

## SEX IN ADVERTISING ... ONLY ON MARS AND NOT ON VENUS?

*Darren W. Dahl, Kathleen D. Vohs and Jaideep Sengupta*

### THE AUTHORS

*Darren W. Dahl*, Sauder School of Business, University of British Columbia, Canada, [darren.dahl@sauder.ubc.ca](mailto:darren.dahl@sauder.ubc.ca)

*Kathleen D. Vohs*, Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota, USA, [kvohs@umn.edu](mailto:kvohs@umn.edu)

*Jaideep Sengupta*, School of Business and Management, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong, [mkjaisan@ust.hk](mailto:mkjaisan@ust.hk)

In an effort to cut through the tremendous clutter that exists in today's advertising space, marketers have resorted to increasingly radical tactics to capture consumer attention. One such popular tactic uses explicit sexual images in advertising, even when the sexual image has little relevance to the advertised product. For example, a recent print ad campaign for Toyo Tires showed a nude female model crouched on all fours with the tag-line "Tires that Fit You".

Although such gratuitous use of sex in advertising undoubtedly succeeds in capturing attention, one may question whether evaluative reactions are favorable among different segments of consumers. Prior research on spontaneous evaluations of sexually-themed ads showed that men's reactions to such ads were globally positive: they liked sex-based ads more than neutral ads. Women's reactions, however, were decidedly negative: they preferred neutral ads to sex-based ads. These findings indicate that for a large segment of consumers, the old marketing cliché "sex sells" may not hold.

Why do women react negatively to explicit sex in advertising? Furthermore, are there tactics that would reduce this adverse reaction? Answers to these questions are of practical value, and the research we report here addresses them both.

### **Men are from Mars, Women from Venus: Gender Differences With Respect to Sex**

Sexual psychology notes stark differences in men's and women's sexual beliefs and motivations. Specifically, this view argues that men tend to adopt a relatively recreational orientation towards sex, an approach that em-

phasizes physical gratification and views sex as an end in itself. In contrast, women tend to adopt a relationship-based orientation to sexuality, an approach that emphasizes the importance of intimacy and commitment in a sexual relationship.

The premise that women and men have different motives regarding sex receives theoretical backing from both evolutionary and socialization models of human behavior. Briefly, an evolutionary view of sexual motives is based on the model of differential parental investment, which argues that because human females must invest far greater resources (e.g., nine months of their lives and intense metabolic costs) to produce offspring than human males, women tend to be correspondingly more selective in their choice of sexual partners. Men, conversely, benefit reproductively by taking advantage of opportunities to engage in sexual intercourse with a large number of women, with little regard to long-term consequences. This account thus argues that evolution has produced an urge for casual, non-invested sex in men but an aversion to casual, non-invested sex in women. Socialization-based models see these tendencies reinforced throughout the socialization process of the individual.

Adding to this discussion, sexual economics theory marries the idea of gender differences in terms of sexual attitudes with social exchange theory. It argues that because women possess greater negotiating power than do men when it comes to sex, they are in a position to ask for additional resources to make the exchange equitable. These additional resources can take one of two broad forms: they can be pecuniary or, as the current analysis highlights, they can also be non-material in nature. Specifically (and consistent with the conclusion we derived earlier from the broader literature on sexual motivations), relationship commitment may be seen as a valuable resource offered by the man in the context of a sexual exchange.

### **Female Relationship Orientation and Effects on the Attitude to Sex Appeals**

All these theories explain why women tend to have a negative attitude towards the gratuitous use of sex in advertising. Sexual ads place sex outside of the context of a committed relationship and, in doing so, make salient the notion that sex is its own justification. Although this view is consistent with men's perspective on sex, it is misaligned with women's, therefore accounting for women's negative reactions. If this reasoning is correct,





{ Box 1 }

## EXPERIMENTAL SETTINGS TO TEST SEXY ADS

The ideas described in the preceding sections were tested in four experiments. In all studies, participants viewed an ad for a wristwatch containing either a graphic sexual image or a non-sexual image under constrained processing conditions – that is, the typical (low-involvement) manner in which consumers view ads. Regression analysis was applied to analyze the results.

Experiment 1 used the stimuli ads to examine the prediction that women's attitudes towards the sexual ad can be improved under conditions of a commitment frame by positioning the product as a gift from a man to a woman. Specifically, the sexual ad was altered to show a red ribbon on the watch and a statement was added that indicated the watch was positioned as a gift from a man to the special woman in his life (i.e. a gift sexual ad condition). Three other conditions were also tested: a non-gift sexual ad, a gift non-sexual ad, and a non-gift non-sexual ad.

Experiment 2 provided a more direct test of the underlying logic by manipulating the accessibility of relationship commitment and intimacy immediately prior to ad viewing. Specifically, this study used a priming technique to make salient either the notion of a loyal, committed romantic partner or a disloyal, uncommitted partner. The priming was executed by having participants read a short paragraph, which contained the priming manipulation, ostensibly to check for spelling mistakes. In the committed partner condition, participants read a paragraph describing a relationship between Mary and John in which John was described as a loyal, committed partner. The uncommitted partner paragraph described John as a disloyal, uncommitted partner. Finally, the control paragraph did not focus on a romantic relationship but instead described a student club run by John and Mary. After answering some distracter questions and receiving the cognitive load task, participants were exposed to the target ad (sexual or non-sexual ad) and filler ads and asked to evaluate them.

The final two experiments 3 and 4 examined how the specific nature of commitment (generalized versus directional) differentially influenced reactions to the sexually-themed ad. The priming manipulation switched genders between the giver and the receiver of relational resources. In the committed partner condition, the paragraph described a relationship where the woman was the loyal and committed partner, whereas the uncommitted partner paragraph described the woman as the disloyal partner.

it implies that women's unfavorable reactions can be alleviated if an ad depicts sex in a manner that is consistent with their underlying values. In particular, women's attitudes are likely to be boosted if the sexual image can be understood in the broader context of a committed relationship. Such an interpretation may be made possible either through the use of appropriate cues in the ad itself (e.g., if the advertised product is positioned as a signal of commitment), or, more subtly, by making thoughts of relationship commitment and intimacy accessible prior to ad viewing.

Therefore, cocooning a sexual image within the context of relationship commitment would help to improve women's attitudes towards such images. An argument based on sexual economics theory, however, would take this reasoning a step further. Because of its exchange-based conceptualization, sexual economics theory suggests that women will think sexual contact is most permissible when valued resources are offered by the man to the woman. Therefore, in an advertising context, an argument based on sexual economics theory would agree that women's attitudes towards explicit depictions of sex can be improved by making relationship commitment salient; it would further posit a directionality to the gesture. This directionality is in the form of relationship commitment as a resource that the man offers the woman. Accordingly, improvement in women's attitudes would not be seen if resource offerings were missing or reversed – for instance, if thoughts of a committed relationship come from the woman's side instead of the man's. Box 1 describes the experiments to test the ads.

### Experimental Evidence: Gift and Commitment Contexts Improve Women's Reactions to Sexy Ads

The results of experiment 1 showed that the sexual ad on its own – that is, without the gift positioning – produced a worse attitude than the non-sexual ad (replicating past results). However, women's attitudes towards the sexual ad improved when the advertised product was positioned as a gift from a man to a woman. Importantly, only in the context of a sex-based advertisement did the gift positioning have an impact on women's reactions, as the gift positioning on its own failed to produce a favorable reaction insofar as it did not influence attitudes toward the non-sexual ad. The results are consistent with theory and suggest one way in which women's dislike of explicitly sexual advertising may be alleviated (Figure 1).

The results of experiment 2 indicated that women's attitudes toward explicitly sexual advertising vary substantially depending on whether the depicted sexual behavior can be interpreted in light of a committed relationship. Priming female participants with the notion of a committed relationship partner improved their reactions toward an ad that featured a gratuitous sex appeal. Conversely, being primed with the idea of an uncommitted relationship partner worsened women's negative reactions to a sex-based ad. However, these priming effects were specific in that they were observed only for the sex-based ad and not for the non-sexual ad. The consequences of activating the idea of relationship commitment within women are not global but appear particularly tied to the concept of sex.

According to predictions, an improvement in attitudes will be seen only if relationship commitment is viewed as a resource transfer to a woman from a man. Indeed, findings from both studies 3 and 4 were supportive of the sexual exchange stance. Using priming manipulations similar to those utilized in the second experiment, more favorable attitudes were induced by a prime of a man proffering relationship commitment to a woman as compared to either a prime of a woman proffering relationship commitment to a man or a couple's shared expressions of commitment. It seems that simply heightening the accessibility of thoughts regarding romantic commitment does not yield an improvement in women's attitudes toward sexual advertising, but rather an improvement in attitudes is only seen when relationship commitment is viewed as a resource transfer from a man to a woman.

#### An Explicit Gift Giving Context Negatively Affected Men's Reactions

Alongside the focus on women's reactions, the results revealed intriguing insights into men's responses to sexual advertising. In support of the view that men value sex as a recreational activity and therefore do not need further rationalization for depictions of sexual behavior, the findings repeatedly demonstrated that heightening the accessibility of thoughts relating to relationship commitment did not influence men's (already favorable) attitudes towards the sexual ad, regardless of the directionality of such thoughts. However, one notable exception emerged. Despite their steadfast support for sex-based advertising, men reacted negatively to sexually-explicit ads when the ads strongly reminded men that they may, at times, de-

vote monetary resources in the pursuit of sexual contact. Experiment 1, in which this result was obtained, differed from the other studies in a qualitative manner in that it highlighted gift-giving from a man to a woman, which clearly indicates money spent.

#### Conclusions

In 1968, *Look* magazine reported that the "days of scantily clad models in advertising are numbered", but a glance at any and all manner of media today reveals that reports of its death were more than premature. Marketers and advertisers continue to use sexuality in advertising and promotion, and it is ubiquitous across product categories and markets even though women dislike it. The current research supports earlier research suggesting that explicit depictions of sex can be problematic, especially with regard to women's spontaneous reactions. However, it found that this aversion can be mitigated if the sexual imagery depicted in the ad could be interpreted in light of a relationship laden with devotion and commitment. Notably, women's attitudes towards sexual advertising are softened only insofar as the ad suggests that women are receiving valued resources (e.g., time, affection, commitment) from men, as opposed to the reverse or generalized ideas of romance or commitment. Therefore the appropriate use of positioning and relationship context can improve women's attitudes towards the ad and brand. Marketers should exercise caution when using sex to promote products if women are part of the target audience. This research provides guidelines to reduce potential downsides for women... but they need to be balanced against potential adverse effect on the male members of the audience! •

**FIGURE 1:** Ad Attitudes as a Function of Gift versus no Gift Positioning and Sexual versus Nonsexual Ad (Experiment 1)

