

The Cost of Provocation: How 'Sex Sells' Harms Brands and Society

Zoe Pantin

Current Issues In Advertising (MSCM 3363)

Dr. Nah Ray Han

November 30th, 2024

A controversial topic in the world of advertising involves the role that sex plays in the industry. This strategy, commonly referred to as "sex sells," relies on the use of provocative imagery and themes to attract attention to the brand and promote their products. It's often used to create emotional responses and lasting impressions, whether that be good or bad. This is something that we as consumers see on a daily basis whether it is on a fragrance ad, undergarments, or even fast food restaurants. While this approach may grab attention, it raises many important questions about its significance. Is sex truly effective in driving sales and building brand loyalty? Or does it encourage harmful stereotypes, alienate key demographics, and distract from a product's actual value? These questions are crucial as they could affect the success of advertising campaigns and even shape societal norms over time.

It's important to take a deeper look into the role that sex plays in advertising to understand the impact that it has on consumers, vulnerable populations, and even the advertisers themselves. For consumers, sexualized advertising can produce strong emotional responses that shape attitudes toward specific products or brands. While it often succeeds in creating memorable campaigns, it can also spark the conversation about unrealistic beauty standards or cultural norms. Another important demographic is the vulnerable populations, specifically

children and teenagers. This group is the most sensitive to seeing these forms of messages. Exposure to sexualized content at a young age can have lasting effects on an adolescent's self-esteem and perception of self-worth, which can lead to unhealthy behaviors or attitudes as they grow older. Lastly, even advertisers themselves could be affected by the concerns of sex appeal in campaigns. This could result in brand fatigue or even loss of credibility.

The primary problem we are currently dealing with has been discussed for a long time. The claim that "sex sells" has been an ongoing discussion in advertising, referring to the assumption that using sexual themes or imagery will draw in customers and increase sales. This is something that has been around for a long time, dating back to World War I when advertisers wanted to find new ways to capture attention and influence consumer decisions. One of the very first usages of this was Woodberry Facial Soap in 1911. This advertisement used the slogan, "A Skin You Love To Touch," which sparked the idea that a consumer could find a romantic relationship if they were to use the product. In an article written by Juliann Sivulka, she stated, "These advertisements also employed fantasy appeals, which allowed women to extend their vision of themselves by permitting them to escape from problems in the real world and "try on" interesting or provocative roles" (Sivulka 51). Since then, many other brands have followed in these footsteps, eventually taking it to an extreme point.

A recent advertisement that was created by Gillette in 2019, was inspired by the #MeToo Campaign. This ended up getting negative backlash because it featured images of sexual content and abuse. Many people believed that this was something that should have never been released because of the negative connotation this was related to as well as the potential harmful impact on this specific vulnerable demographic. This therefore negatively impacted the brand image and

caused backlash to not only their products but Gillette as a whole. In turn, this makes the consumers of these products not want to purchase from them again.

Ethical issues and concerns such as this are reasons why this issue needs to be addressed. The main conflicts in the industry today are the possible oversaturation of sexual content and most importantly making sure that there is still brand recognition after the campaign. In an article written by Helena Lawrence, she stated, "In a study using a recognition memory paradigm, sexual appeals, compared to non-sexual ads, increased visual recognition of the advertisement but did not impact brand memory (Lachance et al., 1977)." These aspects are important because the use of sexual imagery can cause many conflicts. Oversaturation of sexual content can lead to less consumer returns and audience desensitization. If every brand uses similar tactics, it becomes extremely difficult to stand out, potentially damaging the campaign's effectiveness.

On the other hand, many believe that sexual content in advertising is an effective tool that drives sales and creates buzz within the industry. Supporters of this approach argue that sex appeal is a universal and automatic attention-grabber, making it a reliable strategy to capture consumer interest. "Sex sells" advocates believe that campaigns that incorporate sexual themes often generate significant public interest and discussion, which can increase brand awareness. In an article written by Collin Gifford Brooke, he stated "A cliché that benefits from the fact that it would be impossible to verify or disprove, the idea that "sex sells," that sexual imagery somehow makes advertising more effective, is very nearly a given, not unlike the popular perception of subliminal advertising (see Twitchell, 1996)" Many also explain that when a campaign is executed thoughtfully, sexual content can align with the brand's identity and target audience, which would increase the appeal of certain products.

Through the different opinions and beliefs on this topic, I believe that advertisers should approach the use of sexual content with caution and intentionality. While it may create short-term buzz, the long-term success and reputation of the brand is what's most important. Advertisements should strive to create campaigns that not only capture attention but also resonate with audiences on a deeper level, creating more meaningful connections and brand loyalty. Rather than using provocative imagery, advertisers should consider shifting their focus toward themes of empowerment, cultural inclusivity, and genuine storytelling. Storytelling allows brands to communicate their mission and values in a way that feels honest and relatable to the consumer, which builds more emotional ties to the brand.

One policy that I believe should be implemented in the advertising industry is to establish stricter guidelines surrounding the use of sexual content in a campaign. This would ensure that advertisers are focusing more on responsibly promoting their product, which creates buzz while also sticking to their image. This policy would make sure that the sexual imagery is relevant to the brand and its product. This could hopefully lower the negative connotation that surrounds unnecessary provocative advertising and focus more on respectful, inclusive, and meaningful campaigns.

In conclusion, the debate that surrounds sex in advertising is important because it brings attention to many concerns in the media. While the "sex sells" approach has proven its ability to capture attention, generate buzz, and even drive short-term sales, it also raises critical concerns about the broader impact and long-term effectiveness. The overuse of sexual content risks desensitizing audiences, creating harmful stereotypes, and alienating key demographics, including vulnerable populations such as children and teens. Additionally, advertisers must focus

on the challenge of maintaining brand recognition and credibility in an oversaturated market where provocative imagery can overshadow the product's true value.

Advertisers should carefully consider whether their use of sexual themes aligns with their brand identity, resonates with their target audience, and contributes positively to their long-term brand goals. Rather than relying on shock value alone, campaigns should prioritize authenticity, inclusivity, and ethical responsibility to create meaningful connections with consumers. As the industry continues to evolve, it is important to address these challenges and create advertising strategies that are not only effective but also respectful of the different values in society.

Ultimately, the success of brands is closely related to the advertising tactics and strategies used in the media. Making sure they are beneficial campaigns for everyone will ensure a lasting impact on the brand.

Works Cited

- Brooke, Collin Gifford. *Sex(Haustion) Sells: Marketing in a Saturated Mediascape*.
- Gramazio, Sarah, et al. "Does Sex Really Sell? Paradoxical Effects of Sexualization in Advertising on Product Attractiveness and Purchase Intentions." *Sex Roles*, vol. 84, no. 84, 23 Sept. 2020, link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-020-01190-6, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-020-01190-6>.
- Hu, Fengpei, et al. "Love at First Glance but Not after Deep Consideration: The Impact of Sexually Appealing Advertising on Product Preferences." *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, vol. 14, no. 465, 29 May 2020, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnins.2020.00465>.
- Lawrence, Helena, et al. "Sex Does Not Sell: Effects of Sexual Advertising Parameters on Women Viewers' Implicit and Explicit Recall of Ads and Brands." *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, vol. 128, no. 2, 28 Jan. 2021, pp. 692–713, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7890690/, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0031512521990352>.
- Mardenfeld, Sandra. "Sex in Advertising Statistics - Why Sex Sells - BusinessNewsDaily." *Business News Daily*, 23 Oct. 2023, www.businessnewsdaily.com/2649-sex-sells-more.html.
- Marketing Campaigns Use Sex Appeal to Sell Products ISSUE: Is Using Sex Appeal in a Marketing Campaign Appropriate for Product Promotion?*
- Sivulka, Juliann. *Historical and Psychological Perspectives of the Erotic Appeal in Advertising*.