ads in leading U.S. magazines, sexual imagery was identified in 27% of ads (up from 15% in 1983; Reichert, Childers, and Reid 2012). The reason we primarily focus on adult men is that previous research has shown that women are far more likely to be depicted in sex-based ads than men, and most sex based ads target men (Reichert, Childers, and Reid 2012; see also Saad 2004). However, in explicating the relationship between sexual and romantic motives in men, we also examine the effect of sex-based ads on preferences in women. We focus on the effect of exposure to sexual imagery on preference for romantically linked products and services for two main reasons. First, such products and services represent an array of important consumer product categories, including diamonds, flowers, restaurants, dating services, clothes, cosmetics, films, books, and many more. Second, the relationship between romantic and sexual motives is unclear, and little research has examined the interaction between them. As such, the manner in which exposure to sexual imagery affects preference for romantically linked products and services can shed light on the relationship between romantic and sexual motives.

1. SEX IN ADVERTISING

Sex in advertising or "sex sells" is the use of sex appeal in advertising to help sell a particular product or service. Sexually appealing imagery may or may not pertain to the product or service in question. Examples of sexually appealing imagery include nudity, pin-up girls, and muscular men.

The use of sex in advertising can be highly overt or extremely subtle. It ranges from relatively explicit displays of sexual acts and seductive behavior aimed at the viewer, to the use of basic cosmetics to enhance attractive features. The earliest forms of sex appeal in advertising are woodcuts and illustrations of attractive women (often unclothed from the waist up) adorning posters, signs, and ads for saloons, tonics, and tobacco. In several notable cases, sex in advertising has been claimed as the reason for increased consumer interest and sales. The earliest known use of sex in advertising is by the Pearl Tobacco brand in 1871, which featured a naked maiden on the package cover. In 1885, W. Duke & Sons inserted trading cards into cigarette packs that featured sexually provocative starlets. Duke grew to become the leading American cigarette brand by 1890. (Porter, 1971)

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Woodbury's Facial Soap, a woman's beauty bar, was almost discontinued in 1911. The soap's sales decline was reversed, however, with ads containing images of romantic couples and promises of love and intimacy for those using the brand. (Account Histories, 1926).

1. Woodbury's Facial Soap

   ![Image of Woodbury's Facial Soap Advertisement](source: 1916 Ladies' Home Journal vol 33. pp.9)

Jovan Musk Oil, introduced in 1971, was promoted with sexual entendre and descriptions of the fragrance's sexual attraction properties. As a result, Jovane, Inc.'s revenue grew from $1.5 million in 1971 to $77 million by 1978 (Sloan, Millman, 1979).

The Italian clothing company Benetton gained worldwide attention in the late 20th century for its saucy advertising, inspired by its art director Oliviero Toscani. He started with multicultural themes, tied together under the campaign "United Colors of Benetton" then became increasingly provocative with interracial groupings, and unusual sexual images, such as a nun kissing a priest.

2. United Colors of Benetton
Calvin Klein of Calvin Klein Jeans has been at the forefront of this movement to use sex in advertising, having said, "Jeans are about sex. The abundance of bare flesh is the last gasp of advertisers trying to give redundant products a new identity." Calvin Klein's first controversial jeans advertisement showed a 15-year-old Brooke Shields, in Calvin Klein jeans, saying, "Want to know what gets between me and my Calvins? Nothing." (Sischy, Ingrid. 2011). Calvin Klein has also received media attention for its controversial advertisements in the mid-1990s. Several of Calvin Klein's advertisements featured images of teenage models, some "who were reportedly as young as 15" in overly sexual and provocative poses. Although Klein insisted that these advertisements were not pornographic, some considered the campaign as a form of "soft porn" or "kiddie porn" that was exploitative, shocking, and suggestive. In 1999, Calvin Klein was the subject of more controversy when it aired advertisements of young children who were only wearing the brand's underwear. This "kiddie underwear ad campaign" was pulled only one day after it aired as a result of public outlash. (Robert 2011)

The limited research on the effects of sex in advertising has primarily focused on examining attitudes toward ads featuring the gratuitous use of sex (Dahl, Sengupta, and Vohs 2009; Sengupta and Dahl 2008), the effect of the gratuitous use of sex in advertising on ad recall (Alexander and Judd 1978; Bushman 2007; Steadman 1969), and the sales effectiveness of sex in advertising (Bushman 2005). In general, research has found that sex in advertising does not improve brand recall or sales effectiveness and that men view ads featuring gratuitous sex relatively positively, whereas women tend to view such ads relatively negatively.

In contemporary mainstream consumer advertising (e.g., magazines, network and cable television), sex is present in promotional messages for a wide range of branded goods. Ads feature provocative images of well-defined women (and men) in revealing outfits and postures selling clothing, alcohol, beauty products, and fragrances. Advertisers such as Calvin Klein, Victoria's Secret, and Pepsi use these images to cultivate a ubiquitous sex-tinged media presence. Also, sexual information is used to promote mainstream products not traditionally associated with sex. For example, Dallas Opera's recent reversal of its declining ticket sales has been attributed to the marketing of the more lascivious parts of its performances. (Chism, 1999; Reichert, 2002)

As many consumers and professionals think, sex is used to grab a viewer's attention but this is a short-term success. Whether using sex in advertising is effective depends on the product. About three-
quarters of advertisements using sex to sell the product are communicating a product-related benefit, such as the product making its users more sexually attractive. Nonetheless, there are some studies that contradict the theory that sex is an effective tool for improving finances and gathering attention. A study from 2009 found that there was a negative correlation between nudity and sexuality in movies, and box office performance and critical acclaim. (Simonton, 2009).

A 2005 research by Media Analyzer has found that less than 10% of men recalled the brand of sexual ads, compared to more than 19% of non sexual ads; a similar result was found in women (10.8% vs. 22.3%). It is hypothesized by that survey, that this is a result of a general numbing caused by over use of sexual stimuli in advertising.

The main finding of this research is that watching attractive actresses or nude models can lead to decreased evaluations of potential romantic dates (Kenrick and Gutierrez 1980; Kenrick, Gutierrez, and Goldberg 1989). This effect is attributed to a contrast effect, such that extremely attractive actresses/models make normal-looking dates appear less beautiful and less attractive. For example, a field study showed that after watching a popular television show (Charlie’s Angels) featuring three strikingly attractive women, male dormitory residents rated a photo of an average-looking female date as less attractive (Kenrick and Gutierrez 1980); a lab study also showed that average-looking women were judged as less attractive and less desirable to date after male participants had been exposed to photographs taken from popular erotic magazines (Kenrick, Gutierrez, and Goldberg 1989).

2. THE INTERACTION OF SEXUAL AND ROMANTIC DESIRE

Despite evidence that the desire for sex and the desire for romantic connection involve distinct brain and hormonal systems and patterns of behavior, and that pursuing sex without romantic commitment might be advantageous for men, sex and romance generally co-occur in people’s realworld relationships (Diamond 2013; Hazan and Zeifman 1994). For instance, recent research has found that the majority of sex among college students takes place in the context of an established romantic relationship. In particular, a time-contingent sampling study by Walsh et al. (2013) finds that 75% of sexual events take place in established relationships. Furthermore, of the remaining 25%, most sexual events take place in the context of friends, acquaintances, or ex-partners. Sex with strangers constitutes only 1% of sexual events. Indeed, both research and casual observation support the view that romantic attraction often follows from initial sexual attraction (Berscheid and Reis 1998). This sequence makes evolutionary sense in light of the aforementioned presumed purposes of the drives for sex and romantic connection: the sex drive initially motivates the pursuit of an appropriate partner for sex, and the drive for romantic connection subsequently kicks in to promote the provision of economic and other resources to the offspring that may result from the sexual encounter (without precluding openness to other sexual opportunities that might present themselves). Moreover, because women’s greater parental investment makes them the choosier sex when it comes to mate selection (Trivers 1972), demonstration of romantic commitment tends to be instrumental to the attainment of sex for men (Ackerman, Griskevicius, and Li 2011; Baumeister and Vohs 2004). That is, women tend to put the brakes on men’s pursuit of sexual opportunity without the establishment of romantic commitment. As a result, the desire for sex and romantic connection are likely to be mutually reinforcing in the courtship process.

Conclusion

Sexuality in advertising is extremely effective at attracting the consumer’s attention and once it has their attention, to remember the message. This solves the greatest problem in advertising of getting the potential buyer to look at and remember the advertisement. However the introduction of attraction and especially sexuality into an ad often distracts from the original message and can cause an adverse effect of the consumer wanting to take action. In the 21st century, the use of increasingly explicit sexual imagery in consumer-oriented print advertising has become almost commonplace. Ads for jeans, perfumes and many other products have featured provocative images that were designed to elicit
sexual responses from as large a cross section of the population as possible, to shock by their ambivalence, or to appeal to repressed sexual desires, which are thought to carry a stronger emotional load. Increased tolerance, more tempered censorship, emancipatory developments and increasing buying power of previously neglected appreciative target groups in rich markets (mainly in the West) have led to a marked increase in the share of attractive flesh 'on display'. In international perspective, a 2008 comparison of nudity in television advertising in Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, South Korea, Thailand, and the United States reveals that China and the United States have the most demure ads, while Germany and Thailand exposed more of the female body. There is little variation in male undress. (Nelson, Paek, 2008).

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