Sex in Advertising: A Closer Look

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I. An Introduction to Sex in Advertising

Today consumers are exposed to hundreds of commercial messages per day in one form or another. Research shows that the average American is exposed to about 3000 advertising messages a day, and globally corporations spend over $620 billion each year to make their products seem desirable and to get consumers to buy them. These advertisers target the consumer’s emotions, wants, and needs using a wide variety of appeals to pull them in. Of all of the appeals advertisers use, one seems to be the most prevalent and controversial: sex. In today’s contemporary mainstream consumer advertising, sex is present in promotional messages for a wide range of branded goods. Some feel that advertisers are taking advantage of the consumer and using sexual advertising too persuasively, others worry about the impact it has on the youth of our society. Why does sex in advertising appeal to the consumer so dramatically? And how does the use of sexual appeal in advertising affect males vs. females? Using research to break down the usage of sex in advertising, the consumer can become better informed and be able to spot when advertisers are attempting to lure them in.
II. The History of Sex in Advertising

The use of sexual information in mediated promotional messages has maintained a foothold in the media since advertising’s beginning. Sex in advertising began when items such as wood carvings, posters, and signs that depicted attractive and scantily-clad women appeared in saloons. In the 1800’s these early sexual-themed advertisements promoted mainly whiskey and tobacco, and were aimed primarily to capture the male interest. In 1890, W. Duke & Sons had risen to become the leading cigarette brand, a rise that could have been contributed to the company’s inclusion of trading cards featuring provocative women in each cigarette pack. Jovan Inc. was able to increase its revenue substantially between 1971 and 1978 by promoting their musk oil with descriptions of the fragrance’s sexual attraction properties. These advertisements and messages have followed American opinion and attitudes towards sex.

American attitudes about sex have moved in cycles that have roughly followed the economy. In the early 1900’s, women were seen as very conservative and seemingly non sexual, but by the “roaring 20’s” flappers had become the rage. The flappers presented a new sexual appeal and added great shock value to a society that had not yet experienced anything that provocative. Advertisers began to notice the change and were quick to capitalize off of the new movements and attitudes towards sex. The cycle continued yet again during the great depression and World War II in a return to more traditional and
conservative images. The cycle of sex in advertising depends on several factors, but is always present, whether it is mild or heavy.

Over the past two decades, the use of increasingly explicit sexual appeals in consumer-oriented print advertising has become routine. In most cases, sex has always been more accepted when used to advertise specific product types, and therefore was not as highly criticized. For example, when a consumer sees an advertisement for lingerie, they are expecting a sexual portrayal because of the nature of the product. At the same time, when a consumer views an advertisement for potato chips they are not expecting to see sexual imagery because the product and sex are naturally opposite. When advertisers began to introduce sex appeal into advertising products not normally associated with sex, the common consumer soon became helpless to their power.

III. The Psychological Appeal

Why do advertisers use sex as an appeal to today’s consumer? Because it works. Sex is regarded as the second strongest of the psychological appeals, the first being self-preservation. Modern psychology has shown that through images mankind both externalizes and becomes aware of its inner nature. For many products it is very possible to find a sexual connection, or even invent one. Sexual desire is an instinctive reaction in animals, and that desire is the basis of an individual’s perception of a suitable mate. People see a sexy advertisement for a simple product, and in turn it triggers a psychological response that they may not even be aware of. Consumers begin to
subconsciously associate these products with sexual instinct and desire. Some critics argue that consumers are helpless against advertisers as it is in our human nature to pursue sex. These psychological appeals feed into not only what drives our hormones, but what also drives our insecurities.

The psychological costs of sex in advertising induced a massive array of self consciousness as well. Powerful erotic images are used for the sole purpose of selling consumer products and the side effects of this commercialization have a major impact on the identity and the sexual imagination of vast numbers of people. Most notably for women, the psychological costs included an endless amount of self-scrutiny and un-fulfilled self-satisfaction. Sexual discontent can be said to fuel the engines of the consumer culture as the ideal bodies presented in the advertisements invite comparisons between consumers and even their significant others. Consumers are regularly triggered into subconsciously entering into competition with other consumers on the basis of looks, wealth, lifestyle, and many attributes of sexual advertising. While the effects of sex in advertising can be generalized, they have deeper impacts on each gender that are not easily be perceived on the surface

IV. Male vs. Female

Sex in advertising targets each gender with a common goal to cause a sexual arousal and desire, but each gender reacts with different responses and actions. Men are generally more susceptible to the lure of sexual advertising, and as such they are more targeted by the advertiser. An example that greatly affects male sexuality and self-identity is the exploitation of the male archetype of
the Armored Knight. The Armored Knight is the warrior who wins self-esteem and feminine favors through defeating and injuring others. Men come to rely on aggressive performance and competition as a way of gaining attention and admiration from females. Advertisers have learned to manipulate the aggressive, subjugating, archetypal male images through advertising. These advertising methods are playing on a male’s instinctive rather than intellectual view of the world. For most advertisements aimed at men, romance and courtship are not the primary approach; it is sex without any difficulties and complications. This approach is most notably identified in many beer advertisements where a man is shown in a situation in which the beer makes him appear sexy, happy, and healthy. Although the advertising message sent to the male is simple and targets both biological needs and psychological tendencies, targeting women requires more work.

Women view sex in advertising differently than men, and as such they have to be sent a different message in order to get an effective response. Though women do have an instinctive sexual reaction, that reaction is strongly affected by their intelligence. While visions of healthy, attractive, and fit men does create a sense of desire and attracts attention, their willingness to engage in sexual intercourse is far less likely than that of a man. Advertisers have learned that to effectively sell to a woman, they must rely on the idea of romance. Women are mainly interested in what sex can mean in the future, and the act itself has a far greater significance to them than men. One specific example would be diamond advertisements in which a man and women are viewed in a
happy and romantic light. Even though men buy most diamonds, the woman makes the purchase decision and the sense of romance appeals to her wants and needs.

As our culture changes, so does the way women are depicted in advertisements. As women become more liberated and more apart of the working world instead of the stay at home mom, their placements in advertisements change. Many typical advertisements that depicted working women usually focused on their sexual availability and appearance, but as more and more women have been appointed to high level positions at large ad agencies, there could be a change. Sexual images have been a staple of advertising since the birth of the advertising agency, but until ads depict women in a realistic way, many women will continue to measure themselves against an inhuman image. As sexual imagery in advertising becomes more common, more explicit, and more exploitative, society must examine what effect it is having on the youth of the world.

V. Effect on the Youth

As consumers are bombarded daily with images, messages, and implications about how they should look, act, feel, eat, and so on, what message is being sent to the youth of the country? Girls and teenagers are arguably the most vulnerable to sexual advertising and beauty-industry propaganda. A fourteen year old girl flipping through the pages of a magazine might see a woman with slender hips, silky hair, and flawless skin. The same fourteen year old girl might look at her own image in the mirror and wonder how she could look
like the model in the picture, maybe she could lose twenty pounds? Maybe she could get the right clothes and makeup? Maybe she could dye her hair? Each year consumers spend around $33 billion in weight loss, $7 billion on cosmetics, and $300 million on cosmetic surgery. Young girls are growing up under the impression that the girls they see in magazines are the girls that they should look like. Most younger girls are unaware that the image in the magazine is the finished product of many makeup artists, photographers, and photo retouchers. Most images are carefully retouched having eyeballs and teeth bleached white and all blemishes, stray hairs, and wrinkles airbrushed away. Teenage girls are being groomed to become the major purchasers of health and beauty products in an attempt to stay young and beautiful.

As marketers continue to target teens and preadolescents, they are having an increased effect on the beauty product industry. Research indicates that female teens spend an average of $506 million per year on beauty salon visits and cosmetics. Many clothing companies have begun to target the younger population with clothes that appeal to their desire to look older and sexier. Teens look to popular magazines as a source of information on the latest trends and products to keep them looking sexy and mature, and as such the magazines become “cash cows” in the publishing trade. Many popular magazines offer columns offering sexual advice, advice that could be suggestive to pre-teens and teens.

Sex in advertising does not only have a negative effect on females, but also on males as well. Some critics feel that young men are being instructed to
regard women’s bodies as objects, and that advertisements are devaluing women as people. Advertisements encourage young men to live a “sexual playboy” or “player” lifestyle by enjoying the company of several females, rather than put an emphasis on relationships. Young men are also exposed to some advertisements that have been criticized for promoting violence against women. Much like females, males also get a view of what they should look like from magazines. Cologne, sportswear, alcohol, and other advertisements often depict trim and muscle bound men promoting products. Such advertisements have been said by critics to lead to increased steroid, protein, and performance enhancer’s usage both for sports and appearances purposes in young men. These images also cause young men to be unsatisfied with the appearance of women their age, and in doing so encourages them to put more pressure on the women their age to change their appearance. As sex in advertising causes increased concern among parents regarding their children, can consumers expect sex to stop selling?

VI. Is Sex Still Selling?

As most consumer are aware, sex in advertising has stirred controversy for many years, and today an advertiser must be careful when incorporating it in a campaign. Great advertisers must not only consider the attention-getting power of an advertisement or commercial, but also the kind of emotional response it provokes in customers. Some campaigns that have been deemed offensive have been boycotted by some consumers, and in turn their sales effected and their brand reputation damaged. One such example, Abercrombie & Fitch, has
been involved in several scandals involving their catalogs that have caused much controversy. The Illinois State Senate passed a resolution condemning Abercrombie’s advertising tactics which featured naked boys and girls frolicking in natural settings. Today we are hardly shocked when nearly nude models are shown on billboards in kid-friendly shopping centers and Madonna and Britney Spears share a prime-time television kiss at the MTV Music Awards. Consumers can open magazines to see advertisements in which an entirely nude former coke addict advertises a luxury handbag in a glossy magazine. With all of this sexual imagery abounding, girl-on-girl action, and sex that is used to sell everything from cars to toilet paper, what has happened? Has the consumer become completely immune to it all? Does sex really still sell?

Recent research has concluded that while sex still sells, it has begun to drop off as the main attraction. In 2004, CNN reported that the “Playboy Empire” no longer rakes in the big bucks, as it had in previous years. Playboy’s magazine sales have slowed down, the magazine’s advertising revenue has dwindled, and its domestic TV business has slid by 16 percent. Even the record industry has noticed the change in effectiveness of sex in their advertising. Currently, songs and artists with a mellow and introspective approach are finding a receptive U.S. audience. Artists such as Brittany Spears and Christina Aguilera that once used sex appeal to sell records and draw an audience have begun to drop off of the main scene. Artists such as Avril Lavigne and Norah Jones are staying on the charts by writing music that's about being in touch with their values, and they portray themselves as self-made people who write about
their feelings, not about their bodies or sex lives. The usage of sex in online marketing schemes has also started to drop off significantly in the last few years. The major problem with using sex in online marketing schemes is the current over-abundance of sexual content on the net. Many people know the internet’s reputation for seedy advertising, porn, and smuttness.

Sex still sells, and it always will. Post-advertising sales response studies have shown that sex in advertising can be very effective for attracting immediate interest, holding that interest, and then introducing a product that somehow correlates with that interest. Although the use of sex in advertising has dropped in effectiveness the past few years due to its heavy saturation and the changing nation, it still continues to sell regardless. As it has been seen historically, the effectiveness and use of sex in advertising is cyclical, and will always resurface strongly.
VII. Conclusion

Today, roughly one-fifth of all advertising uses overt sexual content to sell a product. From its early beginnings on the walls of saloons and on cigarette packs, to scantily clad pop-princesses on stage today, sex in advertising has maintained a foothold in the U.S. culture. Modern psychology has shown that through images mankind becomes aware of its inner nature, and that sexual desire is an instinctive reaction in animals. Advertisers target each gender with a common goal to cause a sexual arousal and desire, but each gender reacts with different responses and actions. Youthful consumers are exposed to many images, messages, and implications that effect how they choose to live their life, both positively and negatively. Sex is still prevalent in advertising today, and it is still selling. Research has reported a drop off in the usage and effectiveness of sex in advertising, but it is still there and always will be.


