

The Consequential Effect of Sexual Appeals on the Place of Women in Society

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The advertisement industry appears to be dependent on the male gaze to ensure a sale. As a result, women are carefully and systemically objectified through the lens of marketing in an appeal to the male consumer. Sexual appeals rely on the commonly held belief that men are subject to their base sexual urges and are unable to resist an object, an attractive woman in an advertisement, despite the improved social recognition of women as equal partners to men. The belief that men are subject to the evolutionary imperative of choosing a sexual partner has endorsed the continued deprivation of the rights of women. Sexual appeals in advertisements are founded on the surety of the social place of women as objects, and men predictably respond favorably. Despite evidence that sexual appeals lack marketable effectiveness, advertisers continue to cater to what the male perspective appreciates, reinforcing the narrative that women exist exclusively as visual stimuli.

The ultimate goal of the marketing industry is to curate an advertisement that catches the attention of its specific audience and retains that attention until a sale is completed. Therefore, simply catching the attention of the audience is not sufficient to denote a successful advertisement. In the same sense, an advertisement that results in a sale but fails to hold the attention of its audience can also not be viewed as successful. In the latter instance, these ads lack the glamor that leads the consumer to feel dependent on the product for a positive experience. While a consumer may use the product once, an ad that fails to consecrate the consumer's attention risks losing future sales. Sexual appeals in advertising have been used to seemingly address both of these goals with minimal effort. Advertisers continue to use this technique with the assurance that the audience's attention will be enraptured until the completion of the sale.

The empirical evidence has demonstrated and continues to demonstrate that ads using sexual appeals are not as universally effective as advertisers seem to think. Much of the literature in this field has concluded that sexual appeals do have an impact on the audience, but they negatively affect the audience's ability to recognize brands. To explain this, a study conducted by experimental

psychologist Helena Lawrence comments on the limited capacity model. According to this model, “the increased cognitive load associated with sexual appeals diminishes available cognitive resources for encoding the brand” (Lawrence 2021, 695). Therefore, sexual appeals are too overwhelming for the brain to process while simultaneously remembering and associating those appeals with a brand. Consequently, ads that utilize sexual appeals do not fulfill what is required to have a successful advertisement. While sexually appealing ads may succeed in shock value and capturing the fleeting attention of the audience, their ability to inundate the brain with sexual information is incongruous with their mission to complete a sale. “Appeal congruity” is frequently cited as a method of retaining the attention of the viewer (Writz 2018, 187). Writz suggests that when ads that employ sexual appeal are linked with congruent products such as perfume or lotions, they have better rates of ad recall and recognition. This suggests that sexual ads are more effective when paired with products that have a sexual connotation. Perhaps the limited capacity model is less relevant in these circumstances, since similar themes give the brain less information to process. Despite “males liking ads with sexual appeals more than females,” there is no difference between genders when analyzing the decrease in brand recognition in ads that use sexual appeal (Writz 2018, 188).

This does not mean that sexual appeals are not memorable. While “sexual advertising is not beneficial for improving brand memory” it is successful in improving “free recall of advertisement scenes” (Lawrence 2021, 705-706). Therefore, ad campaigns are using sex appeal to increase the memory of the ad at the expense of brand recall. Leila Samson discusses several theories that could explain how men are still affected by sexual appeals but not in the way advertisers anticipate. Some researchers adhere to evolutionary reasoning that suggests men rely on visual stimulation as a cue for sexual selection (Samson 2016, 184). According to that reasoning, men are biologically beholden to their base sexual impulses and are unable to override those impulses, even when stimuli are presented in artificially structured advertisements. Samson articulates how men

prioritize visual sexual content more than women by utilizing the example of a sexualized news anchor (Samson 2016, 186-187). She recounts how one study showed that men “encoded news presented by an unsexualized version of an anchor better than women” (Samson 2016, 187). This study also substantiates a theory named the distraction hypothesis which documents how men are so distracted by sexual appeals that they cannot process as much information as women.

Advertisers are aware of the effect these appeals have on their male audience, yet they continue to objectify women in pursuit of the sale, despite their inherent ability to distract. These appeals are also notable for their ability to reinforce ideas of women as mere objects without true personhood. John Berger substantiates this thought with his discussion of the “naked” versus the “nude” form (Berger 1972, 54). He claims, “a naked body has to be seen in order to become a nude,” alluding to the patterns of objectification present in society that prevent women from being naked without the purpose of entertaining a spectator (Berger 1972, 54). Since sexual appeals often are focused on the female body from the male perspective and society endorses blatant spectatorship of the female form, the advertising industry’s continued use of sexual appeals only affirms the objectification of women rather than denying its place in modern society.

In an effort to acknowledge this pattern, many advertisers have attempted to hypothesize why men have such predictably favorable reactions to sexual appeals in advertising in comparison to women’s notoriously adverse reactions. Kyrousi analyzes how the female audience recognizes and processes sexual appeals and identifies an interesting similarity between how men and women process information. This article attempts to theorize the evolutionary responses that women employ when they encounter sexual advertisements. Kyrousi claims that women’s adverse responses to sexual appeals are dependent on intrasexual competition (Kyrousi 2016, 771). Women are primed to respond to sexual advertisements with “self-promotion” or “competitor degradation” (Kyrousi 2016, 776). This reaction implies that women, similar to men, view sexualized advertisements with an evolutionary mating imperative. Although ads present overtly

fictional situations, women feel threatened by the presence of women who are perceivably more attractive or appealing and therefore threaten their own reproductive ability. Kyrousi even presumes to determine that women view female attractiveness in ads as a sort of “weaponry” (Kyrousi 2016, 789). This analysis continues the narrative that both men and women are biologically subject to their instincts and perceive sexualized ads as an appeal to their own sexuality. This analysis paints men as the pursuer, with all the power to choose in the sexual relationship. Analyses like Kyrousi’s rely on evolutionary assumptions that only function to justify the presence of the male gaze within modern society. They encourage social biases that rely on the objectification of women in order to have a conclusive rationale. Women are yet again passive, waiting to be chosen, even willing to fight other women for the opportunity to be chosen by the all-powerful man. However relevant this analysis is, it is still biased and perceived through the male gaze.

Kyrousi briefly considers that women may respond to sexual advertisements according to their adherence or non-adherence to tradition, but the author quickly moves on, noting that responses are too varied to make a definitive statement on how women perceive themselves through ads without the presence or influence of men (Kyrousi 2016, 773). The majority of the article assesses how women defensively perceive sexual advertisements as threats to their reproductive ability; it fails to truly discuss the impact the sexualization and objectification of the female body have on the mental and social state of women. Kyrousi’s analysis of intrasexual competition relies heavily on interpretations of hormonal responses and cultural interpretations that suppose women’s use of indirect aggression is a response to sexual advertisements (Kyrousi 2016, 775). However, if studies like Wirtz’s have determined that women are not distracted by sexualized content in the same powerful way that men are, it can be argued that Kyrousi is flawed to assume that women contemplate the sexual appeal at all, much less through any competition or

evolutionary lens (Wirtz 2018, 188). It is much more likely that women acknowledge the objectification of themselves and dismiss the ad as irrelevant and not directed toward them.

There are ads that attempt to reinstate the relevance of women as an audience through the message of female empowerment. Couture uses the Dove Real Beauty campaign to emphasize how these campaigns rely on objectification to produce their supposedly empowering message. She discusses “self-objectification” and its relevance to how women have been led to perceive themselves through ads (Couture 2019, 628). She also discusses how the more modernized ads have moved from “sexually passive to sexually empowered” (Couture 2019, 629). Yet she does not blanketly frame these changes as a positive transition. She discusses how these portrayals have led some women to feel more empowered and active in their sexual perception of themselves, but other women still feel beholden to the sexual expectations of men (Couture 2019, 629). Ultimately the empowered ads continued use of stereotypically clear-skinned, skinny, westernized, objectively beautiful women continue to enforce unattainable standards on all women that push them to appeal to the male gaze. Empowerment is used by the advertising industry to mask the pressures to turn oneself into an image that is pleasing for a man to objectify and observe. Empowerment campaigns all too often subtly act to serve the male gaze by convincing women that they need to change aspects of themselves or buy a new product to feel empowered. These ads continue to serve a male audience even if their products and profits are geared toward a feminine audience.

The results of Couture’s study document the conflicting message in empowering ads directed at women. The visual message is strikingly similar to traditional beauty campaigns, but the spoken message “critiques traditional beauty norms and expectations” (Couture 2019, 638). This seems to be a deliberate appeal by advertisers to target both male and female audiences. Since men are documented as more receptive to visual stimuli while women are more responsive to verbal cues, these themes in empowering ads seem to perfectly serve both audiences (Wirtz 2018, 192). It appeals to the male gaze by continuing to display sexual, unattainable standards while also

attempting to reach the female audience through a verbal message that rails against these same standards. This double consciousness serves to subtly reinforce the importance of male perception in the minds of women even when they believe they are being catered to with feminist verbal messaging.



In a Covergirl ad, several well-known celebrities, including Ellen DeGeneres, Queen Latifah, and Katy Perry, appear in rapid succession smiling, dancing, and moving around the frame in a joyous manner. The ad utilizes close-up shots, flashing colors, and large, bold font to secure the attention of the audience. The ad begins with each star declaring “girls can’t” followed by stereotypes that they’ve challenged in their careers. For example, Pink, a well-known pop star, declares “girls can’t rock.” As the ad progresses, these statements are interspersed with several shots without this verbal message. These wordless frames often consist of a close-up shot of the celebrity simply staring into the camera or a wide pan shot of a different star dancing or moving around the set. Halfway through, the verbal message of the ad shifts to “girls can.” This shift is also displayed through the visual text being flashed on the screen as well as short testimonials from the celebrities expounding on how they’ve beaten these stereotypes. Queen Latifah says, “I heard that

girls couldn't rap. I rapped." The ad ends with the celebrities encouraging girls to be themselves and Ellen DeGeneres closes the ad with a twist on the traditional Covergirl slogan by saying "make the world a little bit more easy, breezy, and beautiful."



This ad attempts to reach its target audience of women through the message of empowerment. Its choice to use famous women to convey this message is an attempt to sway the audience with the glamor of success and self-confidence. The clear verbal message of this ad is that women should feel comfortable being themselves and that they can overcome the negative stereotypes about women in society. Yet, the visual message in this ad seems to be at odds with the verbal. All the women on screen have clear skin, are skinny, and adhere to Western beauty standards in most other applicable ways. The women are all able-bodied, smiling, and dancing around happily. In this sense, the visual message appears to appeal to the male gaze, while the verbal message is consistent in its appeal to an empowered female audience. Still, the women who seek to become empowered are still influenced by this appeal to the male audience. There is a dichotomy of the messages present in the ad, one that women need to be themselves and

empowered, and the other, that women must look and move in a certain way in order to feel empowered and be successful. These opposing messages ultimately lead women to believe that the pursuit of empowerment relies on achieving a beauty standard that appeals to the male gaze. Even the verbal message at the end adheres to the stereotypical view of women that the ad is supposedly trying to deny. By using the “make” in their slogan, Covergirl reinforces the belief that it is a woman’s responsibility to change the world. Yet, Covergirl provides the answer to making this change by encouraging women to be “easy, breezy, and beautiful,” an age-old message that defines women as powerless, without emotion, and undeserving of true personality.

Advertisers deliberately use this type of subterfuge to undermine the empowerment of women and continue to uplift a narrative and a standard that allows women to be objectified and viewed as sexual objects for men to observe at their leisure. In the same sense, the subtleties in this messaging function to allow men to become comfortable with their actions and allows them to continue to objectify women without confronting the systemic social consequences of their actions because they are supposedly solved by the empowerment movement. Conceptually, advertisers have managed to address two seemingly opposed audiences without acknowledging their dissonance. However, their actions are not a feat to be applauded but a problem to be acknowledged and resolved in order to reach true equality within society.

In a 2017 study, Black observed that when assessed both men and women preferred sexual appeals in which couples are framed intimately rather than in an objectified manner (Black 2017, 331). Surprisingly, men and women preferred to see a type of achievable attractiveness in ads that present their respective genders in a coupled setting (Black 2017, 334). Not as surprisingly, men preferred high levels of nudity compared to women (Black 2017, 332). The type of ad best suited to appeal to both male and female audiences was a scene with an intimate, low-nudity couple that wasn’t unattainably attractive (Black 2017, 343). Black also acknowledged how these ads would

nonetheless have a greater appeal to men because of their preference for visual cues (Black 2017, 343).

While this article spends a lot of time determining what both men and women will find appealing, it is interesting to see how much more influential the male perspective is. Since men have been conditioned both evolutionarily and socially to sexually select women based on visual cues, men are the default and often the direct target audience of sexually appealing advertising. Even when advertising is aimed toward a female audience, men are more likely to be receptive to it because they socially benefit from this form of observation in ways women will never be able to. Despite attempts to rectify these gendered imbalances, men continue to be catered to when it comes to visual advertisement. Black attempts to understand and develop an advertisement that is sexual and still appealing to women, yet his task is in itself paradoxical. Women cannot exist in advertisements without being observed and objectified by men, and any attempt to rectify this is met with the reality that men are the audience of all visual stimuli involving women. To deny this is to deny the social enforcement of the station of women and the continued effort to endow men with the power to determine the place of women socially and physically. When ads sexualize and objectify women, they deny them personhood and it becomes permissible to dehumanize and destroy the women through both the male gaze and social and physical actions.

Sexual appeals in advertising are an age-old tactic to entice the male audience to buy a product. While the literature on this topic has determined that this tactic is unsuccessful in the completion of the marketing task, ensuring a sale by consecrating brand recognition, it continues to be utilized in ads for a subtler and more nefarious purpose. These ads endorse the message that women are objects meant to be used and viewed by men. Despite efforts to return sexual power and identity to women through empowerment campaigns, the reality of the social prominence of the male gaze cannot be denied. This is not to say that true feminism and equality cannot be achieved; it is only to suggest that it will never be gained through the use of sexual appeal in

advertisements. In spite of the best efforts of advertisers, the priority and the default audience will always be men. Therefore, society must relinquish the device of sexual appeal as it caters purely to the male urge to sexually quantify women through visual stimuli. This reality demands that society must acknowledge how sexual appeal is a device that exclusively caters to men and firmly reinstates women into second-class citizenship.

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