

ETHICS OF EROTIC STIMULI IN ADVERTISING

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Abstract: *The use of erotic stimuli in print advertising has become almost commonplace in the advertising practices. But the employment of erotic communication appeals in advertising continues to be a controversial topic. While the use of such stimuli may draw additional attention to the ad, the outcome of the use of such high degrees of erotic stimuli may, in fact, be negative. Sexuality in advertising is a major area of ethical concern, through surprisingly little is known about its effects or the norm of its use. The article is focused on providing a basis for making ethical choices about the use of sexual appeals in advertising.*

Keywords: EROTICS, EROTIC STIMULI, ADVERTISING, PSYCHOLOGY OF ADVERTISING, BRAND

1. Introduction

Erotic stimuli in advertising invoke any message which, whether is brand information in advertising contexts or persuasive appeals in marketing contexts, is associated with sexual information. It has long been an accepted believe that this form of advertising is very effective at attention-grabbing, considered by some commentators as a powerful step in reaching one's target market, especially in the current clutter of 21st century marketing and communications (Reichert & Lambiase, 2003).

Erotic stimuli are an increasingly common advertising tool used in mainstream media as a means for consumer products and brands to gain attention and arouse emotions, which in most cases provokes behavioral response by the customers. It is therefore assumed to be more effective at generating sales, one of the main objectives of commercial marketing activities. Based on that marketing practitioners mulled over the notion that "sex sells" everything (Solomon, 2014).

Advertisers use sexual images for a number of obvious reasons: to attract attention to their messages, to appeal to audiences that approve of its use, and to demonstrate the outcomes of buying and using the brand.

Indeed, effects research generally supports the efficacy of sexual stimuli on consumer processing and emotional responses or example, research points to increased attention toward sexual ads, but indicates also that the sexual information can distract viewers by monopolizing processing resources. Depending on the audience, context, and intensity of the sexual content, sex in advertising can be evaluated favorably and these feelings can influence attitudes toward the brand. On the other hand, people who are conservative, sex-negative, or older typically, respond less favorably to sexual appeals.

Provocative advertising operates through three constructs: distinctiveness, ambiguity and transgression of a social or cultural taboo. It is important to note that not all of these elements of provocative advertising must necessarily elicit negative responses

Research has shown that distinctive stimuli can have a positive effect on attention to the ad, memory, and retrieval and on brand evaluation. It has also been argued that ambiguity – the extent to which an ad is open to different interpretations - can lead to further processing and provide the opportunity for an aesthetic experience.

2. The role of ethics

In order to understand the positive and negative consumer reactions and ethical dilemmas arising from the use of sexual stimuli in advertising, we must review the fundamental concepts contained in normative ethical theories of moral philosophy.

According to Murphy and Lacznik normative ethical theories in moral philosophy can generally be classified as either teleological or deontological (LaTour & Henthorne, 1994). The principal difference between those two frameworks is in their basic focus.

Teleology focuses on the effects and consequences of behavior on individuals, while deontology focuses on the moral rightness or wrongness of behavior, regardless of the consequences (Gould, 1994).

Teleological philosophies are defined as philosophies concerned primarily with the moral worth of an individual behavior. Their focus is on the consequences of individual actions and behaviors in the determination of "worth". Teleological philosophies believe that the individual should examine and determine the probable consequences (in terms of goodness or badness) of alternative actions and behaviors in a specific situation. A particular behavior is considered ethical if it produces the greatest balance of good over bad when compared with all alternative actions (LaTour & Henthorne, 1994).

Deontological philosophies focus on specific actions or behaviors of the individual without regard to the consequences of the actions. Thus, deontology opposes the principal tenet of teleology. Deontological theory states that the rightness or wrongness of actions and behaviors should be judged by the actions themselves without regard to the outcome (LaTour & Henthorne, 1994).

Hence, we can consider the use of sexuality in advertising both teleologically in terms of its consequences and deontologically in terms of its moral rightness or wrongness.

From a teleological point of view, the use of sexual appeals in advertising often is not appealing to viewers and may produce potentially negative side effects such as sexual obsessions and gratuitous sex. Therefore, the consequences (in terms of unwanted or unintended side effects) of the use of sexual appeals in advertising, as well as the fundamental moral rightness or wrongness of its use are of concern (Gould, 1994).

The deontological approach to sexual appeals in advertising focuses on whether such appeals are morally appropriate, apart from their effects. In practical terms according to Gould research is focused on the views, norms and values of all parties included. There are likely to be values segments for the ethics of sexual advertising that parallel those found for pornography.

Another important deontological consideration is whether sexual appeals are used with good intentions by advertisers, or whether they use them in an exploitive and degrading way to appeal to consumers' "base instincts" and to cause consumers to buy "unnecessary" products. A related point concerns the advertiser's sexual ideology. Are sexual appeals merely a marketing tool, interchangeable with other appeals such as humor and fear, or are they used to promote a demoralizing agenda.

According to Gould deontological research must address both the audience of sexual advertising and the people who create and use it (Gould, 1994).

Deontological research must address both the audience of sexual advertising and the people who create and use it. Researchers must explore a host individuals difference variables that may affect how an audience member views and interprets sexual appeals.

The fundamental component in teleological theories is the amount of good or bad contained in the consequences of an act, whereas the essential component in deontological theories is the inherent rightness of an individual act. But it is not realistic to believe that individuals make ethical decisions or judgments strictly on the basis of either teleology or deontology.

Another important variable to be explored is the trait of erotophilia-erotophobia. Erotophilic people have positive attitudes toward sexual matters while erotophobic people have negative attitudes toward sexual matters (Gould, 1992). This trait is reflected in a host of sexual attitudes and behaviors ranging from the use of contraceptives (erotophilic people are more likely to use them regularly) to having favorable attitudes toward erotic films (erotophilic people are more likely to have favorable attitudes). Other variables that could also make a difference in one's ethical stance on sexual appeals in advertising are one's love style (e.g., being more sexual versus seeking more companionship from one's love partner), sexual experience, and stage of sexual development, as well as one's general religiosity, political views and ethical stances (Gould, 1992).

Gender is another variable that must be further investigated by the professionals in the field of psychology and marketing. Men have generally been found to be more receptive to sexual appeals, though this observation may be attributable to the fact that such appeals have largely been targeting on them (LaTour, 1990)

Research is also needed about sexual advertising in terms of its morality, conditions of use, and effects on audiences.

3. Effects of provocation and nudity in advertising

There are different types of sexual appeals who consist of a variety of elements. There is a considerable body of evidence to suggest that the use of nudity and sexual stimuli and/or provocation in advertising has, at best, little impact, or, at worst, a negative one. It is important these elements to be considered because they may determine whether people think a sexual appeal is ethical or unethical. For example, ads that are using physically attractive models are acceptable for the society. But major part of the society would probably oppose nudity in general advertising.

Reasons for the use of such stimuli include efforts to gain attention, increase recognition and recall, and improve sales figures. There is conflicting evidence regarding the achievement of these objectives. Support exists for the effect of increasing attention and recognition but most studies have concluded that sexual content in ads actually reduces consumer recall and recognition of a brand. The same is not necessarily true of provocation, which has been found to increase recognition of a brand while also risking the creation of a negative effect (De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh 1996).

To appreciate the role that mild erotic sexual imagery may play in influencing brand attitudes, it is important to understand how such a process might occur. There are two differing models of how attitude to an ad affects attitude to a brand. The first, the indirect effects model suggests that attitude towards the ad impacts attitude towards the brand through affect transfer, so that attitude towards the brand is formed from brand attribute information already held by customer, combined with ad picture content. It was found that attitude towards the ad has a direct effect on brand choice and an indirect effect through attitude towards the brand. Crucial to this last picture is the implication that ad disliking does not necessarily lead to brand rejection. Although attitude towards the ad may have a detrimental effect on attitude towards the brand positive feelings about a brand might moderate or even remove negative impact of attitude toward the ad on attitude toward the brand.

While it has been established that sexual stimuli in ads can increase consumer arousal (LaTour, 1990) this arousal has been found to have a negative effect on attitude toward the ad. This is not to deny that nudity can make an ad more interesting but that some

evidence would also suggest that this interest does not enhance the communication ability of the ad. In fact it may actually detract from positive feelings (LaTour, 1990). Provocation appears to reduce attitude toward the ad but the effect on attitude toward the brand is still open to question.

4. Ethical concerns about using erotic stimuli in advertising

Despite all the positive effects that erotic stimuli in advertising have, researchers in the field of psychology and marketing have identified a range of unintended effects.

Investigators and commentators have stated that repeated exposure to such images may contribute to a broad range of social problems, including sexist attitudes and beliefs, sexual harassment, violence against women, eating disorders, and stereotyped perceptions of and behavior toward men and women. Erotic advertisements tend to reflect a more limited representation of gendered roles which lead to creating negative portrayals. Such portrayals inaccurately depict men's and women's roles in society and may ultimately influence individuals to believe that the portrayals are accurate. Thus, negative stereotypes are created (Ferguson et al., 1990).

In studies done to compare gender stereotyping, it was found that female characters are less in a working roles and they also are treated as sex objects, as objects of the desires of men (Schroder, Wulf, & Hofstee, 2002). The female bodies are shown in exaggerated and provocative postures. Highlighting on the importance of the physical appearance of women, focusing on their body parts. The bodies are exploited to attract attention. This leads to a process of objectification which is demeaning and dehumanizing.

Erotic advertising is criticized as well for producing distorted body images by setting unrealistic standards of female beauty and thinness.

Women that are shown in the ads usually are thin with perfect bodies. This leads to an unrealistic ideal both for men and women about the way that a woman should look. In one hand men are provoked to pay attention to the physical appearance of women and in order to face those unrealistic standards women usually start having problems with eating disorders.

That portrayals of beauty in ads play a causal role in shaping women's perceptions of and satisfaction with their bodies. Researches have shown that exposure to highly attractive female images in most common cases increases body dissatisfaction among women. The effects are that women exposed to sexist ads perceive themselves as heavier than women exposed to nonsexist ads. Women exposed to sexist ads exhibit a greater discrepancy between actual and ideal body size. Also, women exposed to sexist ads overestimate both men's and other women's desire for a thin body size.

But those ads increase in most common cases the body dissatisfaction among men. Ads that portray women as sex objects also portray especially attractive, athletic, or muscular men and thereby cause men to feel insecure about their bodies through social comparison.

Men tend to perceive themselves as underweight (and as thinner than they actually are) and report a desire to be larger and bigger. Men also overestimate both women's and other men's preferences for a large, muscular physique for men. They exhibit a greater discrepancy between actual and ideal body size, as well.

Other negative effects of using sexually explicit materials in advertising are that they may lead to sexual preoccupation, sexual violence, hostility toward women, forming gender stereotypes in youngsters.

Another issue concerning the use of sexual stimuli in advertisements is whether it affects consumer's perception of the company portrayed in an ad. This perception is often conceptualized as corporate image.

In advertisements with nudity, the associated company is deemed to be less reputable and the producer of a lower quality product. It has also been found that a company that uses nudity in advertising would be perceived to be discriminatory in its employment practices.

5. Conclusion

Although sexual themes and erotic stimuli have been largely used in advertising, they continue to be a controversial topic. Sexuality in advertising is a major area of ethical concern as evidenced by quoted theories and researches.

Advertisers should reduce the provocation level of commercials with sensual. It would decrease the risk of hurting the sensitivity of individuals and avoid the creation of negative emotions. Advertisers should use prominent levels of erotic content in print advertising. Care and consideration should be directed to predetermining the reaction of their particular target market to print ads containing high levels of erotic content.

Additionally, advertisers must consider the likely exposure of individuals outside of the selected target market and the subsequent possible negative social consequences (e.g., perceived sex objectification (Ford and LaTour, 1993), perceived degradation of women (Gould, 1994), increased promiscuity (Boddewyn and Kunz, 1991), negative word of mouth to the exposure.

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