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Sexualised Advertising in Non-Sexual Products: Attention, Social and Brand Impacts

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Abstract. This paper will examine the function of sexualized advertising as part of its application to promote non-sexual goods and services. Firstly, it should be mentioned that numerous previous works have found out that such advertising methods are quite commonly used among different companies because they help to attract clients in a competitive media space. Moreover, sexual content can arouse certain feelings and associations that are necessary for promoting products and ensuring effective communication. However, there are some disadvantages of using such promotion strategies. For example, frequent exposure to such advertising can become a cause of body dissatisfaction, self-objectification and creation of gender stereotypes. Moreover, overusing of such appeals can ruin the reputation of the company and lead to distractive effects on consumers. The objective of this research is to examine existing literature on the topic from different perspectives.

Keywords: sexualised advertising, consumer culture, advertising ethics, brand image, social impacts

1. Introduction

Competition between products in modern society is growing more and more intense. The advertisement becomes an essential tool to catch consumers' eyes. In order to make their products unique among many other products in the market, some firms choose to use provocative ads that have images or themes of a sexual nature. Different from products that are closely associated with sex itself, such as lingerie, some necessities and beautifying goods also take advantage of sexual advertisement strategies to get people's attention. For example, the cosmetic company Hualoria utilized lights to cast a shadow of the male sexual organ on the lipstick. Nevertheless, the constant addition of neutrals to advertisements also raises questions regarding the effect this phenomenon will have on society as a whole. While this technique will draw a great deal of people's attention immediately, there is always a chance that the meaning behind this message will be misinterpreted by the consumers in the wrong way. Instead of focusing on the product and its attributes, people will concentrate on the hints provided.

This trend could be explained through the lens of modern consumer culture and the attention economy. Consumer culture is a concept where the value of a product goes beyond its use value, with added symbolic value in terms of its role in defining identity, lifestyle, and desires [1]. Thus, in addition to promoting products, advertisements are also meant to create emotional and symbolic

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connections around them [2]. Moreover, in today's extremely crowded digital space, consumers are constantly bombarded by advertisements. In order to attract the audience's attention, marketers are challenged with this task. It has been found that images with overt sexual themes are much more visually stimulating than other ads and hence catch the attention of the viewer immediately [3].

From this perspective, the use of neutral marketing in relation to non-sexual commodities cannot be called coincidental because it is determined both by consumer culture and competition. Nevertheless, despite being effective enough in terms of gaining the interest of people, the strategy in question involves many moral issues as well as social effects – as was proven in earlier research [4].

This work deals with the reasons why marketers decide to promote their products that have nothing to do with sex by sexual marketing and offers a brief summary of literature on this matter. There are several important aspects that can be considered within this paper, including attracting consumers' attention through sexual content and its potential implications and how sexualized advertising affects the image of products or brands.

On the other hand, previous works pay less attention to the problem in question in that they usually deal with sexual advertising or sexual products and do not consider the issue of sexualized promotion of non-sexual products. Additionally, most articles cover the effects of sexual content either in relation to morality or consumer's interest only. Therefore, this summary attempts to shed light on the problem of sexualized advertising of non-sexual products.

2. Methodology

For this particular study, the literature review method will be employed to examine the application of neutralization marketing in non-sexual products. As far as the selection of the sources used in the research articles is concerned, online libraries like Google Scholar and Web of Science should be used. The terms which can be used to look for information include: "sexualized advertising", "sexual appeal", "consumer culture", and "advertising ethics".

The timeline for choosing literature sources is between 1988 and 2025 years. In this way, both basic theories related to the area and modern researches will be analyzed. Further, the sources selected will be analyzed according to their relation to the topic and their overall quality. Only scholarly articles and books will be considered.

After that, all the literature sources will be categorized thematically according to what aspects of the issue will be covered by each source, e.g., how advertisement impacted the audience, its effect on society, effects on brands/products, and so on. This approach will help understand the process of personalization marketing research better.

3. Literature review on the impacts of sexualised advertising in non-sexual products

Existing literature has widely discussed the use of sexualised advertising in non-sexual products from different perspectives. Previous studies mainly focus on three aspects: the effectiveness of sexualised content in attracting consumer attention, its social and psychological impacts, and its influence on brand and product evaluations, the Framework of Sexualised Advertising Impacts as Figure 1 shows. By reviewing these themes, it becomes possible to better understand why sexual marketing is commonly used in non-sexual products and what consequences this strategy may bring to consumers and society.

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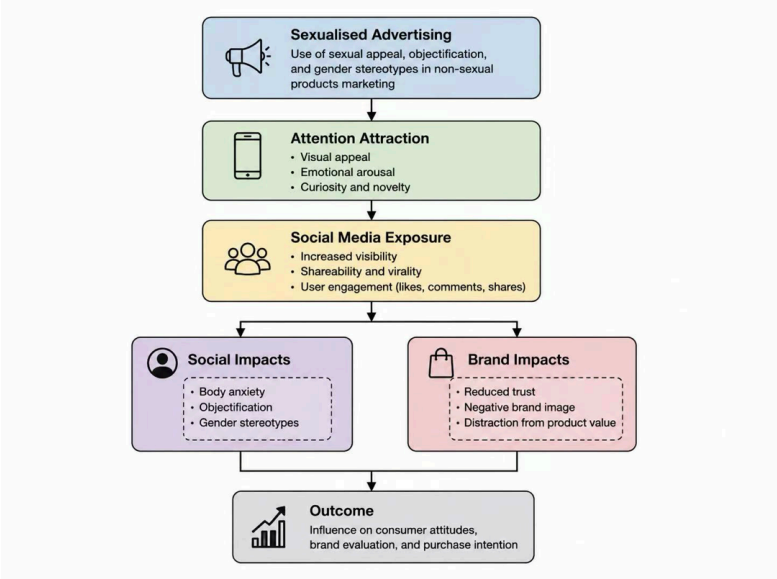


Figure 1. Framework of sexualised advertising impacts

3.1. Studies on attention and sexualised advertising

Literature analysis has shown that the main cause for using sexual marketing strategies when selling non-sexual products lies in the possibility of grabbing the attention of individuals in a saturated media landscape. Nowadays, in the age of digitalization, everyone faces multiple advertisements daily, meaning that paying attention becomes a scarce resource. Therefore, interesting and even provocative material would be more likely to grab their attention. Indeed, as shown by Pentus et al., sexualized visuals were found to capture the consumers' attention better, despite having nothing in common with the advertised product [3].

Additionally, literature review revealed that sexual marketing could assist with increasing the attractiveness of ordinary products. According to Belk, consumption cannot be perceived only functionally but needs to involve the symbolic aspects associated with the product and including the aspects of identity and emotionality [5]. The same position was stated by Arnould et al. who believe that advertisements would always try to create fantasies around the product [2]. For products of the same class, which cannot be different in functions, such as beauty and everyday items, this creates the connection of attractiveness.

Moreover, the use of sexual content can be considered an advertising tool in order to promote wider distribution and visibility among users. It is proven by the fact that ambiguous or suggestive images will attract more comments, shares, and active discussion from the audience. Despite Pentus et al.'s findings that suggest the role of the content in gaining attraction [3], Wyllie et al. have found that people perceive the same advertising images differently, as some of them react positively, while others negatively [6]. In other words, using sexual marketing makes the probability of advertisement distribution and popularity higher. As a result, sexual marketing is used even for goods and services that do not have anything to do with sex itself.

To conclude, the analysis of the chosen literature shows that sexual marketing is commonly used because it is effective rather than connected with the product.

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3.2. Studies on social impacts

Earlier studies showed that sexual advertising for non-sexual products had significant impacts on both social and psychological dimensions. The comparison between sexual products and non-sexual products indicates that non-sexual products were commonly seen in our everyday life. This makes it possible for the audience to come across the sexual material in their day-to-day consumption routine. de Kerviler et al. stated that sexual advertising may affect the moral and gender perception of the audiences [4]. Thus, sexual exposure may influence one's perceptions toward bodies, relationships, and society at large.

Besides, it has been found that repetitive exposure to sexually themed media content could influence one's perception regarding one's physical appearance and worth. As claimed by Ward, continuous presentation through contact could cause self-objectivization and physical distress [7]. Through using sexual advertising of non-sexual goods, the impact on one's perception might become even wider and harder to detect.

Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting that the application of sexually explicit marketing strategies for non-sexual goods might contribute to gender stereotypes and phenomena of objectivization. As the objects themselves do not require to demonstrate their functional capabilities in terms of sexuality, the application of such marketing strategy suggests the instrumental application of the body to attract public interest. According to de Kerviler et al., this process can result in the establishment of stereotypical attitudes towards gender-related matters [4]. Moreover, some researchers have noticed that such content may be perceived as indecent and inappropriate, which will lead to negative moral assessment of it [8].

In addition, there is evidence showing that the extensive use of sexually explicit marketing strategies might contribute to the normalization of 'sexually appealing' as one of the universal values. According to Arnould et al., advertisement plays a crucial role in forming cultural importance and expectations in the society [2]. With the help of sexually appealing images applied in a range of products, people might start focusing excessively on physical attractiveness and appearance.

Thus, according to the existing research, the application of sexualized marketing for non-sexual products might lead to psychological stress, stereotypical attitudes towards gender issues and the social normalization of sexualized values.

3.3. Studies on brand and product impacts

According to previous studies, it is indicated that while sex marketing might help attract audience attention for some time, it can also negatively influence how people evaluate the products and remember the brands.Indeed, the analysis shows that although such marketing methods attract people's attention quite effectively, they fail to draw much concentrated attention. In other words, due to such kind of marketing, consumers' attention will likely turn to the sexual elements rather than the product's features and quality characteristics.

Moreover, there is evidence showing that a negative attitude of consumers can arise under the conditions of sexual marketing. According to Hosen et al., if a company relies on sexual marketing too obviously, consumers' response can be quite negative [8]. Similarly, Waller et al. state that if customers believe that an advertisement is inappropriate, they will develop negative emotions not only about the advertisement itself but also regarding the brand [9].

Additionally, studies show that a brand image will suffer when sexual marketing practices are applied to non-sexual products. Over-reliance on images implies to consumers that products have no

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real value added to them, thus, only relying on pictures in order to attract customer's attention. Van Reijmersdal et al. found that the use of manipulation techniques would reduce consumer confidence in a brand [10].

In addition, sexualized marketing is likely to affect consumer perception of the value and identity of the brand in question. When used consistently, sexualized marketing may overshadow the quality and novelty aspects of products. This way, the unique characteristics of the brand would be undermined and, therefore, would decrease its competitiveness in the market. Moreover, consumers become increasingly sensitive to ethical and social aspects of advertising. Some of them might consider an excessively sexualized approach to marketing as inappropriate and contradictory to the values of our times. The consequence of such perception would be criticism on the part of the audience, especially on social media channels. As a result, a brand would suffer a loss of its reputation and popularity among consumers. This becomes especially important when speaking about products that have nothing to do with sex, since excessive sexualization could blur their functions and roles in society.

All things considered, these findings suggest that while sexualized marketing might help brands to attract attention in the short term, it is likely to undermine their value and image.

4. Conclusion

Summing up, the current literature review focuses on the effectiveness and outcomes of neutral marketing as a means of promotion for non-sexual products. Previous research proves that this technique is frequently used amidst the conditions of fierce competition and scarcity of resources in modern times. Sexual content could attract attention and increase visibility temporarily. However, it is proven that this does not necessarily lead to success.

According to previous literature, the marketing through sexualization of non-sexual products contributes to expanding the social significance of the phenomenon, bringing it into everyday life of people. Therefore, it can shape the psychological perception of the consumer, establish gender stereotypes, and make the products sexualized in nature.

Furthermore, it is emphasized that such a strategy can have negative impacts on the process of evaluating the product and recognizing the brand. It will distract customers from product attributes, reduce customer's confidence and harm the reputation of the brand. Some researchers argue that this kind of advertisements is viewed as inappropriate and low-quality by viewers.

Conclusively, previous literature points out that despite the ability of such strategy to provide attention, there are still many concerns related to its impact on other aspects.

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