

Ethics of sex appeal in advertising media essay



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This treatise puts forward the reality that advertisements with sexual undertones are remembered over and over again than advertisements that are not. The question to ask though is, how ethical is it to make use of sexual appeals in advertisements? And does sex really sell? Social comparison theory as instigated in 1954 by Festinger is used as the theoretical scaffold in this study as this premise states that individuals who have a longing to appraise their views, judgments and abilities can be satisfied by social comparisons with other people. At the end of this write-up, it attempts to recommend to media and advertising practitioners, that they need to apprise the audience who will be viewing their ads before putting sexual innuendos into their respective advertisement pieces; that they need to recognize the moral intricacy of sexual appeal in advertising and integrate that understanding in their strategic thought and when designing their commercial pieces. Quoting Henthorne and LaTour, (1994) as saying that, “as the ethical considerations of society change over time, what is considered appropriate and acceptable in advertising must also change” (p. 88). Therefore, this study shares the idea of how imperative it is to incessantly reassess what society would consider suitable and consider the full level of consequences of their actions before advertising practitioners start considering what they make out as ethically acceptable.

Introduction

“Every media consumer is alert to sex in advertising. Its pervasive use and misuse are constantly before us, and typically elicit strong criticism”

(Richmond and Hartland, 1982, p. 53). As anyone can see, the employment of sex in advertising has been in our midst for several decades and the

reason for it? – It works. Advertisements with sexual undertones are remembered over and over again than advertisements that are not. The question to ask though is, how ethical is it to make use of sexual appeals in advertisements?

“ Does sex sell?” Actually, sex does not sell, but sexiness does (Cebrzynski, 2000, p. 14). By means of sex appeals in advertising is a good way to aim at specific market segments but not all. Questions like — what is identified as sexual appeals in advertising? Where and when should sex be used? Does the use of sexual appeals lead to an advantage for brand remembrance? — must be addressed exhaustively.

Sex and the Media

Today, sex permeates advertising in the United States and in many countries all over the world as contemporary society is extremely fixated with the demonstration of sex in the media as never before. The issue of whether sex sells could be countered by screening the massive quantities of billboards and classified ads which integrate some form of sex appeal or nudity (Pynor, 2004, p. 42). Several reasons have been provided with the use of sexually oriented themes, among them are to achieve product and brand attention, recognition, recall, and sales (Alexander and Judd, 1978, p. 47). Observably, sex is utilized to sell a wide array of products — from cars to fashion products, and is meant to attract not only the male customers, but female, consumers as well.

The employment of sex as an instrument in advertising can be traced back to the 1800s when the advertising industry noticed the beneficial effect of

using degrees of sexuality in their advertising drives. These economic gains include – above all else – an increase in revenue due to the point of difference that sexual schemes provide for the product. Sometimes, the use of sex also affords shock-value that frequently triggers social debate and helps in the product promotion's continuing recall. Author of *The Erotic History of Advertising* Tom Reichert has this to say — “ Many real-life examples from the 1800s to the present exist to suggest that it has worked, and does work, to inflame not only consumers' libidos but their motivations and desires to make purchases. In some cases, sex in advertising contributes to the building of strong, vibrant and long-lasting brands” (Reichert, 2003, p. 9). As it is, the incessant use of sex in advertising from the 1800s until these days is a demonstration of the fact that it is an effective tool that works for advertisers.

Literature Review

Sex Appeal in Advertising

Advertising is “ one of the most prolific and all-encompassing forms of communication in the world” (Reichert, 2003, p. 20). This type of ‘ company to customer’ communication lifts several concerns about the ethics of advertising because its practice is very convincing and powerful (Treise and Weigold, 1994). Advertising has turned to become an excellent way for business firms to create a positive image for them and for the public to easily adapt to such image. Image creation is a public relations approach that has increasingly aimed young adults and teens because they are not interested on conventional direct advertising (Goodman and Dretzin, 1999), obviously, advertisers target the demographic group of young adults and

teens because they account for a huge amount of American consumer spending.

The practice of utilizing sex appeal in advertising is nothing new. Sexual images (nudity) can be found in advertisements as far back as the late 1800s and in the early 1900s, it was used to sell soaps, perfumes and creams. These advertisements claimed to transform any woman to become sexier for a man's pleasure and as sex advertising boomed in the 40s and 50s, controversy abound.

Until today, a lot of business enterprises find sex appeal as an effective tactic in advertising. When Maidenform bras began to use models with their shirts off, it became the number one bra company and when Jovan fragrance used sexuality to sell its product, company revenues soared from \$1.5 million to \$77 million in just seven years (Reichert, 2003).

In a 1981 study conducted by Reid and Soley, advertisements were more likely to be appealing and immediately recognized if an attractive endorse is used (Severn and Belch, 1990). In another survey, 32% of consumers confessed that there is strong likelihood of them buying a product if it uses an advertisement with strong sexual undertones (Fetto, 2001).

Capitalizing on the idea of sex appeal, people sell their products with the notion that such product is for sexy people and to own that specific product can make any person sexy. Such sexiness can be depicted through the clothes being worn, the models poses, the lighting being used in the advertisement, positioning of the models or in their facial expressions, location used, and interaction. Likewise, companies employ this idea to

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connect the company image with allure and prestige. As it is, sexuality associates brands with sexual activities and increased attractiveness, something desired by consumers (Reichert, 2001/2003).

Although the argument that wanton sexual appeals generate off-putting results because of perceptions of disreputable and scheming practices is basic and extremely valid, it also assumes a deliberative, cognitive mechanism. Past research investigations have found that the process of judging whether a persuasive message infringes ethical standards or not demands cognitive effort (Campbell and Kirmani, 2000). Yet end users characteristically spend little time and effort when viewing an ad (Sengupta and Gorn, 2002; Burnett and Moriarty 1998; Kassarian, 1977). Hence, it is imperative to understand reactions to improper sex appeals under “thin slice” processing (Ambady, Bernieri, and Richeson, 2000), such as when consumers view ads under constricted cognitive capacity. Without a doubt, unstructured, spur-of-the-moment, uncontrolled responses may be quite different from more cautiously considered responses in the sphere of sex-based advertising.

Recent research by Sengupta and Dahl (2008) examined non-deliberative reactions to the gratuitous use of sex in advertising. Men and women in these experiments were placed under high cognitive load while viewing an ad that showed an unequivocal sexual image and a nonsexual image. Unlike previous research that has found that both men and women abhor the gratuitous use of sex in advertising, a gender difference surfaced under constrained conditions, that is, men preferred more the advertisement containing a sexual image (compared to the nonsexual image) whereas

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women reported considerably adverse mind-sets toward the overtly sexual ad compared to the nonsexual advertisement.

Basically, sexual imagery sets off an emotional response or reaction. “ In other words, viewers are, all things being equal, favorably energized by sexual information” (Reichert, 2007, p. 6). With this in mind, advertising organizations employ sex in several different ways to try and convince and influence end users to purchase a product. “ Individuals seek out and are willing to pay for sexual content in mainstream media” (Reichert, 2007, p. 7), an example of this reality is the sale in millions of copies of Cosmopolitan and Maxim each month. These magazines’ ads have become more competitive and risqué due to the idea that an ad needs to be noticeable and must draw attention. “ Some advertisers may push the boundaries of acceptable sexual content because of direct competitive pressure. Certain product marketers utilize a higher proportion of sexual appeals than other marketers because of the nature of the product and the relevance of sex to product benefits” (Reichert and Carpenter, 2004).

Another approach being used to draw customer attention is the idea that upon purchasing a product, such will make the buyer more sexually attractive, or can have more sex or can have a better sex life (Reichert, 2007), thus, people who are seeking for such qualities are more likely to pay for a product if the ads are sexually evocative.

Gender Expression, Sexuality and Advertising

This rather outmoded depiction of gender and expression of sexuality continues to be exploited in modern-day advertisements principally because

it is an unbeaten prescription that brings in financial incentive and this will continue as long as women believe – even if only for a brief moment – that acquiring the advertised product will bring them one step closer to attaining the unattainable. As what was pointed out: “ those who are dissatisfied with their looks, their bodies, their status, make great consumers” (Lee, 2003, p. 134). Furthermore, Nancy Etcoff (2000) sums it up well: “ to tell people not to take pleasure in beauty is like telling them to stop enjoying food or sex or novelty or love.” This is an impracticable likelihood because to like and to want is instinctive in human character. Advertisers are intensely conscious of this as they create advertisements filled with representations of dazzling, extremely sensuous women.

Women as Primary Focus?

For many decades, numerous people believed that women are the major focus of sex appeals employed in advertising, however, this is not necessarily correct. It is true that women look as if they are the target most recognized in sexual appeals, but men have been targeted more recently.

If women have often been the targets of sexual advertising, it is because it appears to work in many cases. As it is, sex is a potent and a convenient method of obtaining male attention and making a product desirable and in advertising, it is easy to get a man’s attention by using women’s bodies and associate it to the idea of “ getting the women as well” if he buys the product (Taflinger, 1996, p. 8). The most well known target of women as sexual appeals has been in beer commercials. Usually the ads go something like this — a beautiful woman is sitting at a bar and a man comes up and she does not notice him at all. Then he orders a certain kind of beer and all of the

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sudden, he is desirable to this woman. They then get caught up in the moment and ultimately the man gets this woman (because of the beer).

Another example of the man getting the hot woman because of a particular product that supposedly makes the man more desirable to the women is the AXE advertisement. AXE is a body spray for men. In the commercial, the men who use AXE get beautiful women. In fact, AXE is so effective that if in any way you come in contact with this body spray, you will be instantly wanted. There is also a commercial which features an old man getting a young, hot woman because of the AXE effect.

Women are exploited repeatedly in advertising as sex appeals. But, some do not become conscious that these advertisements are often aimed at women as well. Victoria's Secret is a classic example of this. Advertisers obviously want women to think that if they purchase Victoria's Secret products, they could look like those stunning, sexy endorsers on the commercials seen on television or in the print ads. Obviously, these bra and panties are not going to look very good on just anyone, however, at first glance, a woman could think, "wow, she looks splendid; I should get that outfit so I can look that good too."

In truth, women are not the only focus in sexual appeal advertising. Men play a huge part as well. According to Taflinger (1996), "It is rare for advertising to use sex as an appeal for women. Women are often less interested in the sex act itself for its own sake. They are interested in sex for what it can mean in the future. They may enjoy it as much as men, but for them it has far greater significance. Advertising cannot take advantage of a woman's instinctive sexual desire because advertising's job is not to build for the

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future-it is to sell a product now” (p. 6). Here, Taflinger attempts to elucidate the fact that women are not interested in sexual appeals on television, rather, they are interested in sex for their future. Although this seems to be correct in some instances, it is questionable when thinking about all of the ads that target men as the sex selling object.

Sex Appeal and Product Branding

Sex in advertising can also produce positive mind-sets and sentiments about the ad or product brand. Using catchphrases are huge in the industry along with sexual overtones. A popular example is Las Vegas’s tagline “ what happens here, stays here” (Reichert, 2007). This is very indicative and interesting; people want to go to Vegas so they can find out for themselves what it’s all about.

Sex in advertising is controversial and it is vital to reflect on consumers’ outlooks and points of view. While many feel there is too much sex in advertising (Treise and Weigold, 1994), most people feel that if sexual commercials are crafted with relevance and aptness, these are more likely to be accepted (Gould, 1994; Treise and Weigold, 1994). Innately, concerns and apprehensions crop up when sex appeal usage are viewed by unintended (Gould, 1994). Similar disquiet appears when advertisers target teens and young adults with these advertisements. There are concerns that these advertisements are venerated by young people and teach these young adults improper conduct (Reichert, 2001). Negative facets of this target audience advertising consist of women idolizing the sexual models being used to endorse a product and compare themselves to the advertisements (Gould, 1994). In a survey, 55. 2% of respondents agreed sexual

advertisements influence a teen's decision to be sexually active (Treise and Weigold, 1994). However, the idea in advertising is give and take; the media learns from teens and teens learn from the media (Goodman and Dretzin, 1999). One cannot exclusively say who manipulates whom, so much so that even though end user's anxieties arise, sex continues to be used as an powerful advertising approach.

Reichert and Carpenter found that the level of sexual advertisements has remained constant from 1993 and 2003; the only thing that had increased was the female's level of dressing as it has become more provocative and sometimes offensive (2004, p. 828).

It is fascinating to note that some research investigations found the degree of sexuality actually increased over time. Reichert and Carpenter (2004) conducted an extension of a study that evaluated the degree of sex in 1983 and 1993. Magazine advertisements particularly were content analyzed from 2003 and compared with the issues of the previous years. The general outcomes signified that women not only persisted to be represented in a sexual manner, but that the degree of sexuality increased over time. For instance, advertising became extensively more overt from 1983 to 2003 and clothing (or lack of it as the case may be) largely contributed to this. Results revealed that in 1983 only 28% of female models wore sexually explicit clothes. This rose by 75% in 2003 when 49% of models were dressed in sexual attire. Thus, in 2003 virtually half of the models featured were shown with less rather than more clothing — to be exact, in 2003 almost 4 out of 5 women who appeared in ads were suggestively dressed, partially clad, or nude (Reichert and Carpenter, 2004)). Moreover, the images of women that <https://assignbuster.com/ethics-of-sex-appeal-in-advertising-media-essay/>

were most sexually explicit were featured in men's magazines. As Linder (2004) found, general interest magazines, such as Time contained the least degree of sexualized images, when compared with magazines aimed predominantly at men and women.

The increase of sexuality over time could be associated with the likeness of products that are available today. It is presumed that in 1983 there was not such an immense collection of products available on the market, and therefore did not need to be distinguished from each other to such a great degree. Furthermore, in those years, advertisers were rendered inadequate by the capability of computer graphic technologies. This is definitely not the case today and advertisers frequently resort to stimulating images to make a distinction between similar products. Particularly, according to Reichert and Carpenter, specific merchandise are promoted in a more sexual manner due to the character of the product, such as fragrance and clothing (although clothing is also often used as a means to sexualize other products).

Theoretical Framework

People are continuously evaluating themselves with others and this is certainly no exception when addressing advertising, particularly among women. According to Stapel and Blanton (2004), an important source of self-knowledge comes from other people. Human beings maintain a sense of who they are by contrasting their own capabilities and characteristics to other people. This so-called social comparison theory was instigated in 1954 by Festinger, who hypothesized that individuals have a longing to appraise their views, judgments and abilities that can be satisfied by social comparisons with other people.

Using this premise as a scaffold, many studies have been carried out, predominantly in reference to females which raise the question — does advertising take advantage of consumer tendencies to alter their body or image of themselves by creating anxieties and discontent with the self?

Relative to its effect on adolescent girls which Martin and Gentry (1997) studied, the answer is yes, advertisers especially of young fashion magazines do exploit this mindset among adolescent girls, who evaluate their physical beauty with that of models in the advertisements. Martin and Gentry's study has proven that, consistent with the social comparison theory, female pre-adolescents' and adolescents' self-perceptions and self-esteem can be destructively impinged on when self-evaluation takes place. Other studies have suggested that advertising can have a vital role in creating and highlighting a fixation with physical charm (Downs and Harrison, 1985), and may manipulate consumers' awareness of what is an adequate level of physical attractiveness (Martin and Kennedy, 1993).

This conception of advertisers taking advantage of consumers' perception of themselves is unswervingly associated with sex appeal in advertising.

Recently, advertisers have endeavored into a contentious area with their use of female sexual images and a focus on distinct body parts, language and sex-role portrayals. These advertisers are profoundly conscious that sex appeal in an advertisement has the capacity to exert a pull on women on the premise of social comparison. In a study conducted by Craik, Clarke, and Kirkup (1998), women who were sensitive of stereotypes and were even aware of the spuriousness of the industry still desperately want to imitate these images. Such is the explanation why advertisers reportedly pay huge

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amounts of money every year to have their products endorsed by alluring and well-admired women, since their beauty or personality is assumed to add dazzle to the products they promote (Langmeyer and Shank, 1994).

Recommendations

For media and advertising practitioners, it is important to apprise the audience who will be viewing the ads before putting sexual innuendos into the advertisement piece. Advertisers need to recognize the moral intricacy of sexual appeal in advertising and integrate that understanding in their strategic thought and when designing their commercial pieces. As what Henthorne and LaTour, (1994) stated, “ as the ethical considerations of society change over time, what is considered appropriate and acceptable in advertising must also change” (p. 88). Hence, it is imperative to incessantly reassess what society would consider suitable and consider the full level of consequences of their actions before considering for what they make out as ethically acceptable.