

## **Effects of Sexual Advertising on Customer Buying Decisions**

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**Abstract:** *This study was conducted to examine the influence of Sexual Advertising on the customer buying choice as well as an impact on the product brand. The respondents in this study were randomly selected participants of an internet based survey. A survey was conducted by using a questionnaire through online survey form for information gathering about Sexual Advertising relating to customer response to it, customer influence by it and impact on society. The efficacy of any sexual marketing was gauged on the basis of this effective impact on the customer and the recall the customer can make on a product. Apart from this there is also a need for the companies to understand what negative impact these advertisements create on the Indian consumer. It was concluded that there is no such strong need for Sexual Advertising unless absolutely necessary in which case the suggested safety measures can be implemented.*

**Key words:** *Sexual Advertising, Sexual Advertisement, Gender Advertising, Customer Behaviour, Brand Equity, Subliminal Messaging, Test Group*

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### **I. Introduction**

#### **1.1 Sexual Advertising**

Sexual advertising or ‘selling via sex’ is the use of sex appeal or innuendo in advertising to help sell a particular product or service. Surprisingly enough this sexually appealing imagery may even not pertain to the product or service in question. Some noticeable instances of sexually appealing imagery include nudity, pinup girls, and muscular men. The use of sex in advertising can be highly overt and can be recognized by the person or extremely subtle wherein it is said to work on the subconscious. It ranges from relatively explicit displays of sexual acts, to the use of basic facial or bodily cosmetics to enhance attractive features. (Wikipedia)[1]

Some of the researchers have worked on how the sexual stimuli in print advertisements influence the brand recall and purchase intentions, however the sexual intensity actually will have an impact. (William Grazer et.al, 2011)[2]

In some researches it was found that the presence or absence of sexual stimuli affects cognitive as well as conative response (Severen, Belch et.al, 1990)[3]

#### **1.2 Gender Advertising**

Gender advertisement refers to the images and accompanying visual or audio supplements in advertising that depict stereotypical gender roles and displays. These so called stereotypical displays are used extensively in advertising in order to put together the roles of the two genders in relation with the other. (Jhally, 1989)[4]

However, unlike sexual advertising which plays on the associated body response on being exposed to biologically based male female difference; gender advertising culminates within humans as a result of socialization, and normally lies almost on the same line as biological sex. Gender refers to the differentiation between men and women or the associated idea of femininity and masculinity that they entail. It is this relationship that advertisers capitalize on. This is further aided by the fact that people define themselves by gender, and gender can be “communicated in an instance,” which acts as a target for advertisers to use this theme in their work to better their product advertising.

Even some of the researchers have worked on how the nudity had impact on the consumer and how it is perceived as more offensive than any other appeal.

In some researches it was emphasized on the how females harbor more negative attitudes than male towards the sexual stimuli. (Belch et.al, 1981)[5]; Peterson and Kerin, 1977)[6]. Of course on these studies there were some contradictions which indicated some favorable predispositions for Ads displaying the physical attracting model of opposite sex. Therefore the selection of appeal and the gender is very important in putting the advertisements before the consumers. Exposing mature adults to sex based advertising often invites lesser criticism compared to advertising that targets teenagers. It is observed that the celebrity physical appearance will increase the willingness to buy the product. Attractiveness will be based on how confidently the celebrity or the endorser is conveying the message and how good looking he or she is looking. (Kahle and Homer, 1985)[7].

## **II. Review of Literature**

In one of the studies, a group of young adults were observed by asking them on how they would react to the TV show with high sexual content and how it reacts on the attitude of the customer. (Brown et al., 2006)[8]. The final results proved that the adolescents were more likely to get engaged in sexual behaviour than the peer with maturation and low in watching the shows. (Brown et al., 2006)[9]. Thus this research actually express on the impact of sexual appeal on the consumers and in particular on the teens.

Reichert(2003)[10] has done a research on looking at the sexual prevalence shown in the television advertisements targeted towards young adults. In that research the ads which portrayed celebrities in sexually explicit situations were taken into consideration and the results revealed that the in these ads more sexual imagery was emphasized than the original thought. It was proved that these ads had more impact on the male perspective towards the female gender.

In a research done by Rouner, Slater and Domenech-Rodriguez (2003)[11] states that the perceptions on gender roles and sexual content in television advertisements were examined. Their researcher actually states that the perceptions keep changing and differ for different ages . Attitudes of adolescents and young adults can be studied to check the positive correlation between sexual imagery in ads by taking the attitude as positive towards the product advertisements. Men in particular are drawn more towards the sexual imagery. In the younger generation, it was found that adolescents were more likely to search for media that coincided with their perceptions of gender (Rouner et al., 2003).

In a research done by Tapan,2014 tries to find out the association between the use of sex content in advertisements for commercial and non-commercial product group at different levels of portrayal and behavioral purpose towards product categories. The results show that the respondents find sex-content based advertisement to be in terrible taste in the context of family situation and there is a comparatively moderating effect on the behavioural purpose of consumers upon experience to commercial product advertisements. (Tapan K.Pandal,2014)[12]

In one of the research which actually emphasized on the link between the women image shown in the advertisements and the sexual attitude formation in the consumers. (Lanis, K., & Covell, K,1995)[13]

### **Objectives of the study**

To study how the youth segment will get effected by the sexual advertisements.

To study how these ads influence different genders.

## **III. Study**

### **3.1 Challenge and Problem Statement**

How can companies manage to integrate sexual advertising into their product promotions without holding the risk of offending a group or section of their customer base or the society at large?

### **3.2 Purpose of the Study**

With the increase in competition in marketing world, companies are faced with challenges within and from the external environment, and thus to cater their products to the outer world with maximum benefits, and profits along with creating a brand name, they use a variety of marketing gimmicks and strategies in order to put their products out for the customer and make him use and like it further. The best way to do it is by marketing it in a smart way such that the consumer is attracted towards it and is forced to like it. The use of marketing mix properly makes the product move easily into the product hands happens, but among the 4 Ps, most of the marketers need to first give much importance on product awareness creation and consumer attraction towards the product. In this process they need to promote a lot and use every possible advertisement appeals, be it humor, rational, emotional or sexual. However the question is sexual has many other outcomes on both the consumer and the market.

Advertising plays an important role in this one, and the best way to attract a person is by using sexual references, and this has been a trend for a long while now. Use of subliminal messages is also done. Thus the main purpose of our study was to conduct a survey and record the responses of the audience who are bombarded with such advertisements, which use sexual messages and are gender biased or specific. This would be useful to let the message go out to the companies which use such tactics to realize till what extent its fine by the customers, what is the threshold limit and what are the reasons for the doom of any product, and how they can be cautious and take proper measures.

### 3.3 Study Design and Approach

To carry out this study, we used an internet based google doc survey, in which a questionnaire was made in order to record the responses of the people who were responding to the study. It consisted of questions like name, age and gender which helped us to measure which gender was more open and which gender preferred to anonymous with the responses. It also helped us to record the responses to the various questions and what they thought about the advertisements. How they perceived the advertisements and the references that were made.

The responses were then taken and recorded and proper pie charts were made in order to compare the results from each gender and age group. 83 responses were recorded in a matter of 3 days which consisted of total eight items which were used for the data collection.

### 3.4 Study Limitations

However the plan to conduct a survey and record the results doesn't help us to evaluate the proper responses and can't help us to reach a decent conclusion since the age group that was catering to our survey was majorly students who are comparatively likeminded people and students. The major chunk of people is aged from 19 to 25years. Elder age group which might have problem weren't a major part of our study group thus the results are ambiguous, however a general response was obtained and how the young minds think and what all they want. Given the current environment, we were only able to obtain the responses from the current generation in an academic environment, the group was generally restricted to students.

### 3.5 Originality of the Study

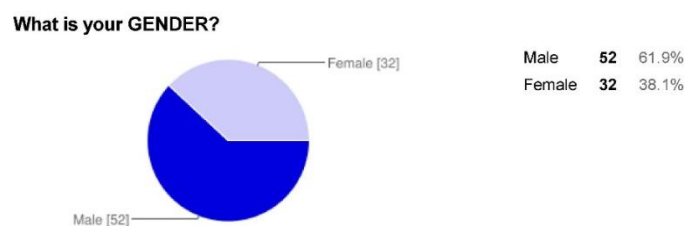
The study was completely original from self-observation which initiated the study. With the increase in cases of uproars due to TV content and reports, we were tempted to record the responses from the general public itself. Novelty of the survey and paper was also due to the absence of studies already available online, and also to do the research and come out with what general public really thinks, what triggers their brains, and what kind of an advertisement is a hit and what is a miss.

However, to pay emphasis to the responses, we've come up with the better ideas on how to trigger the customer's mind such that the step taken is not counter-attacking by the companies.

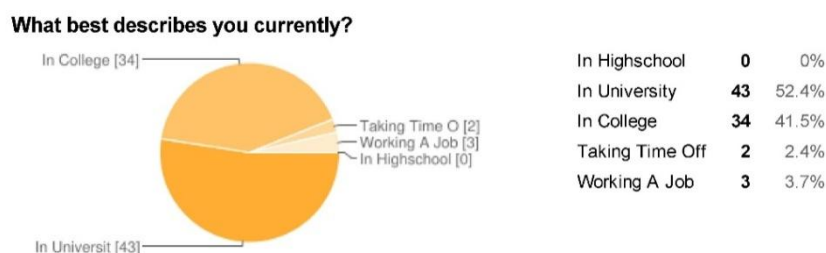
## IV. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Results

The results from the survey have been represented as pie charts. The following paragraphs give transcoding of the pie chart data while the section on 'Study Implications' gives a cross analysis of every entry recorded.



There was a higher response from the male gender than the female gender. The percentage of females who withheld their names was 43.75% while for males it was 38.18%. This descriptive statistics showcase that there is a mixture of responses and no where it tends to a biased observations. As this study is linked with the sexual appeals it becomes difficult in posing questions to females as well they to respond, but interestingly there is a mixed response and credibility of the data increases.



The response is more inclined towards the college and university strata, as they seem to make up 93.90% of the respondents. We were unfortunately not able to get much responses from the High school and Working category which would have allowed us to analyze the response from mindsets of youngsters in their adolescent stage and supposedly mature adults, who could have offered us different insights synonymous to their social environment and exposure. These results show that the segment chosen for the study are the right segment on which the sexual appeal may have high impact. As this segment which is called as youth will be more inclined on these type of appeals, but whether it will have impact on the decision making or just an entertainment.

**How old are you?**



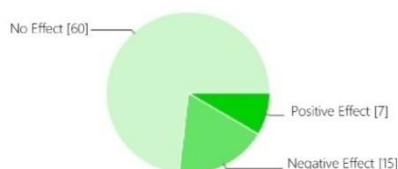
As would have been evident from the response to the previous question, the 19 to 25 age band gap occupies 90.3% of the total response. A comparative analysis with the previous and the upcoming generation would have been groundbreaking and revealing. Being restricted to one generation yields to myopia or rather conformity.

**What is your first impression when you see a sexual advertisement?**



Roughly 20% of the participants said that they are genuinely surprised or shocked on coming across such advertisements. Another 10% present in the 'Other' category also said similar opinions. Many had much detailed opinions and views to share such as 12% believing that it is sufficient as long as the product warrants it. 58% respondents all had the same belief that they don't care about it, which is a phenomenal number. Companies need to realize that 58% people don't care so that is their target audience but on the other hand they end up offending the other 30% which could prove detrimental for them. This indicates that the segment which was taken for this expressed a very less importance on the impact of Sexual appeals. Interestingly this is a segment which in the teens tend to get inclined more to these type of pictures, but even then they expressed very less importance. Hence this proves that these appeals may not have much impact on the consumers and even may have negative impact. Therefore the companies or advertisers need to think on what would be a better ad for this segment or probably for them to pass on the brand awareness to the others. Infact today most of the sexual appeal ads are all more used in the Deo Ads which again are more focused to this segment. Hence it is time for the companies to think.

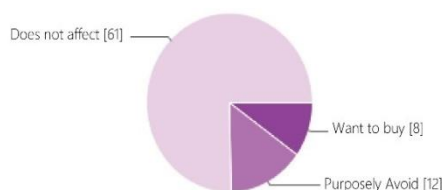
**Choose the phrase that best applies to you:**



I believe that sexuality and the "ideal beauty" present in advertising have a positive effect on my self-esteem.	7	8.5%
I believe that sexuality and the "ideal beauty" present in advertising have a negative effect on my self-esteem.	15	18.3%
I believe that sexuality and the "ideal beauty" in advertising do not consciously effect my self-esteem or the way I see myself.	60	73.2%

Even though 60 respondents believed that sexual advertising has no effect on them, what needs to be noted is that roughly twice the number of participants agree to the fact that sexual advertising has more of a negative effect on their self-esteem as compared to people who thought it had a positive effect. The 18.3% who do take it upon their personality might let go off all company or brand loyalty and might end up as people carrying out negative propaganda instead. This result also emphasized on the same fact on what the above result came out. Therefore advertisers need to spend on those appeals which actually create an impact on the consumers rather than damage the brand of the product. Ads need to create a recall of the brand and thus drive the consumer towards that brand.

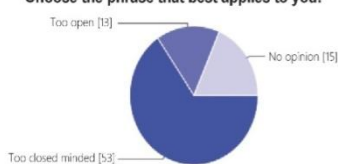
**Choose the phrase that best applies to you:**



When a company uses overtly sexual or "sexy" ads, it makes me want to buy their products.	8	9.9%
When a company uses overtly sexual or "sexy" ads, I purposely avoid buying their products.	12	14.8%
Whether or not a company uses sexual advertising does not affect whether I buy their products.	61	75.3%

A large fraction of people said that sexual advertising doesn't influence their choice while more people were convinced that coming across such advertisements and marketing aspects makes them want to avoid the product rather than buying it. As such 90.10% of the customer base is either immune or sensitive towards sexual advertising and this kind of strategy would only give fruit when specifically target towards the other 9.90%.

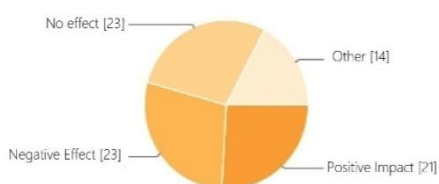
**Choose the phrase that best applies to you:**



I think that Indian culture in general is too closed minded to sexuality. Human beings have a sexual element and it should not always be hidden.	53	65.4%
I think that Indian culture in general is becoming too "open" about sexuality. Sexuality should be a personal, private matter.	13	16%
I don't have an opinion on the Indian perspective on sexuality.	15	18.5%

Almost 65.4% people hold the view that the Indian culture in general is still too closed minded to sexuality however they could open up a bit more to embrace the sexual element and that it should not always be hidden behind curtains or considered taboo. On this note, it goes on to emphasize that more of the respondents are accepting of the sexual element and their statement is a broad generalization over the Indian culture as a whole, which they may or may not consider themselves to be a part of. As also mentioned and proved in various researches that culture plays a major role in the success of the product in the market. When any company actually enters any market they try to follow the cultural norms of that market. Even if we take that most of the US based advertisements which uses sexual appeals in US try to use different advertisements by avoiding sexual appeals.

**How do you feel that sexuality in advertising is affecting you and your peers, generally speaking?**



I think it is having a positive impact on us.	21	25.9%
I think it is having a negative impact on us.	23	28.4%
I don't think it is affecting us.	23	28.4%
Other	14	17.3%

Roughly equal divisions of the respondents believe that Sexuality in Advertising has a negative impact, a positive effect or no effect at all. Such a varied yet equally distributed response speaks a lot about the

variegated audience or rather target that a company has to cater to. Considering the negative to be one-third and the neutral to be another third, companies should focus on pitching their product to the remaining one-third in an amicable way.

#### **4.2 Research Implication**

The given data sheds a lot of light on the current Indian scenario. The highlight is that a very large audience is immune to any and all kinds of sexual advertising, or rather in other words it fails to catch their fancy. Which brings us to the most imperative question: 'Does sexual advertising actually sell'?

Add to this the section of people who end up getting offended or perturbed by a sexual advertisement gone wrong and we see as to why this is a pretty important issue which could greatly affect a company's customer base, profile and loyalty.

If it all the product requires sexual advertising as a keystone to be able to sell it, the company should make it a rule of thumb to adopt a few cautionary and introspective procedures that have been suggested from our side in the following section.

#### **4.3 Discussion**

There are many innovative yet fundamental solutions that a company can adopt to either lessen the backlash to a sexual advertisement or mitigate its effect.

Firstly, as is the underlying concept should be more emphasized by doing many more surveys with different segments taking into account and thus can be studied. By doing so the advertisers will be getting different segments feedback and the impact the ads are providing on the consumers. This would go on to give them some idea as to whether their line of thought or process until now has a major fault line or Achilles' heel. The feedback could also help them better customize their advertisement and tailor it to the desired segment while avoiding the reactive ones.

Secondly, it is observed that brands such as 'Nike' who do carry out sexual and gender advertising but cater to both the genders unlike 'Axe' and 'Spraymint' which end up sexually objectifying women because they only cater to the male gender and this gets highlighted in the minds of the female gender. It is a general suggestion as per observation that if brand hold or offer product variants for both the genders than it somehow goes on to be less offensive to either one of them.

Thirdly, the companies could think about trying subliminal messaging as a means of getting the message across without staking the company reputation at hand, however the true effect and influence of subliminal messaging is highly debatable and no conclusive proof or study as such has been clearly able to distinguish its impact on product sales.

### **V. Conclusion**

As mentioned in the Introduction section of this paper, there are various factors that one must pay attention to before incorporating sexual advertising in their mode of promotion. The present study only focused on the attitude of a very few selected and largely conformed study group towards the presence of sexual advertising in affecting their buying decision and the influence it has on them as a person and on the society at large. It is clear from the results that a very large group of the target audience remains uninfluenced by sexual advertising and a half of the remaining is either strictly against it or at least displaced from their comfort zone on coming across it, however there exists a necessity for these advertisements in the current market scenario. Therefore we can conclude that advertisers also need to emphasis on the negative impact of sexual appeal Ads on consumer and the market on a whole. Hence it will be beneficial if more focus is given to the dissatisfaction and disappointment reflected in the advertisements with sexual advertising when it fails to make a mark on the target audience.

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