The Influence of Involvement and NFC on Consumer Response Toward Sexual and Nonsexual Appeals
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This research sets out to examine whether sexual and nonsexual ads elicit different responses based on involvement and need for cognition (NFC). Two independent studies were undertaken to test the hypotheses. The results suggest that sexual appeals lead to higher recall, better recognition, deeper processing, and superior attitudes and purchase intent under low involvement or low NFC conditions. However, consumers who score high on involvement or NFC process both sexual and nonsexual ads more deeply and such consumers exhibit superior attitudes and purchase intent for nonsexual appeals.

References


[to cite]:

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Creative ad execution strategies to engage audience attention include sex, novelty, humor, contrast, fear, music, animation, and celebrity endorsers. While all of these have been used frequently, none has garnered as much controversy as sexual appeals. Advertisers seem to rely on the adage “Sex Sells”. However, both practitioners as well as academic researchers report mixed results with some studies finding that such appeals are effective and others finding that they are ineffective. The objective of this research is to explore the effectiveness of sexual and nonsexual appeals under conditions of high versus low involvement and high versus low NFC.

Consistent with the predictions of ELM, consumers who are high in involvement are likely to follow the central route to persuasion and pay more attention to the message arguments as opposed to less relevant peripheral cues or executional elements. Indeed, powerful executional elements such as sexual appeals might serve as detractors. Hence, sex appeals might not be effective for high involvement consumers. However, low involvement consumers are less likely to pay attention to the central message arguments and less willing to expend the cognitive resources to engage in detailed processing. For such consumers, creative ad executions such as sexual appeals might enhance attention to the ad and engender persuasion through the peripheral route.

H1: Compared to low involvement consumers, high involvement consumers will engage in more in-depth processing of the ads (both sexual and nonsexual appeals) as evidenced by superior recall, more accurate recognition, and higher number of cognitive responses.

H2a: Compared to low involvement consumers, high involvement consumers will have higher Aad, Ab, and PI for nonsexual appeals.

H2b: Compared to high involvement consumers, low involvement consumers will have higher Aad, Ab, and PI for sexual appeals.

H3a: Low involvement consumers will exhibit more in-depth processing of sexual appeals compared to nonsexual appeals as evidenced by superior recall, more accurate recognition, and higher number of cognitive responses.

H3b: Low involvement consumers will have higher Aad, Ab, and PI for sexual appeals compared to nonsexual appeals.

NFC is defined as the “tendency for an individual to engage in and enjoy thinking.” NFC could moderate the effectiveness of an ad through its influence on the preferred style and amount of processing. High NFC consumers are more motivated to undertake effortful processing of messages while low NFC consumers might refrain from attending to and/or processing ad appeals. Hence, sexual appeals might be necessary to engage the attention of low NFC consumers. In contrast, high NFC consumers might not welcome such appeals as they could detract from the main message arguments.

H4: Compared to low NFC consumers, high NFC consumers will engage in more in-depth processing of the ads (both sexual and nonsexual appeals) as evidenced by superior recall, more accurate recognition, and higher number of cognitive responses.

H5a: Compared to low NFC consumers, high NFC consumers will have higher Aad, Ab, and PI for nonsexual appeals.

H5b: Compared to high NFC consumers, low NFC consumers will have higher Aad, Ab, and PI for sexual appeals.

H6a: Low NFC consumers will exhibit more in-depth processing of sexual appeals compared to nonsexual appeals as evidenced by superior recall, more accurate recognition, and higher number of cognitive responses.

H6b: Low NFC consumers will have higher Aad, Ab, and PI for sexual appeals compared to nonsexual appeals.

Two independent studies (experiments) were undertaken to test the hypotheses. The stimulus material, positioned as a college magazine, composed of a ten-page excerpt containing a cover/instruction page, the two target ads, three filler ads, and four filler articles. The target ads (one sexual and one nonsexual) appeared on the fourth and eighth pages and were rotated to reduce order bias. The order was as follows: cover page, filler ad, target ad, filler article, target ad, filler article, filler ad.

One hundred three undergraduate students (46 males and 57 females) participated in the first study. The respondents’ involvement with each of the product categories and issues listed in the excerpt were assessed on a single seven-point scale. The sample was divided into high and low groups based on a median split on involvement with fragrance. As predicted by H1 high involvement consumers had superior recall, more accurate recognition, and more cognitive responses than their low involvement counterparts. Also in line with H2a and b, high involvement respondents had higher Aad, Ab, and PI for nonsexual appeals compared to their low involvement counterparts whereas low involvement respondents had higher Aad, Ab, and PI for sexual appeals compared to those with high involvement. In line with H3a, a higher proportion of low involvement respondents recalled the sexual appeal and exhibited superior discrimination ability (recognition) for the sexual appeal. As predicted by H3b, low involvement consumers showed an affinity toward sexual appeals compared to nonsexual appeals as evidenced by higher scores on Aad, Ab, and PI.

Ninety nine undergraduate students (44 males and 55 females) participated in the second study. The subjects responded to Cacioppo, Petty, and Kao’s (1984) abbreviated 18-item NFC scale. The sample was divided into high and low groups based on a median split on the NFC scores. As predicted by H4, high NFC respondents had superior recall, more accurate recognition, and more cognitive responses than their low NFC counterparts. In line with H5a and b, high NFC respondents had higher Aad, Ab, and PI for nonsexual appeals compared to their low involvement counterparts whereas low NFC respondents had higher Aad, Ab, and PI for sexual appeals compared to those who were high in NFC. In line with H6a, a higher proportion of low NFC respondents recalled the sexual appeal, showed superior discrimination ability (recognition) for the sexual appeal, and generated more cognitive responses for sexual appeals compared to nonsexual appeals. As predicted by H6b, low NFC
consumers showed an affinity toward sexual appeals compared to nonsexual appeals as evidenced by higher scores on $A_{ad}$, $A_{hp}$, and $PI$.

The results suggest that sexual appeals lead to higher recall, better recognition, deeper processing, and superior attitudes and purchase intent when the audience has low involvement or low NFC. However, consumers who score high on involvement or NFC process both sexual and nonsexual ads more deeply and such consumers exhibit stronger attitudes and purchase intentions for nonsexual appeals.

References


