

# Indiscriminate Use of Sex Appeal in Advertisement: An Analytical Study

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## ABSTRACT

Advertisement is a form of communication used to promote a product, service, or an idea. The use of sexual appeal in advertising to promote a product has been a technique that has been used from time immemorial. When this mode was first introduced, it was a great success as it was obscene enough to incite a shock amongst the viewers. and it immediately grabbed their attention. However, over time, this mode uses various other strategies to grab the attention and appeal to the consumer, thus, making it an effective mode of advertising. It is understood that some amount of seduction and manipulation is prevalent in such ads. These play with the minds of the viewers to incite an exact reaction and they then go on to transform that reaction into a desire for the product. The important question thus arises when studying such ads is the effective that this has on the viewers. The paper, thus, seeks to answer this question in a two-fold study, the effectiveness of the techniques used by the advertisers that play on the reactions of the viewers and the ultimate impact that it may have on the personal lives of the users. This will be done through an analysis of the first-hand responses retrieved and a study of examples and cases dealing with the same.

**Keywords:** Indecency, Sexual Behaviour, Nudity, Distraction, Self-Concept, Stereotypical Norms, Flawless Model

## INTRODUCTION

Advertisement is a form of communication used to promote a product, service, or idea. Advertisements never limit themselves to the promotion of the product. They also sell a different set of values, images, and concepts of success, worth, love, sexuality, popularity, and normalcy (Jon Barber, 2011).

Advertisements have the ability to predict and manipulate human behaviour. They do this by targeting the psychological demands of the consumers and play off the denial of our access to those needs. For example, food is always available to us but the advertisers manipulate the psyche to make the consumers believe that this need is unmet, thus, inducing them to purchase the specific product (Vance Packard, 1957). Many researchers have shown that advertisement is a science and the basic technique is that these advertisers tap into the most primal human drives and constantly associate the given stimulus with their product (Raghuraman, 2015). One of the most successful uses of this technique is manipulating the

audience by tapping into their sex drives and personal insecurities.

There are a class of ads that often use sex appeal as a tool to grasp the consumer's attention. This is usually done by often portraying men and women as sex objects. The models in the advertisements are like a well-sculpted mannequin. The conventional sense of beauty is their only attribute. They have no lines or wrinkles or any scars or blemishes on their body. Moreover, they have the perfect unattainable body.

This power that advertisements hold over society has been found to be dangerous as the manipulation techniques used have been found to have an extremely negative impact on its audience and their perception of themselves and the people around them.

An analysis of the people's reaction to these class of ads shows that they stand out for two characteristics, the physical features of the model and their behaviour or movement in the advertisement, which is either sexually suggestive or portrays a level of intimacy. These

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characteristics are used as a tool by such advertisements to grasp the attention of the public. For the popularity of these ads, these models are linked to the product and then projected to the society. Even though the “beautiful woman” in the advertisement is usually never related to the product, the audience find the need to conform to this norm (Calogero & Rachel, 2015). For instance, the Parle Milano ad portrays a beautiful model sensually eating one of their cookies. The ad seeks to draw a nexus between the rich taste of the cookie and sexual passion. Although a cookie has nothing to do with sexual intimacy, the ad managed to capture the attention of the audience by bringing about a flirtatious and sensual aura to the product. Moreover, the ad highlights the chocolate filling in the cookies by exaggerating the sensual reaction of the model when she bites into the biscuit. This ad was a great success as not only did the beautiful model ensure a high recall rate, but also the manner in which she enjoys the cookie tempts the consumer into tasting the cookie (Ad Critique on Parle Milano, 2011).

Different audience have been found to react differently to these advertisements amongst the genders. Interestingly, men seem personally unaffected by these advertisements as compared to women. This was also reflected in the responses observed and recorded. These advertisements target both the gender for different reasons and a majority of them tap into the insecurities of the women and project them to a larger audience as undesirable. It is clear that to understand this concept, it is important to understand how the target viewers receive it.

Use of sexual appeal is very much prevalent in mainstream forms of advertising. There is very little understanding as to what actually constitutes this sexual appeal. However, to understand the reasons for their success, it is important to arrive at a conclusive conceptual definition and the key to obtaining this is to understand its impact on its audience.

The researcher aims to get a better understanding of its impact by analysing various aspects to the concept through examples and an analysis of the data extracted from the responses to the questionnaire conducted.

## OBJECTIVES

The author, through this paper, would like to particularize on the following aspects:

- To study the various techniques used by the advertisers in order to grasp the attention of its viewers.
- To identify the impact that it has on the society at large.
- To ascertain the actual reaction of the audience to this form of advertising.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology adopted by the author for the study was empirical in nature. The sources for the same were essentially primary. To achieve the objectives of this paper, a grounded theory was employed to understand the reaction of the audience to the various aspects of sexual behaviour in advertising. The author received approximately hundred responses to the questionnaire. The author proceeded with this paper after carefully studying the responses obtained.

For the present study, the researcher relied upon library resources, journals, and articles from magazines and newspapers, web journals, and online databases. Critical, comparative, and analytical methods were employed with regard to the analysis of techniques used by the advertisers and their impact on society

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Dawn M. Szymanski, Lauren B. Moffitt, and Erika R. Carr in their paper “*Sexual Objectification of Women: An advanced theory and research*” examine the sexual objectification theory and, then, go on to study the negative impact of objectifying women. In their paper, they understood that the gravity of this on their mental health is often one of the reasons that leads them into drug abuse and substance abuse (Dawn M. Szymanski, 2010).

Raghuram J., Ruchika Mahajan, and Aayush Poddar in their paper, *Effects of Sexual Advertisements on Consumer Buying Decisions*, studied the role of gender stereotyping in these class of advertisements. Here, the stereotypical roles of gender were displayed to clearly put together the roles of the two genders in relation to each other. The paper explained that this was one of the important factors of the success of such ads as they defined the distinct and most desirable physical traits of both genders. These ads, thus, convince their audience that in order to

be considered desirable, they had to achieve the physical appearance prescribed for their gender.

Tom Reichert and Jacqueline Lambiase, in their paper “*Sex in Advertising: Perspectives on the Erotic Appeal*,” carried out a study on the effect of these ads on the minds of the youth. In that research, the ads, which portrayed celebrities in sexually explicit situations, were taken into consideration and the results revealed that, 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 (Vance Packard, 1957).

Panda, T. K. in his paper, “*Sex-Oriented Advertising and its Impact on Attitude of Teenagers: Application of Behavioural Intention Model across Product Categories*,” did a study on the effectiveness of such ads in the various categories of commercial and non-commercial product. He understood that these ads were most appreciated only if connected with products for the body and most criticised if used for products that were family oriented. He, thus, explained that the need for a link between the product and the ad was of utmost importance (Panda T.K, 2005).

## TECHNIQUES USED TO EXPLOIT THE PEOPLE

It is obvious that these forms of advertising use subtle tools to trigger the most basic emotions of the audience to grasp their attention. The question arises as to what extent it is acceptable for the advertisers to exploit the consumer’s emotional responsiveness. This will be further understood by studying the techniques used and the extent to which their success depends upon inciting an emotional response.

### The Perception of Indecency

The term decency has been defined as a behaviour, which conforms to accepted standards of morality. However, the concept of decency keeps changing as the standards of morality keep changing over time. These advertisements use the perception of people as a technique to manipulate and grasp the attention of their audience.

This mode of advertising started with just the showing of the ankle. In the Victorian era, when the women were

covered from head to toe, the display of the ankle seemed to get the attention of the viewers (Magda Kay, 2013). This was either because they were disgusted by the scandal or they lusted after this display of skin. As this mode successfully managed to grasp the attention of a large audience, it continued to be used with the changing times.

In 1871, a product named Pearl Tobacco featured a portrait of a scantily clad maiden on its package cover. Later on, in 1970, a hair dye Clairol (by Procter and Gamble) launched its campaign with a sexually suggestive slogan, which then became a popular technique as it had a double meaning attached to it which amused and scandalised the audience. This was the start to many such controversial campaigns. The origin to the use of suggestive behaviour was the infamous campaign for Kalvin & Klein featuring a 16-year-old Brooke Shields who provocatively positioned herself to a sexually suggestive slogan to promote their jeans (Sut Jhally, 1989).

The important question is: will this technique lose its effectiveness with the changing time? This technique has been used from the origin of this class of advertising and it was successful mainly because it was completely unexpected. One would assume that an audience would be shocked only if they do not expect it. Funnily, 80% of the respondents agree that they are aware that these ads are used a shock value to attract their audience but still find them being attracted to them for this prime reason. Even though 72% of the takers believe that the content in these advertisements should be regulated, they still find that these ads grasp their interest when displayed.

Therefore, this technique used is not only effective, but also fool proof as it continues to serve the purpose of these ads even though people are aware that this is used to arouse the basic emotions in them. Although the key to the proper functioning of this technique is to make sure that the content of the advertisement is unexpected. Taking into view the previous examples and the reaction obtained from the respondents, it shows that these advertisements will continue to be successful as long as they keep increasing the level of explicit content on par with the changing times. The process that is used is that they identify the standard of morality in the society at

that point of time and make sure that they go beyond it to shock and provoke their audience.

## The Self-Concept

A developing trend in advertising these days is the objectification of women in society. In other words, these ads strongly focus on women as sexual objects rather than human beings. Therefore, the advertisements are shaping the stereotypical idea of beauty in society and the more they sell it, the more people are buying into them. However, it is important to note that by shaping these stereotypes, the ads are also shaping many cultures such as dating, romance, and sex.

To understand the self-concept, it is important to understand the objectification theory. This postulates that many women are sexually objectified and treated as an object to be valued for its use by others. It results in having a negative impact on the self-esteem of the people, especially women. These ads condition her to view her face as a mask, her body as an object, and that she is constantly in need of alteration, improvement, and disguise.

This technique serves a dual purpose, namely, to grasp the attention of its viewers but, more importantly, to pressurise them into believing that the models portrayed on screen are the ultimate beauty and that they have to live up to that to be considered desirable. The advertiser is, thus, attempting to manipulate consumers by using self-degradation (Fenton, 2001).

In simpler terms, this technique involves a process by first setting and projecting the ideal sense of beauty and defining the standard of desirability. This not only hits the insecurities of the viewers, but also pressurises them to live up to the standard set by these advertisements. The crucial point is that the theme of the ad must have a nexus with either actual or ideal self-image to serve as a link between the viewer of the ad and the advertised product.

To understand the effectiveness of this technique, the reaction of the respondents was obtained with relevance to the subject at hand. The observations were as follows: closer to 42% of the respondents admitted

that these advertisements made them feel conscious about themselves. In addition to this, subtle signs of its effectiveness were found by studying the responses. Closer to 41.4% of the respondents admitted that they were disgusted by such class of advertisements and 52.9% believed that such objectification did have a negative impact on society.

Another observation, which just goes on to reaffirm the effectiveness of this technique, is that closer to 45% of the respondents openly agreed that these ads wouldn't be a success or would disgust them if the model in these ads were unattractive or overweight. This is shocking as normally most people would not accept such a fact and, therefore, the actual number of people who react similarly would realistically be a lot higher.

Therefore, as can be seen from the earlier findings although the people are aware of the objectification that occurs in these ads, they continue to be in denial of the direct impact these have on their own self-esteem.

This technique is very subtle about the fact that they use triggers to incite a reaction from the people. They are well crafted to conceal the intensity of the effect that this has on the consumers. Although they claim to only sell the product but along with the product, they are selling values and ideas of perfection and self-worth.

## Distraction

The study of distraction effects plays a central role in understanding the impact of persuasive messages. The theory is that the consumer knows very little about the product and it, thus, becomes easy to persuade him into believing what the advertisers want them to. This theory posits that the viewer focusses more on the visual aspect of the ad instead of brand information (Richmond, D & Hartman, 1982). Using the example of the class of ads in question, the sexual aspects are more interesting and, therefore, work as a distraction to persuade the consumer from the actual message.

This technique is used to appeal to the sexual drive of the consumers to attract them into buying the product without really questioning the worth of the product on its own.

This technique uses two classes of sexual stimuli, explicit, and implicit. Both these stimuli are effective, as they have been found to reduce the rational cognitive reasoning that controls persuasion (Reichert, Heckler & Jackson, 2001).

An analysis of primary research shows that closer to 47% of the respondents found that they never really focus on the product, while viewing such advertisements. Yet, a substantial number of respondents also agreed that these kind of ads have been successful in persuading them to actually purchase the product. In other words, the technique not only manages to side-line the viewers' attention from the actual product, but, at the same time, convinces him that he needs to buy the product.

The explicit stimuli used would be nudity. The model is either in one of the stages of undress namely, suggestive, partially revealing, or nude (Calogero & Rachel, 2015). Nudity is found to be one of the prime determinants of sexual response as nudity was found to be linked with sexual arousal. This explains why most of these advertisements have models that are scantily dressed. In other words, nudity is used as a tool to appeal to the sexual drives of the viewers to attract them to the product and distract them to avoid providing greater detail about the product.

An implicit class of sexual stimuli used is the element of suggestiveness present in these ads. This has been referred to as implicit because the reference made to sex is subtle or implied. Suggestiveness has been defined as a message "having or possessing sexual stimuli that triggers or arouses ideas about sex in a person's mind." Suggestiveness can be as subtle as the camera angle, seductive language, and the double entendre present in the ad (Alexander M.W. and Judd, B. Jr, 1978).

A study of the responses of the respondents of the questionnaire shows that the viewers tend to pay less attention to the detail of the product as they find themselves distracted by the sexual imagery attached to it.

Therefore, this technique involves the projection of explicit and implicit sexual stimuli in connection with the product so that the audience are attracted to it and, at the same time, distract them from the deeper details of the product by appealing to their sexual drive as opposed to

their cognitive faculty. Because of this, the audience are persuaded to react favourably towards the product.

### **Impact of Colour**

Surprisingly, the colour and theme of the ad have an immense impact on marketing. 90% of immediate judgement is determined by colour and more than 31.9% aggressive ads capitalize on colour and its ability to elicit a desired response. Colour has been found to elicit a specific response from the viewers. Most of these advertisements that portray passionate sexual behaviour always have dull yet rich colours in the background such as plum or indigo. Whereas, advertisements that try to bring in energizing or exciting sexual behaviour have brighter colours (Martin Lindstorm, 2011). Although colours do not have a huge role to play, they do contribute to the manipulative techniques used in the ad.

### **NEGATIVE IMPACT OF THE TECHNIQUES**

Out of all the techniques employed, the self-concept theory undoubtedly has the biggest negative impact on society. The research question is that how is society being affected by the objectification of models in these advertisements. The harm caused is twofold, namely, on the same gender that is being objectified and on the opposite gender.

For the purpose of this paper, the author will focus on the objectification of women, as it is more prevalent in this form of media. Images that encourage woman to focus solely on their physical appearance and sexuality have been found to be harmful to their physical as well as emotional health. This is because women not only strive to dress themselves as these models, but also to attain their body image.

It was observed that women felt more attracted by such ads than men as 56% of the respondents were male and only a very less claimed that these ads made them feel conscious about themselves. Whereas, a significant number of the women respondents admitted to this fact.

It is found that because of this, young girls of the age of eight have started to become conscious of their physical appearance. Especially, in relation to their weight, which

in turn results in the rising levels of eating disorders and depression (Emma Rooney, 2008).

The sexuality of these women is used as a selling pitch for their intended audience. Many a time, it is found that only the body of the woman is portrayed in posters or campaigns. This is because portraying the face is a link to the personality of the woman. These ads seek to sell only the body as a representation of ideal beauty.

The entire concept is dangerous not only because women constantly try to match up to the ideal beauty, but also because even young girls are being affected with the pressure being placed by this class of ads.

The impact on the opposite gender, namely the male gender, is that these advertisements shape the standards of desirability. They force him into believing that the woman is perfect and will be attracted to her only if she conforms to the standards as laid down by these ads.

For example, consider the desirability of having a small gap between the thighs. This is a very redundant attribute to overall beauty of the woman; however, because the media has promoted this as a sign of the perfect body. Most women strive to achieve this and most men make this a benchmark of beauty.

The question arises as to whether the company should be responsible for the impact of its advertisements on society. Not only does it affect the culture of attraction and romance adversely, they also have been found to corrupt the minds of the child audience.

This uncensored content is easily available to child viewers. It must be regulated, as not only do they corrupt their minds with such explicit content, but they also instill a stereotypical view of both genders from a very young age. Closer to 70% of the respondents had a positive reaction to the fact that such ads would corrupt the minds of the young viewers.

Moreover, almost half of the respondents believe that these ads have a negative impact on the public at large. Closer to 52% of the respondents had a positive reaction to the possibility that these ads could lead to physical and mental issues such as insecurities, anxiety, and depression,

which in turn have dangerous outcomes such as violent tendencies and anti-social behaviour.

## CASE STUDY

The author will illustrate the negative impact of these ads with the case of the Kama Sutra Condom ad, which was penalised. Shri Dinesh Trivedi brought the attention of the press council to this case. The advertisement was published in one of the magazines, "Sunday States Miscellany" in Calcutta with two models in sexually suggestive poses along with the picture couplet, which was quoted, from the text of the Kama Sutra (Sadiya Suleman, 2014).

The complaint against this advertisement was that it degraded women by promoting her as a sex object. Moreover, the vulgar matter was misleading and corrupting the young and impressionable minds of society.

This ad was criticised widely as it was deliberately designed to create chaos in the society by crossing the hallmark the decency. It was argued that such advertisements had to restrict themselves within the morality standards of the society and provoking the people to incite a response would create huge amounts of conflict and controversy in society, which would lead to irreparable damage.

Moreover, the complainant alleged that the advertisement should have taken a family planning point of view rather than a vulgar approach. The advertisers, in this case, should have kept in mind the culture of the Indian society especially in the 1990s. The advertisement incited a negative response, as it did not take into consideration the concerns of its audience when directing the behaviour in the advertisement and the message that it sought to put across.

Coming to the aspect of the objectification of women, the ad was criticised for portraying the woman as a sex object. The audience was disgusted as this was disrespectful towards woman. Therefore, the advertisement was struck down because it was vulgar, obscene, and offensive to public good taste.

## LIMITATIONS

Other than the shock value of these ads, they are found to be successful primarily for their ability to tap into the most

primal drives of its audience. They attract the attention of the people by calling out to the sexual instinct of the people and, at the same time, hit their deepest insecurities (Lanis K & Covell K, 1998).

These ads that use sexual appeal are very subtle about the fact that they are using triggers to incite a reaction from the people. They are well crafted to conceal the intensity of the effect that this has on the consumers. These advertisements claim to only sell the product, but along with the product, they are selling values and ideas of perfection and self-worth (Robert. A. Peterson & Roger. A. Kerin, 1977).

Close to 61% of the respondents agreed that this form of advertising was extremely effective in grasping the consumer's attention and agreed that the message was communicated better this way. In addition, they remembered the product for a longer period of time by linking it to the sexual behaviour in the ad.

However, it is interesting to note that only a minority of 22.9% of the respondents thought that using sexual appeal was an effective form of advertising. Whereas, a majority of the respondents believed that its effectiveness depended on the product that was being promoted. In addition to this, a good number of people agreed that such ads would be more effective if the model in the ad was a celebrity or a known face. Therefore, it is clear from their response that the effectiveness of using the shock value as a technique reduces as long as the content of these ads remain more or less the same. Although this may also differ amongst audience from different cultures and age groups.

From the response of the respondents, it can be inferred that the consumers are attracted to these ads only if they were well crafted and, especially, only if there is a link between the sexual behaviour on screen and the product sought to be promoted. Therefore, although these ads have been found to have a negative impact, the public no longer blindly follows these ads and finds them attracted to it only if the context is appropriate.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This trend of sexual behaviour in advertisements looks to continue as a majority of the viewers find it entertaining, which makes it profitable. The important question is up to what extent these advertisers can be expected to take responsibility for the negative effect these ads have on the physical and mental health of its viewers. Although, on the other hand, this form of advertising is found to be highly effective and despite its impact, it cannot be banned altogether. A balance must be struck between the interests of the advertisers and the viewers in order for it to continue to function effectively.

Some recommendations in order to ensure a balance are as follows:

- Advertisers must submit a report, which contains details of the techniques used in their ads.
- To conduct an assessment of the potential impact of these ads on the viewers and to include the viewer impact assessment in the report submitted
- Only once such report is accepted by the concerned central agency can these advertisements be allowed to be aired or published.
- In the case where an advertisement does not follow the above procedure, they shall be subjected to strict penalty.
- Photoshop and other such computer graphics, which give these models their unrealistic beauties, must be avoided to prevent the promotion of this false ideal of beauty and desire.
- They must normalise the idea of beauty and desire by portraying these models with their human flaws.
- These ads must feature plus-sized and coloured models more often to widen the perception of beauty.
- Such advertisements should be allowed only for a particular set of products, which actually have a direct nexus with the sexual behaviour.
- These types of advertisements can be limited only to certain adult channels.

**ANNEXURE- I: TABULAR REPRESENTATION OF DATA COLLECTED**

S. No.	QUESTION	YES (%)	NO (%)	MAYBE (%)	OTHER RESPONSES
1.	Do You think using sexual appeal is an effective form of Advertising?	22.9	32.9	38.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Only if it is done smartly</li> <li>● Depends on the product being advertised</li> </ul>
2.	Have you ever been attracted to a product because of the model who promotes it with sexual behaviour (Slice ad by Katrina Kaif)	11.4	78.6	10	
3.	Have you ever purchased a product because it had a sexually stimulating imagery attached to it?	7.1	84.3	8.6	
4.	Do these stereotypical ads wherein a male/ female is sexualised in order to market the product disgust you?	41.4	37.1	21.4	
5.	Wold you be disgusted if the model in such ads is not attractive/ overweight	27.1	51.4	21.4	
6.	Do you think such objectification of male/female will have an impact on society at large?	52.9	38.2	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Depends on the literacy levels and the outlook of the people</li> <li>● Depends on the purpose behind the objectification</li> <li>● Depends on the product being marketed</li> <li>● Depends on the extent to which it occurs in the ad</li> </ul>
7.	Do such ads make you feel uncomfortable?	31.4	68.6	-	
8.	Do you think sexual behaviour in advertising would be more effective if it were a celebrity in the ad?	37.1	40	22.9	
9.	Sexuality in advertising is strongly effective in attracting the consumer's attention and on that, to retain the message	47.9	30.4	21.7	
10.	Do you think such advertisements must be controlled to as to avoid corrupting the minds of the young viewers	53.6	27.5	18.8	
11.	Do you think sexual behaviour in advertising should be banned altogether?	34.3	65.7	-	

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