

Sexual Suggestiveness in Advertisements and Its Impact on Gendered Consumer's Purchasing Power in China

Zhuowen Yang*

Abstract—Sexual elements in the visual design and unique layout of advertisements have been with us for a long time. Commercials, pamphlets, and electronic posts with almost naked models and pretty women are everywhere in TV programs and websites. The primary goal is to stimulate the viewer's curiosity and gratification of vicarious pleasure, while prompting the potential customer to look at the products along the side. The designer wants to deal with the human psyche and the action motivated by this visual layout to entice the prospective buyers. A pretty, skimpily clad woman with an attractive figure, charming lips and mesmerizing stare is the matching configuration to seek business transaction and virtual profits. It deserves a careful examination of the interaction between the advertisement and business, especially the layout's sexual and erotic appeal to the viewer's emotional response. The statistical results of the survey conducted in 2020-21 and follow-up assessments have shown that most respondents answered either not quite enthusiastic or indifferent to the visual images of sensational exposing of the body and erotic attraction in the advertisements. My investigative research also indicates the correlation of gender and advertisement in terms of motivation and desire for purchasing the product. Emotional responses to the advertisements from the participant-interviewers will also be an important indicator of connection between image and business. It is interesting to add the issue of respondent's gender to the questions in the survey. A tentative assessment of the survey and follow-up analysis concludes that the effectiveness of glamorous images in the advertisements promotes the sale of product and somewhat increases revenues, whereas the excessive display of human body bordering on vulgarity and sensationalism may thwart the customer's purchasing desire and tarnish the image of the brand as well.

Index Terms—Advertisement, consumer psychology, sexual elements.

I. INTRODUCTION

Sexual elements in the visual design and unique layout of advertisements have been with us for a long time. Commercials, pamphlets, and electronic posts with almost naked models and pretty women are everywhere in TV programs and websites. The primary goal is to stimulate the viewer's curiosity and gratification of vicarious pleasure, while prompting the potential customer to look at the products along the side. The designer wants to deal with the human psyche and the action motivated by this visual layout, while enticing the prospective buyers. A pretty, skimpily clad

woman with an attractive figure, charming lips and mesmerizing stare is the matching configuration that seeks business transaction and virtual profits. It deserves a careful study of the interaction between advertisement and business, especially the layout's sexual and erotic appeal to the viewer's emotional responses. As the statistical results of the survey conducted in 2020-21 and follow-up assessments have shown the wide spectrum of emotional responses when people saw the visual images of sensational exposing of the body and erotic attraction in the advertisements. My investigative research also indicates the correlation of gender and advertisement in terms of motivation and desire for purchasing. Emotional responses to the advertisements from the participant-interviewers will also be an important indicator of connection between image and business. It is interesting to add the issue of respondent's gender to the questions in the survey. The essay concludes that the glamorous images in the advertisements effectively promotes the sale of product and ramps up revenues, whereas the excessive display of human body bordering on vulgarity and sensationalism may thwart the customer's purchasing desire and consequently ruin the image of the brand [1].

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexual elements include nudity, exposed private parts, and suggestive words or descriptions [2]. The viewer's response to the images is associated with his/her psyche, the subconscious, that is, the feelings stemming from the mind under the threshold of human conscious and arousing your emotions or memories without your awareness [3]. Therefore, advertisers intentionally guide consumers' emotions in the direction related to sex by indirect words, seductive actions, or women with a good figure. The use of visual sexuality is a subtle thing for advertisers because it tends to swing between obscenity and being too obscure to be perceived. Obscenity is illegal and carries criminal charges, whereas indecency does not. To be considered obscene, an advertisement must meet three conditions: it appeals to prurient interests, it is patently offensive, and it lacks any redeeming social value. The use of sexual elements that are legal is regarded by advertisers as the easiest creative marketing method [4].

From the perspective of biological psychology, sex-related stimuli (such as pictures or sounds) can make the brain feel pleasure through various ways. After this stimulus appears repeatedly, it may become a CS (a term short for Customer Satisfaction) [5]. Therefore, consumers may feel aroused when they see advertisements with such stimulation. At the same time, according to Freud's subconscious theory,

Manuscript received June 30, 2022; revised September 6, 2022; accepted December 10, 2022.

Zhuowen Yang is with the Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College, China.

*Correspondence: 13711506599@163.com.

sexual desire is the primordial desire that people are born with. For the reason of social constraints and their own moral suppression, people rarely speak out loud about their sexual desire. These repressed sexual desires are expressed through art and other forms of presentation like advertisements or websites. The reason that suggestive advertisements may succeed is also related to consumers' libido or their primal drive [6]. However, for sex appeal to achieve an emotional arousing, most of the researches are still in the preliminary and theoretical level, and only a few samples of life experience can confirm it. Some scholars think that the subconscious stimulus is too small or intangible to be easily felt by consumers, so that it has no effect [7]. Scholars claim that sex appeal helps cultivate brand loyalty, because people will transfer the happiness and pleasure associated with seeing this stimulus to the products [8]. In contrast, others believe that there is a dubious relationship between sex appeal and positive brand recognition because each person has different feelings of acceptance and preferences for sexual culture [9]. Therefore, the use of sexual cues sometimes prompts people's resentment.

Based on the critical assessments and evaluations done by previous studies, sex-related elements have actually enhanced people's interest and attention. However, it may also distract people from the main subject information of the product and alter the purchase desire [10]. In addition, differences in gender and cultural backgrounds merit a careful investigation into people's views on the aspect of subconscious in advertisements. For example, the general public view claims that sexual cues related to the opposite sex will attract the customer more. However, in Akira's 2009 study of on-the-field surveys and interviews, it discovered that both men and women favor beautiful women, but men tend to be more tolerant than women to nudity [11]. In addition, the use of sexually implicit or innuendo advertising may change the viewer's image of the brand itself, because it lacks social responsibility and violates ethics, thereby affecting the public's acceptance. As a result, it may diminish the public's positive view of the brand. At the same time, the frequent use of sexual attractiveness may be overwhelming in its manifest intent of creating a false or demeaning image of a particular gender. If the image appeals to consumers of one gender, it is likely to provoke resentment and disgust in the other gender [4]. Cultural differences are also an important factor to consider. In Asian countries, collectivists outnumber individualists. Therefore, in countries like China, most people are highly instilled to the core values and moral teachings of their tradition. The deep immersion of ethical considerations and social responsibility cause people to favor advertisements that are more subtle and implicit than direct and overt [12].

With the premises made by the foregoing studies, I conducted an experimental survey to examine subconscious factors in advertisements and their impact on local people's desire of purchasing the product. The study first conducted field surveys and interviews. Questionnaires and patters of scale were designed to gather the responses to issues such as subconscious cues in advertisements and people's acceptance of sexual images. The correlation of such publicity to the purchase rate in China was also examined.

III. METHOD

A. Participants and Experimental Applications

First, perfume is favored as the major commodity because it is usually considered to be sexy. And the choice can make the subconscious factors more obvious [13]. In this experiment, the age groups from 18 to 26 years old in the first and second tier cities of China were selected as the participants. They have similar educational backgrounds, and live in coastal developed cities. It is also clear that perfume and other luxury goods are mainly targeted at these cities.

The first step was to narrow down the target consumers as participants and conduct the questionnaire survey. The survey included questions like "have you ever bought perfume before?", and "Do you see yourself as a regular customer to buy perfume?". The aim was to remove the non-relevant subject-respondent who would not buy the product regardless of the images or forms of advertisements presented. The experimental study then selected plain photos as the main visual material, and adopted an emotion scale, while giving a simple questionnaire to measure the degree of sexual suggestion and consumers' emotion and purchase desire.

In the course of the investigation, the object of study was a group of young people who were accustomed to buying perfume and had acquired some years of college education. In order to ensure that the products had no brand effect on the subjects, we eliminated the brand information and took black and white photos of them. The black and white design of the photo was to avoid the influence of color and light on the subject.

B. Experimental Group and Control Group

For perfume, there were a group of control photos and two groups of experimental photos produced respectively. The two print advertisements in the control group were displayed by ordinary display platform and simple product description such as "perfume". The photo of group 1 was a perfume display of a female model, as well as an ordinary display stand. The order of the two advertisements was random. The photo of group two was a male model displaying perfume, and an ordinary display stand. The order of the two advertisements was random. Then, each experimental group was given the same number of male and female subjects to complete the experiment.

C. Experimental Process

The pictures of the two experimental groups and the pictures of the control group appeared in a different order in each experiment to counteract the possible influence of the appearing order on the experiment. 45 men and 45 women were randomly divided into three groups, each group had 30 participants in total. They were asked to view two pictures of their own experimental group in a random order for 12 seconds. According to the literature, 12 seconds is the time when visual cortex transmit stimuli and make people's emotions change. So, we showed the consumers the pictures for 12 seconds [14]. The participants were then asked to fill in the emotion scale, as well as a questionnaire with questions such as "The following photos will be used as illustrations of advertisements. Which would you likely buy?", "Do you think of the suggestive elements in this picture?", and "Are these pictures sexually attractive to you?"

The emotion scale in advertising is a self-test designed by Dr. Mai to measure the emotional changes of consumers after watching TV advertisements. It contains 20 kinds of common emotions, and the score range of each is 1 to 5 points. The higher the score, the stronger the emotion at that time [15]. The scale is shown below.

TABLE I: SELF-TEST EMOTION SCALE

Humour	1	2	3	4	5
Warmth	1	2	3	4	5
Sex	1	2	3	4	5
Passion	1	2	3	4	5
Longing/Desire	1	2	3	4	5
Interest/Curiosity	1	2	3	4	5
Enjoyment/Amusement	1	2	3	4	5
Happiness	1	2	3	4	5
Surprise	1	2	3	4	5
Admiration	1	2	3	4	5
Jealousy	1	2	3	4	5
Love	1	2	3	4	5
Pride	1	2	3	4	5
Belonging	1	2	3	4	5
Trust	1	2	3	4	5
Feeling of Freedom	1	2	3	4	5
Hope	1	2	3	4	5
Boredom	1	2	3	4	5
Self-empowerment	1	2	3	4	5
Relaxation	1	2	3	4	5

Consumers' purchase desire and attitude towards advertising should be related to emotion. Some scholars believe that emotional arousal is the intermediary between visual image and sensory attitude [16]. Therefore, we showed the consumers the images for enough time to generate emotional arousal.

D. Statistical Method

After collecting the data, there were three Between-Subjects Factors, namely the experimental group with female model, the experimental group with male model and the control group without model. Each group was also divided into male and female participants also. In each group, the data was divided into 20 Within-Subjects Factors, which corresponded to 20 kinds of Emotional Factors in the scale. The statistical method of repeated measure two-way ANOVA was used to do normal analysis for this data. On the one hand, it compared whether consumers' emotions were affected after seeing models with sexual cues, and whether sexual cues made by models from different genders had different impacts on consumers. On the other hand, it also compared any emotional differences between the subjects of different genders when facing sexual suggestion elements.

The two-way ANOVA comparison is shown in Table II.

TABLE II: COMPARISON DIAGRAM OF ANOVA

Each kind of emotion	Experimental group 1 (female model)	Experimental group 2 (male model)	Control group (without model)
Female participants			

Male participants			
-------------------	--	--	--

In this two-way ANOVA comparison, there were comparisons among the three experimental groups and between the two genders, so there was a 3-by-2 matrix for each emotion data.

IV. RESULT

A. Result

In the comparison of scores of each emotion in different experimental groups, there are 30 subjects in each experimental group, that is, $n=30$, and the confidence interval is 95%, among which the values of 9 emotions are significantly different in different groups (see Table III).

TABLE III: ANOVA TEST BETWEEN DIFFERENT GROUPS

Emotional Factor	Between groups(I)	Between groups(J)	Mean difference(I-J)	Significant
Humour	posters of male models	posters of female models	0.667	0.014
	posters of male models	Posters without models	1.167	0.000
Warmth	posters of male models	posters of female models	.800	0.000
	posters of male models	Posters without models	1.033	0.000
Sex	posters of male models	posters of female models	-0.700	0.028
	posters of male models	Posters without models	1.300	0.000
	posters of female models	Posters without models	2.000	.000
Longing	posters of female models	Posters without models	.800	0.006
Happiness	posters of female models	Posters without models	0.667	0.029
Jealousy	posters of male models	Posters without models	0.733	0.018
Trust	posters of female models	Posters without models	-0.633	0.036
Feeling of Freedom	posters of male models	Posters without models	-0.733	0.030
Boredom	posters of male models	Posters without models	0.900	0.001

According to the statistical results, the data of "Humour", "Warmth", "Sex", "Longing", "Happiness", "Jealousy", and "Boredom" are significantly higher in the experimental group than in the control group, while the scores of the control group are higher in the two emotions of "Trust" and "Feeling of Freedom"

In the comparison between the subjects of different genders, there are 7 kinds of emotions with obvious differences in scores between the subjects of different

genders(see Table IV).

TABLE IV: ANOVA TEST BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS WITH DIFFERENT GENDERS

Emotional Factor	Mean difference (Female-Male)	Significant
Warmth	-0.33	0.048
Longing and desire	-0.29	0.007
Interest and curiosity	-0.40	0.044
Happiness	-0.47	0.020
Jealousy	0.29	0.017
Trust	-0.27	0.019
Feeling of Freedom	-0.24	0.017

B. Analysis

It can be seen that posters with male sexual suggestive elements were more likely to make people feel insecure, and consumers may feel wary and distrustful whether they are male elements or female elements. This may be due to the traditional Chinese concept of sexual culture. Under the influence of Chinese traditional education, sexual culture gives people the stereotype of being undignified and dirty. Especially, it doesn't conform to the traditional Chinese requirements for women [17]. Therefore, it is easy to provoke consumers' resentment when using sexual suggestion promotion elements in China.

At the same time, the social definition of sexual charm for men and women is also different. People tend to think that appearance, figure and other factors are the main sexual charm of women, while the traditional concept of male sexual charm is mainly manifested in social status and resources [18]. Therefore, the main characteristics of male models who give sexual cues in the experiment are rich and gentlemanly. At the same time, in order to avoid the confounding variable that the participants may know the models being shown the models in the experiment are perfume advertising models of the last century, which are not well known to the public [19]. As a result, this may be the reason why posters with male sexual suggestive elements have higher emotional scores in "Boredom".

In addition to "Boredom" and "Jealousy", the scores of the experimental group were significantly higher, which were defined as positive emotions in the original scale. They proved that even though consumers may feel distrustful after seeing posters with sexual suggestive elements, their emotions do become happier, and they also feel that the posters in the experimental group are warmer, more interesting and sexier. Combined with the experimental group, 76% of consumers are willing to buy this bottle of perfume, while only 50% of participants in the control group are willing to buy it, and the proportion has dropped significantly. It can be seen that these positive emotional changes have a positive impact on the desire to buy.

When comparing subjects of different genders, the study finds that among all the emotions with obvious differences, male subjects generally scored higher. Only in the emotion of

"Jealousy", was the average score of female subjects higher than that of male subjects. This may be attributed to Chinese traditional culture, where women are presented as much more restrained in sex than men [17]. Women are more likely to avoid the topic of sex than men, or feel uncomfortable. But at the same time, jealousy is more likely to appear among women, because women pay more attention to their appearance than men, so they are more likely to be jealous of the same sex with charming look [9]. However, this does not affect their desire to buy, because they hope that the product can make them more attractive and glamorous.

V. CONCLUSION

A. Conclusion

After reading related materials and literature and conducting the experimental survey and presenting an analysis, I conclude that the images of sexual suggestive elements in advertisements can exert significant influence on consumers through emotions such as humor, enthusiasm, sexual charm, and sense of belonging, while at the same time detecting the difficulty and obstacles in coping with the sense of proportion in presentation and averting people's negative emotions. Positive emotions have been proved to effectively drive the desire to buy, while negative emotions produce the opposite effect. Therefore, when merchants promote their products by using these kinds of elements, they need to carefully of the moral value and cultural milieu of the targeted area, and avoid being the source of ire and hostility in terms of decency, ethics and propriety.

B. Discussion

In addition to the above conclusions, I have brought up thoughts of my personal experience and advanced a post-study critique of my own research study and limitations.

First, per the experimental props, I chose to design my own posters. It is easy to manipulate and control the variables in my own design, but it risks failing to warrant the reliability and validity. The investigative results collected from the questionnaires about the subject-responses to the sexual cues in posters received positive feedback, more than 80% of the subjects felt that way. However, some participants thought that there were no sexual suggestive elements in posters or that the models in the pictures were not sexually attractive. This factor may lead to the deviation of my experimental data. Consumers' emotions vary due to apparent and concealed response: What they see and respond to posters might not necessarily be affected at the conscious level. Even if they don't express it clearly themselves, they may be hidden and never let it be known in public, something within the realm of the subconscious. Subsequent researchers can continue to discuss and look into this topic in depth.

Secondly, when making posters, the image adapts to some external factors and takes into account aesthetic factors, so it is hardly possible to present perfectly the position and proportion of products in each poster. This motivates the question: Do enlarged posters attract more attention for subject-consumers? This issue has not been discussed in the study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In the course of writing the thesis, I would like to thank many people: primarily Dr. Ghee Ho for his patience, support and guidance; Yang Yijun and Yang Fuming for their help to use statistical tools; Guo Zehao, Zhang Wenbo, Wang Yihan and Wang Ziheng for distributing and gathering surveys and interviews; Xia Hongmei and Peng Minghui for their moral support and comments; my loved one for his companionship and unending help.

REFERENCES

- [1] T. Reichert, "Sex in advertising," *Wiley International Encyclopedia of Marketing*, 2010.
- [2] M. Delbaere, *The Cambridge Handbook of Consumer Psychology*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, vol. 107, no. 4, pp. 781–782, 2015.
- [3] D. Hawkins, "The effects of subliminal stimulation on drive level and brand preference," *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 8, pp. 322–326, 1970.
- [4] F. A. William, H. S. David, and F. W. Michael, *Advertising*, NY: McGraw-Hill Education, p. 214, 1970.
- [5] T. Frederick, *Biological Psychology* (3th.ed.), England: Pearson Education, 2011, p. 442.
- [6] N. R. Branscombe, "Effects of hedonic valence and physiological arousal on emotion: A comparison of two theoretical perspectives," *Motivation and Emotion*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1985.
- [7] M. Steadman, "How sexy illustrations affect brand recall," *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 15–19, 1969.
- [8] P. H. Vettehen, K. Nuijten, and A. Peeters, "Explaining effects of sensationalism on liking of television news stories," *Communication Research*, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 319–338, 2008.
- [9] R. E. Jack, C. Blais, C. Scheepers, P. G. Schyns, and R. Caldara, "Cultural confusions show that facial expressions are not universal," *Current Biology*, vol. 19, no. 18, 2009.
- [10] R. Taflinger. (1996). Taking advantage-you and me, babe: Sex and advertising. [Online]. Available: <http://www.wsu.edu:8080/taflinger/sex.html>
- [11] T. Akira and T. Shingo, "Sex differences in visual attention to sexually explicit videos: A preliminary study sex med," *Journal of Sexual Medicine Search*, pp. 1011–1017, 2009.
- [12] B. T. Fidelis, J. H. C. Oliveira, J. D. M. E. Giraldi, and R. O. J. Santos, "Sexual appeal in print media advertising: Effects on brand recall and fixation time," *Research Journal of Textile and Apparel*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2017.
- [13] L. Fang, "A close look at research on sex appeal advertising," *International Advertising Research*, 2014.
- [14] L. W. Mai and G. Schoeller, "Emotions, attitudes and memorability associated with TV commercial," *Journal of Targeting, Measurement and Analysis for Marketing*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 55–63, 2009.
- [15] S. J. Maglio, "Psychological distance in consumer psychology: Consequences and antecedents," *Consumer Psychology Review*, 2019.
- [16] D. Watson and L. A. Clark, "The PANAS-X: Manual for the positive and negative affect schedule expanded form," University of Iowa, 1994.
- [17] M. H Bond, *Chinese Psychology*, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 541
- [18] P. J. Lang, M. M. Bradley, J. R. Fitzsimmons, B. N. Cuthbert, J. D. Scott, B. Moulder, and V. Nangia, "Emotional arousal and activation of the visual cortex: An fMRI analysis," *Psychophysiology*, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 199–210, 1998.
- [19] D. L. Rosen and S. N. Singh, "An investigation of subliminal embed effect on multiple measures of advertising effectiveness," *Psychology and Marketing*, vol. 4, pp. 157–173, 1992.

Copyright © 2023 by the authors. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)).