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Ethical Judgments of Sexual Appeals in Print Advertising

Michael S. LaTour and Tony L. Henthorne

This study explores consumers' ethical judgments about the use of sexual appeals in print advertising. It specifically focuses upon responses on the Reidenbach-Robin multidimensional ethics scale, ad attitude, brand attitude, and purchase intentions. The findings indicate that, regardless of the respondent's gender, the use of a strong overt sexual appeal in a print advertisement was not well received. Consequently, advertisers need to rethink the use of strong overt sexual appeals, especially given the controversial issues surrounding such advertising stimuli and their popular use to break through media clutter.

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Though not universally embraced, and held in disdain by many people, the use of overt sexual appeals in print advertising has increased considerably in contemporary advertising practice (LaTour 1990; Severn, Belch, and Belch 1990; Soley and Reid 1988; Tinkham and Reid 1988). Today, it is common for a reader of any age to pick up a general-interest consumer magazine and find an advertisement featuring provocatively posed and attired (or unattired) models for many consumer products.

Alexander and Judd (1986) contend that ad creators must be acutely aware of the reactions (both positive and negative) of their target audience to the use of potentially controversial sexual appeals as ad stimuli. Pease (1980) views advertising as presenting "social statements" about widely held and shared beliefs among the public to which the advertisement is ultimately directed. Soley and Reid (1988) state that general changes in a society's sexual attitudes are often mirrored in print advertising. Axiomatic to each of these arguments is an assumed ethical judgment about the suitability and acceptability of the use of sexual appeals in advertising. We examine the impact of such potentially controversial ad stimuli on consumers' ethical judgments (as measured on moral philosophical dimensions), attitude toward the viewed ad, attitude toward the brand being promoted, and purchase intention.

The Use of Sexual Appeals in Print Advertising

During the past two decades, the use of sexual appeals in print advertising has become almost commonplace (LaTour, Pitts, and Snook-Luther 1990; Soley and Reid 1988). Jovan Musk has established a reputation for pushing the moral and ethical concern of censors to the edge — for example, with the "What Is Sexy?" campaign (Miller 1992a). In a recent Jovan ad, a partially nude couple asks the provocative question, "Just how much can we take off?" Among the more memorable examples of such advertising in recent years are the long-running controversial print ads for *Obsession* perfume and cologne by Calvin Klein. These ads, somewhat characteristic of the genre, typically feature a nude couple in a suggestive position. Concurrently running, and just as memorable, are many of the print advertisements for Calvin Klein jeans. Early on, the jeans maker featured the teenage actress Brooke Shields stating that nothing came between her and her Calvins. More recently, Klein has featured model Karen Moss showing even

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less between her and her Calvins (Miller 1992b). Ads of this type are designed to elicit what the originators hope is a vicarious experience of sensuality (LaTour and Henthorne 1993).

In the 1990s, the use of sexual advertising appeals continues to be a controversial topic, as evidenced by the strength and variability of reactions to it. Previous empirical studies have indicated that the use of such advertising appeals has met with a somewhat mixed consumer response — sometimes evoking positive reactions and sometimes evoking negative reactions from viewers (cf. Alexander and Judd 1986; LaTour 1990; Morrison and Sherman 1972; Sciglimpaglia, Belch, and Cain 1979). The whole issue of sex and what is considered decent and acceptable in a society is continually in flux (Boddewyn 1991; D'Emilio and Freedman 1989). Advertisers are finding it increasingly difficult to determine whether viewers will perceive ads containing provocatively posed and attired models as “sexy” or “sexist” (Lipman 1991; Miller 1992b). Past studies of general perceptions (not ad specific) of female role portrayals have shown that if women perceive they are being portrayed inappropriately, their perception may reduce purchase intention and/or damage sponsor image (Ford and LaTour 1993).

The spectrum of what constitutes a sexual appeal may be viewed as a narrow to broad continuum (Gould 1992). The narrow range of the continuum encompasses material that shows explicit nudity or portrayals of the sex act itself. In contrast, the broad range of the continuum encompasses material that, while not overtly sexually explicit, some individuals may find sexually stimulating (e.g., attractive, “sexy” dressed couples in subtle but sensual poses) (Brown and Bryant 1989; Gould 1992).

The Role of Ethics

To understand more fully the positive and negative consumer reactions and ethical dilemmas arising from the use of sexual appeals in print advertising, we must consider the fundamental concepts contained in normative ethical theories of moral philosophy (Gould 1994). Murphy and Laczniak (1981) state that normative ethical theories in moral philosophy can generally be classified as either teleological or deontological. The principal difference between those two frameworks is in their basic focus.

Teleological philosophies are defined as philosophies concerned primarily with the moral worth of an individual behavior (Fraedrich and Ferrell 1992).

Their focus is on the consequences of individual actions and behaviors in the determination of “worth” (Ferrell and Gresham 1985). Teleological philosophies maintain that the individual should examine and determine the probable consequences (in terms of goodness or badness) of alternative actions and behaviors in a specific situation. A particular behavior is considered ethical if it produces the greatest balance of good over bad when compared with all alternative actions (Hunt and Vitell 1986).

Deontological philosophies focus on specific actions or behaviors of the individual without regard to the consequences of the actions. Thus, deontology opposes the principal tenet of teleology (Fraedrich and Ferrell 1992). Deontological theory purports that the rightness or wrongness of actions and behaviors should be judged by the actions themselves without regard to the outcome.

From a teleological viewpoint, the use of sexual appeals in advertising often is not appealing to viewers and may produce potentially negative side effects (e.g., sexual obsessions, gratuitous sex) (Gould 1994). Therefore, the consequences (in terms of unwanted or unintended side effects) of the use of sexual appeals in advertising, as well as the fundamental moral rightness or wrongness of its use are of concern (Gould 1994).

The fundamental component in teleological theories is the amount of good or bad contained in the consequences of an act, whereas the essential component in deontological theories is the inherent rightness of an individual act. It is not realistic to believe that individuals make ethical decisions or judgments strictly on the basis of either teleology or deontology. Reidenbach and Robin (1988) contend that individuals do not use the clearly defined concepts of ethical philosophies in making specific ethical evaluations, but that a mixing or combining of these philosophies is the norm. This notion is predicated on the work of Frankena (1963), who espoused the balancing and blending of the joint requirements of a deontological-teleological process. Further, Hunt and Vitell (1986, p. 7) state that “people...do in fact engage in both deontological and teleological evaluations in determining their ethical judgments and, ultimately, their behaviors.” Therefore, we should resist viewing teleology and deontology as two totally independent philosophies. As the work of Tansey, Hyman, and Brown (1992) highlights, the use of a controversial ad stimulus may evoke an array of related teleology- and deontology-based responses on a single dimension of ethical evaluation.

Hypotheses

On the basis of the preceding discussion, we expect a print ad displaying an strong overt sexual appeal to result in significantly lower scores or ratings across dimensions of moral philosophy/"ethics of advertising use" than a mild sexual appeal (as encompassed in the broad range definition previously discussed). Additionally, given the potential offensiveness of strong overt sexual appeals in print advertisements (Ford and LaTour 1993; Miller 1992b), we expect attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intention to be significantly less favorable for an ad with strong overt sexual appeals than for an ad containing mild sexual appeals.

- H₁: An ad that contains a strong overt sexual appeal will result in significantly less favorable response on moral philosophical ethical dimensions than an ad that contains a mild sexual appeal.
- H₂: An ad that contains a strong overt sexual appeal will result in significantly less favorable attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intention than an ad that contains a mild sexual appeal.

The Study

Data Collection and Ad Stimuli

Data were collected through the use of a mall intercept during all hours of mall operation over the course of one week. The mall is in a growing, demographically diverse, culturally vibrant MSA in the mid-Gulf Coast region. In-migration to the area is heavy. The proximity to beaches, gambling casinos, and other tourist-oriented destinations, military bases, and industry contributes to this location's dynamic environment. Trained interviewers were rotated in a random pattern to different locations in the mall (Nowell and Stanley 1991). Several people were allowed to pass between interviews. Potential respondents were approached and told they were invited to participate in a strictly academic advertising research project. The interviewers emphasized that there were no "correct" answers or responses and gave assurance of confidentiality. More than 85% of the people approached agreed to participate. Each individual was requested to complete the questionnaire alone — sitting down at a nearby rest area, away from the major traffic flows of the mall, where he or she could be monitored from a distance. Thus the respondents filled out the

questionnaire in a private, yet carefully monitored environment. To reinforce confidentiality, they returned the completed questionnaires to a covered box. The use of the mall intercept as a data collection technique has been shown to produce a statistically representative cross-section of respondents (Bush and Hair 1985). A total of 199 usable questionnaires were obtained.

The treatment manipulation was facilitated by the use of two high quality copies of black and white print ads. Both ad stimuli were part of a collection of black and white photographs promoting a well-known brand of jeans and used as an outsert in a metropolitan area different from the one where the study was conducted. As part of the treatment selection process, a focus group of adults ranging in age from 21 to 50 years provided input for the selection of two ads from this promotional outsert — one perceived to have a strong overt sexual theme and the other perceived as having a mild sexual theme. One selected ad depicted fully clothed male and female models wearing jeans and holding hands while walking. The other selected ad featured two similar looking models. In this ad, both the male and female models were partially nude (i.e., the male wearing jeans only and the female's unclothed breasts and abdomen covered by the male) and, according to the focus group, in a sexually suggestive embrace in an "out of the ordinary" environment (outdoors against a fence) (see Table 1). Each ad contained the brand name of the jeans at the bottom.

Each respondent was given only one of the two ads followed by the questionnaire. The treatment ads and attached questionnaires were thoroughly shuffled prior to data collection so respondents would be assigned randomly to treatment groups. According to Kerlinger (1973, p. 310), for samples the size of the one in our study, randomization of treatment group assignment is an appropriate method to ensure control over extraneous variables, the result being groups that are statistically equal.

Operationalization

It is reasonable to assume that individuals use more than one justification when drawing any ethical conclusion and that the relative importance of those justifications is a function of the specific circumstances facing the individual (Reidenbach and Robin 1990). Normative ethical philosophy, which encompasses several overlapping theoretical ideals (teleological and deontological philosophies), was the basis for the development of the Reidenbach and Robin (1988, 1990)

Table 1
Description of the Ad Stimuli*

The Mild Sexual Appeal Ad

The male and female models are featured walking together out of doors with their arms around each other. The male model's arm is around the shoulder of the female. The female's arm is around the male model's waist, under his shirt. Both models, while fully clothed, are not dressed conservatively. Rather, both models are wearing jeans and tank tops.

The Strong Overt Sexual Appeal Ad

The male and female models are out-of-doors, clearly engaged in a sensual sexual embrace. The female model is leaning against a chain-link fence with her arms raised above her head. The female is completely unclothed, yet her lower abdomen and breasts are covered by the male model. The male model is wearing only jeans with the fly unzipped.

*additional information concerning the ad stimuli is available from the authors.

multidimensional ethics scale. (For a detailed discussion of the moral philosophy base of the scale, see Reidenbach and Robin 1990.) The Reidenbach-Robin multidimensional ethics scale has been shown to have a relatively high level of validity in comparison with a single univariate measure of ethical evaluation (see, e.g., Reidenbach and Robin 1990; Tansey, Hyman, and Brown 1992). Additionally, the scale has consistent and fairly high construct validity (Reidenbach, Robin, and Dawson 1991). The scale has typically distilled three dimensions: *moral equity*, *relativism*, and *contractualism*.

The *moral equity* dimension (composed of the variables fair/unfair, just/unjust, morally right/not morally right, and acceptable to my family/not acceptable to my family) is based on lessons learned early in life from basic institutions such as family and religion about such fundamental constructs as fairness, equity, and right and wrong (Reidenbach and Robin 1990). The insights acquired from such institutions are considered decisive in establishing what individuals consider to be decent or objectionable in advertising (Gilly 1988). The moral equity dimension can be viewed as a composite dimension in the sense that it consists of variables from both teleology and deontology.

Hunt and Vitell (1986) examine the possibility of a link between the ethical evaluative process and social and cultural influences on the individual. The *relativism* (or *realism*) dimension (composed of the items culturally acceptable/culturally unacceptable and tra-

ditionally acceptable/traditionally unacceptable) represents the influences, guidelines, and parameters manifested by society. Hence, the realism dimension can be viewed as a deontological dimension. An argument can be made that the current level of sexuality in advertising is just a mirror of presently acceptable social behavior (Courtney and Whipple 1983).

Given the overlapping theoretical foundations of the ethical philosophies used in developing the scales, it is not surprising to find a high degree of correlation between some of the constructs. Specifically, the *moral equity* and *relativism* dimensions have been shown to combine into a single comprehensive dimension (Reidenbach and Robin 1990; Reidenbach, Robin, and Dawson 1991; Tansey, Hyman, and Brown 1992). According to Reidenbach, Robin, and Dawson (1991, p. 86), an explanation of the two-dimensional structure may be the "natural relation expected between what people perceive to be culturally acceptable and what is just." The authors go on to say that the meaning of "fairness" comes to us in part through our culture, so such a composite makes intuitive sense.

The third dimension, *contractualism*, represents the notion of a "social contract" between the individual and society (Reidenbach and Robin 1990). This dimension consists of two items, violates an unspoken promise/does not violate an unspoken promise and violates an unwritten contract/does not violate an unwritten contract. It can be viewed as being grounded in the philosophies of deontology (Bayles and Henley 1983).

Table 2
Variables Used in the Study

Attitude Toward the Ad (A_{ad}) ^a	Attitude Toward the Brand (A_b) ^a
1. Irritating (reverse scored) 2. Good 3. Informative 4. Offensive (reverse scored)	1. High quality 2. Unsatisfactory ^b 3. Appealing 4. Inferior ^b
Cronbach's alpha = .71	Cronbach's alpha = .74
Purchase Intention^a	
The next time I purchase jeans I will purchase (brand name) jeans	
Moral Equity/Relativism Dimension ^c	Contractualism Dimension ^c
1. Just 2. Acceptable to my family 3. Fair 4. Morally right 5. Culturally acceptable 6. Traditionally acceptable	1. Does not violate an unspoken promise 2. Does not violate an unwritten contract
Cronbach's Alpha = .92	Pearson Correlation = .40; $p < .01$
Overall Ethical Measure^c	
1. Ethical	

^aMeasured on 7-point scales anchored by "yes, definitely" = 7 and "no, definitely not" = 1.

^bReverse scored.

^cMeasured on 7-point bipolar adjective item scales.

To evaluate dimensions of an individual's moral philosophical responses (or perceived "ethics of use") associated with the ad stimulus, we asked respondents to use the Reidenbach-Robin (1988, 1990) multidimensional ethics scale to express their opinions about the promotional use of the ad they had just seen (see Table 2). Additionally, the scale included a single univariate item measuring the perceived overall ethics of using the ad stimulus.

Respondents completed two series of four 7-point items that were summed to measure attitude toward the ad (A_{ad}) and attitude toward the brand (A_b) (see Table 2). The items were selected on the basis of focus group research and their use in related advertising research (e.g., Henthorne, LaTour, and Natarajan 1993; LaTour, Pitts, and Snook-Luther 1990).

These items were followed by a series of demographic questions, a manipulation check, and a purchase intention (PI) item. PI was measured by a 7-point item that read, "The next time I purchase jeans I will purchase [brand name] jeans." The scale was anchored by "yes, definitely" and "no, definitely not."

Given the possibility of gender-based differences in responses (LaTour 1990), treatment, gender, and treatment by gender interaction effects on the dependent variables were evaluated by multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). Because age differences may affect the receptivity to such youth-oriented ad stimuli, age was included as a covariate. However, we note that nontargeted individuals are important to consider because of their possible exposure to the ad and subsequent possible negative social conse-

Table 3
Varimax Rotated-Factor Structure

	Morel*	Contractualism	Percent Variance Explained in Items
Traditionally Acceptable	.856	.211	77.6
Fair	.844	.070	71.7
Acceptable to Family	.832	.302	78.3
Morally Right	.824	.295	76.5
Just	.822	.021	67.5
Culturally Acceptable	.781	.382	75.4
Does Not Violate Contract	.025	.929	86.3
Does Not Violate Promise	.450	.618	58.3
Eigenvalue	4.30	1.62	
Percent Variance Explained	53.8	20.3	

*Moral Equity/Relativistic.

quences (e.g., perceived degradation of women) (Gould 1994).

Preliminary Analysis and Profile of the Sample

Factor analysis indicated a two-factor structure (as previously discussed). As in previous research (Reidenbach, Robin, and Dawson 1991), a composite dimension (six items) entitled "moral equity/relativism" ("morel") was distilled along with the *contractualism* dimension (see Table 3).

We conducted a manipulation check by comparing the two treatment groups on their mean responses on a 7-point item, "The featured ad contained nudity" (coded from 1 "No, definitely not" to 7 "Yes, definitely"). As expected, the mean was significantly ($p < .001$) stronger for the group seeing the strong overt sexual appeal ad (5.76) than for the group seeing the mild sexual appeal ad (2.71). Cronbach alpha tests were conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of summed scales (see Table 2). Alpha levels ranged from a low of .71 to a high of .92. Scores within this range are considered adequate indications of internal consistency for basic research such as ours (see Bagozzi 1978; Nunnally 1967).

Of the 199 total usable responses, 94 were from men and 105 were from women. Forty-six women and 50 men were in the mild sexual appeal treatment group; 59 women and 44 men were in the strong overt sexual appeal treatment group. The average age of the sample was 34.3 years with a standard deviation

of 14.8 years. The average educational level was 13.8 years (high school=12 years) with a standard deviation of 2.8 years. In terms of racial composition, 75.7% of the respondents were white, 15.8% were African-American, 2.5% were Hispanic-American, 2% were Asian-American; the remainder were in a self-declared "other" category. Income levels were measured in categories and showed wide variation. Self-reported marital status indicated that 30.2% of the respondents were not married, 47.5% were currently married, and the rest were separated or widowed. The sample demographic profile was quite comparable to population statistics (supplied by mall managers) for a 10-mile radius surrounding the mall. In addition, Kolomogorov-Smirnov nonparametric tests indicated the demographic profiles of the treatment groups were not significantly different from each other.

Results

Hypothesis Tests

We report significant univariate effects (i.e., $p < .05$) that followed indications of significant overall MANOVA model results. The univariate results for the overall ethics (single-item measure) of using the ad indicate that the mild sexual appeal is perceived as significantly more positive on this item and the covariate is significant and negative ($t = -2.33$). The test of heterogeneity of regression reveals that the negative relationship between age and perceived overall ethics of use is much stronger in the strong overt

Table 4
Significant Mean Differences

Group		Mean	SD	Univariate F	p<
A_{ad} (four 7-point items, summed scale)					
Treatment main effect	Overt sexual appeal ad	13.07	7.63	8.02	.05
	Mild sexual appeal ad	16.06	6.16		
Gender main effect	Male	16.39	6.37	8.85	.05
	Female	13.20	7.19		
Interaction	Female/Overt sexual appeal ad	10.91 ^a	6.77	6.19	.05
	Female/Mild sexual appeal ad	16.08	6.70		
	Male/Overt sexual appeal ad	16.18	7.60		
	Male/Mild sexual appeal ad	16.58	5.11		
A_b (four 7-point items, summed scale)					
Treatment main effect	Overt sexual appeal ad	17.82	6.49	5.11	.05
	Mild sexual appeal ad	19.67	5.30		
Purchase Intention (single 7-point item)					
Treatment main effect	Overt sexual appeal ad	2.67	1.69	11.31	.05
	Mild sexual appeal ad	3.57	1.98		
Moral Equity/Relativism (six 7-point items, summed scale)					
Treatment main effect	Overt sexual appeal ad	17.94	10.44	24.48	.05
	Mild sexual appeal ad	25.66	10.14		
Contractualism (two 7-point items, summed scale)					
Treatment main effect	Overt sexual appeal ad	8.14	3.27	3.75	.06
	Mild sexual appeal ad	9.35	3.80		
Ethical (one 7-point item)					
Treatment main effect	Overt sexual appeal ad	3.07	2.12	18.03	.05
	Mild sexual appeal ad	4.45	1.98		
					(1, 181 D.F.)

^aSignificantly different ($p < .05$) from the other three cells.

Table 5
Pearson Correlations*

	Morel ^b	Contractual	Ethical
A _{ad}	.73	.53	.65
A _b	.39	.41	.27
PI	.52	.26	.38

*All correlations significant ($p < .01$).

^bMoral equity/relativism composite dimension.

sexual appeal ad group ($r = -.294$) than in the mild sexual appeal ad group ($r = -.032$; $p > .05$) (see Table 4).

For *moral equity/relativism*, only the treatment main effect is significant, with the mild sexual appeal ad group showing stronger response. The age covariate is significant in the negative direction ($t = -2.65$). The heterogeneity of regression test on the covariate is also significant. Specifically, the morality/relativistic acceptability problems that older respondents appear to have with the ads have a significantly stronger relationship in the strong overt sexual appeal ad group ($r = -.325$) than in the mild sexual appeal ad group ($r = -.069$; $p > .05$).

The significance level of the treatment main effect on the *contractualism* dimension is $p = .054$. Though this effect is not significant at the $p < .05$ level, the mild sexual appeal ad group is seen as more strongly "upholding an unwritten contract with society." The age covariate is not related significantly to the contractualism dimension.

The findings indicate general support for H₁. The use of a highly sexual theme in a print ad was not as well received and was in fact viewed as less ethically "correct" than use of a mild sexual version of the ad. In our sample, both men and women expressed serious ethical concerns about the use of the overtly sexual ad.

Univariate analyses of A_{ad} show significant main effects for gender and treatment. An interaction effect of gender and treatment is evident as well (see Table 4). The age covariate is related negatively to A_{ad} ($t = -2.69$), perhaps because the youthful nature of the product makes it difficult for older respondents to identify with the message. The test for heterogeneity of regression for the covariate is nonsignificant. Analysis of the means for the main effects shows that, overall, men had a more favorable response in terms of A_{ad} and that the mild sexual appeal ad was more affable. Perhaps more revealing, however, are the post-hoc analyses of interaction effects by the Tukey

range test. An examination of Table 4 shows that women in the strong overt sexual appeal ad group had the most negative A_{ad}.

Univariate analyses for both A_b and PI indicate only a main effect for the treatment. For both of these variables, the mild sexual appeal ad was evaluated more favorably. That is, the group seeing that ad indicated a more positive brand attitude and a stronger intention to purchase (see Table 4).

The results demonstrate general support for H₂ in that significantly more negative A_{ad}, A_b, and PI were evident in the strong overt sexual appeal ad treatment group than in the other treatment group. Finally, though generally the use of the highly sexual print ad was viewed more negatively, the attitude of women was significantly more negative than that of their male counterparts.

Table 5 shows an overall pattern of dimensions of perceived ethical judgment having a positive association with A_{ad}, A_b, and PI. This pattern of correlations may suggest a positive linkage between ethical judgments and attitudinal structures (e.g., if the ad is perceived to be ethically/morally "correct," resulting attitudinal structures should be enhanced). Though such a positive relationship is intuitively logical, future research should explore both theoretically and empirically the complexity of structural relations between these variables.

Limitations

The mall intercept is gaining acceptability and popularity but as a data collection technique, it nonetheless results in a convenience sample. Generalizability is limited by the use of only one environment for data collection. Though the mall used in our study is in an area believed to be demographically diverse and culturally dynamic, it is only one location.

Skipper and Hyman (1993) have raised the issues of what the Reidenbach-Robin multidimensional ethics scale is truly designed to measure and the possibility of loss of meaning during the distillation process. These may be valid issues, but we contend that the distillation process, though deleting some individual items, preserved a variety of measures covering both teleological and deontological considerations.

Given that the Reidenbach-Robin multidimensional ethics scale was developed and validated through the use of business practice scenarios, one could argue that the *moral equity/relativism* dimension is more suitable than the *contractualism* dimension for use in a study on the use of sexual appeals in advertising. Therefore, the lack of significant findings related to

the *contractualism* dimension should not be viewed as overly limiting. As previous work (Tansey, Hyman, and Brown 1992) has indicated, the *contractualism* dimension may be unrelated to certain situation-specific ethical evaluations.

The use of the print ad stimuli is also a potential limitation. One could argue that the female model in the strong overt sexual appeal ad is "more naked" than the male model. However, though the female model is unclothed, she is "covered" by the male model and is clearly a participant (as is the male model) in a sexually suggestive embrace. Finally, an inherent limitation to this study is the use of only two ad stimuli; one a mild and subtle sexual appeal and the other a strong and overt sexual appeal. Future research, incorporating ad stimuli between this range of mild and overt would be further illuminating. In addition, Gould (1992) points out the ethical concerns over the incorporation of violence within sexual appeals. A useful extension of the current study would be to vary the stimuli in that manner as well.

Discussion

Both of our hypotheses are supported. Though we acknowledge the limitations of the sample and treatments used, it is clear that undesirable reactions and consequences may result from the use of strong overt sexual appeals. However, in response to competitive pressures, advertisers often use sexual appeals as a creative way to capture the consumer's attention (Ford and LaTour 1993). Of concern to advertisers is determining the point at which a sexual appeal may be viewed as unethical and therefore become counter-productive.

Our research shows that both men and women have potential ethical concerns about the use of strong overt sexual appeals in advertising. These findings, however, must be considered within the complexity of the issue. Gould (1994) points out the multifaceted nature of ethical concerns about sexual appeals and the challenges facing advertisers. For example, whether or not the use of a sexual appeal is perceived as "degrading" is a function of pre-existing sensitivities and awareness of the social issues surrounding such portrayals (Ford, LaTour, and Lundstrom 1991). Ford and LaTour (1993) contend that "sex objectification" of women is very much in the "eyes of the beholder" and a direct function of the extent to which an individual embraces the doctrines espoused by the

women's movement.

The dilemma of whether or not to use a sexual appeal has no simple solution. An important implication of our research is the need for advertisers to recognize the moral/ethical complexity involved in the use of strong overt sexual appeals and to incorporate that understanding within their strategic thought. Specifically, advertisers must carefully test assumptions about the efficacy of such appeals for targeted customers and the "social impact" (i.e., the impact on other individuals not targeted by such appeals) (Gould 1994).

Clearly, advertising operates within the parameters established by society. As the mores and ethical considerations of society change over time, what is considered appropriate and acceptable in advertising must also change. As Zinkhan, Bisesi, and Saxton (1989) have pointed out, the influence and impact of "moral idealism" change over time. It is therefore prudent to continually re-evaluate the assumptions on which strategic decisions are based. Advertisers considering the use of sexual appeals need to examine all potential social issues at stake. Advertising executives should consider not only the unintended consequences of using such appeals, but also the perceived morality of doing so (Gould 1994).

Though we are not condemning the use of strong overt sexual appeals, we believe the blatant use of overt sexual appeals as advertising themes may have run its course. Such appeals may not work because of current moral philosophical sensitivities. For example, sexual ad portrayals that have worked well in the past may not be as well received in today's "advertising climate" because of the focus on the moral/ethical issues surrounding female role portrayals in advertising as a feminist issue (Ford and LaTour 1993). Piirto (1989, p. 38) has stated that "a growing segment of the buying public, many of them women, are fed up with the hard sell of sex." The age-old notion that sex sells may now be an unduly risky assumption.

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