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A Survey of Nudity in Advertising and Offensiveness with Regard to Gender

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A discussion of offensiveness in advertising is the focus of this research. A review of nudity, sexual suggestiveness, offensiveness, and irritation in advertising literature suggests that females report somewhat high arousal scores when viewing nudity but that the arousal may not necessarily be positive.

There exists a need for a more formalized understanding of the role that nudity and sexual suggestiveness play in the formulation of cognitive apperception towards specific advertising especially those which are deemed "offensive" by the viewer. One of the issues that is a concern is the increasing use of nudity in print advertising targeted toward women with particular regard to the use of models of the same gender. The study examines some contributory variables to offensiveness and its effect on Attitude-Toward-the-Ad formulation.

The general topic of irritation in advertising has given way in the past decade to articles on offensiveness as a factor in Attitude-Toward-the-Ad theory. Offensiveness has been studied across several ad elements including, product factors, message factors, and frequency of appearance.

The survey of findings proposes that nudity does contribute somewhat to offensiveness, but that sexual suggestiveness may be more important to women forming attitudes toward ads considered to be offensive. Other factors besides nudity might possibly be contributing to offended attitudes about advertising and require further examination.

SEX APPEAL IN ADVERTISING

The increasing incidence of nudity in women's magazines is well documented in both advertising and editorial content (Peterson and Kerin 1977, Scott 1986, Soley and Kurzbard 1986). Soley and Reid (1988) report that nude female models were present in 7.7% of the 1,112 magazine ads examined in 1984 and that they were "more sexually explicit and provocative than in 1964."

In advertising, some have believed that nudity is a psychological tool to cut through the clutter created by similar products, with similar ad layouts, in similar publications (LaTour, Pitts, Snoop-Luther 1990; Soley and Kurzbard 1986; Soley and Reid 1988; Tinkham and Reid 1988).

However, nudity may be creating a negative effect on attitude formulation concerning the advertisement and the product. It is in this light that the aspects of the use of nudity in advertising and research in offensiveness should be examined.

Recent studies have argued that nudity (especially female nudity), when used in advertising targeted to women, may not be maximally effective in terms of increasing response, arousal, or recall, the primary components of measuring advertising effectiveness (Alexander and Judd 1978; Alexander and Judd 1986; Barnes 1988; Barnes and Dotson 1990; Bello, Pitts, and Etzel 1983; Danilenko 1974; LaTour 1990; LaTour, Pitts, and Snoop-Luther 1990; Morrison and Sherman 1972; Peterson and Kerin 1977). Some autotonic and self-reporting studies show that, although there is some response among females to nudity, the results are questionable and contradictory (Belch et al 1981). It is proposed that although response and arousal may be measured, it is not a positively correlated arousal and that some of this response may be due to an attitude of offensiveness and irritation (Barnes 1988, Barnes and Dotson 1990, LaTour 1990). It is in this context that this study is proposed.

The use of nudity as a single and as multiple stimuli for arousal and attention-getting response is well documented in advertising research. Nudity has played a minor part in irritation and offensiveness studies (LaTour 1990; LaTour, Pitts, and Snoop-Luther 1990). However, the research conducted using nudity and sexual messages must be grouped according to three objectives: advertising recall (Alexander and Judd 1978; Morrison and Sherman 1972; Steadman 1969; Weller, Roberts, and Neuhaus 1979); as one aspect of the roles women portray in advertising (Chestnut, LaChance, and Lubitz 1977; Courtney and Lockeretz 1977; Ferguson, Kreshel, and Tinkham 1990; Gilly 1988; Kerin, Lundstrom, and Sciglimpaglia 1979; Leigh, Rethans, and Whitney...
Recall testing using nudity and sexual messages have produced mixed findings (Alexander and Judd 1978; Weller, Roberts, and Neuhaus 1979). The earliest studies using "sexy illustrations" (Steadman 1969) found that the use of such illustrations tended to possess high attention-getting devices and aroused the immediate interests of viewers. Steadman (1969) showed that product names associated with sexy illustrations were correctly recalled fewer times than those brand names accompanying non-sexual illustrations.

Alexander and Judd (1978) and Weller, Roberts, and Neuhaus (1979) found that increasing the erotic content of the ad message did not increase recognition for the brand over long recall periods. Morrison and Sherman (1972) found that females more than males tended to report on the perceived existence of sexual suggestiveness in selected ads. These findings were echoed by Belch et al in 1981. And, when using female nudity as the primary stimulus, LaTour (1990) found it to be less effective than using male nudity in creating arousal as a surrogate for attention/involvement in female viewers. He found that females tended to exhibit higher levels of tension when viewing nude models and reported lower opinions of the ads.

Additionally Severn, Belch, and Belch (1990) found that the use of sexually explicit appeals might appear to reduce the amount of product message processing by viewers of such ads. Thus, it would appear that some sort of cognitive defense mechanism may be utilized by females in such viewing environments.

When nudity was measured within ad contexts, Tinkham and Reid (1988) found ads that utilized sexual messages in a functional application, that is where the ad presentation was congruent with the product, recall was highest among sexual messages tested. This seems to validate the "contextual apperception" concept in which nudity is evaluated based on an identifiable relationship with the ad scenario. If these conclusions are correct, it is difficult to understand why advertisers continue the practice of using highly sexually suggestive ad messages with nude models in an incongruous context. Levine (1990), in the popular press, states that "Americans still bridle when they see no connection between the sexual setup and the advertised product."

Peterson and Kerin (1977) found indications that results of using sex in advertising is likely to vary with the viewing audience, the nature of the product, and the situational variables present in the ad.

Exploring this area, Richmond and Hartman (1982) proposed a five scale bi-polar semantic differential description of sexual appeals in advertising. These included "Gender Orientation" (targeted gender for the ad), "Function" (was sexual connotation congruent with the use of product), "Fantasy" (the promoting of sexual gratification), "Symbolism" (were culturally-shared sexual symbols utilized), "Appropriateness" (was attention-getting sexual message congruent to product), and "Moral Evaluation" (offensiveness).

Thus, response to sexual appeals in advertising is multidimensional and different audiences may respond differently based on their perception and evaluative processes (Tinkham and Reid 1988).

THE ISSUE OF IRRITATION AND OFFENDEDNESS

Offensiveness research in advertising finds its roots in a variety of media studies and under a variety of labels. Richmond and Hartman (1982) and Tinkham and Reid (1988) both included a dimension of "Inappropriateness" in their studies in order to measure overall feelings of the use of sexual content messages.

Tinkham and Reid (1988) called for additional study concerning sexual appeals and other evaluative criteria. Of particular interest is that of unfavorable evaluations of ads which were deemed "inappropriate." They also correlated "Inappropriate"ratings with perceptions of "Offensiveness."

Sciglimpaglia, Belch, and Cain (1979) found that the evaluation of sexual content is a function of the gender of the evaluator. The evaluation of sexual content by both genders becomes generally less positive as nudity increases, but females consistently found "suggestive"ads to be personally offensive. As sexual content became more explicit, both men and women tended to
evaluate portrayals of the opposite sex more highly and tended to evaluate portrayals of the same sex in a generally negative manner.

One study, using Electroencephalogram (EEG) measurements (Rothschild 1982), found a 60% correlation between the subjects who used the word "irritating" to describe a commercial they were viewing and increased levels of brain wave activity (Aaker and Bruzzone 1985).

There are conflicting explanations concerning the actual response of irritation in advertising. Greyser (1973) suggested that the public's receptivity to advertising depends upon a goodwill that is eroded by public dislike of advertising.

Two theories have emerged concerning how the attitude toward an advertisement acts as an explanation of how advertising is effective (Aaker and Bruzzone 1985). The first proposes that there is a simple, positive association between the reaction to the ad and reaction to the product/brand (Shimp 1981). The second argues that attitude toward the ad can be influenced by mood (Bower 1981), attention, and the amount of information being processed from the ad (Ray and Batra 1983). Burke and Edell (1989) found that feelings generated by ads are related to the viewer's evaluation of brands. Thus, an irritating ad could detract from a positive attitude about the brand or product.

However, there also exists a competing model based on a J-shaped curve representing the relationship between a positive attitude toward the ad and its effectiveness. This implies that irritating ads can be more effective than banal ones, perhaps due to the production of counter-arguments or the increased stimulation and involvement from the irritation (Ray and Batra 1983, Moore and Hutchinson 1983). The study conducted by Aaker and Bruzzone (1985) measuring recall of television ads tended to support the J-model, but they propose that there are many cases where the ads are successful in spite of being irritating, not because of it.

In capturing the construct of offensiveness, previous studies have used "Irritation" (Aaker and Bruzzone 1985), "Annoying" and "Offensive" (Barnes and Dotson 1990; Sciglimpaglia, Belch, and Cain 1979; Severn, Belch, and Belch 1990). Some studies merely sought the respondent's opinion of whether the viewed ad could be described by one of the adjectives, but Sciglimpaglia, Belch, and Cain (1979) introduced a seven point scale of "Offensiveness" which has been utilized in several studies (Belch et al. 1981; Severn, Belch, and Belch 1990).

Aaker and Bruzzone (1985) proposed that the following items increase irritation: a sensitive product, where the situation is phony or unbelievable, a threatening situation, where uncomfortable tension is created, and sexual suggestiveness.

Barnes and Dotson (1990) proposed a theory of offensiveness for TV advertising which consists of two dimensions: the nature of the product and the nature of the ad execution. They studied 21 commercials and found that ads for personal products (feminine hygiene and condoms) were ranked as highest in offensiveness. (The findings may be somewhat questionable as the authors deemed any response above a three on a seven point scale as a potentially offended response.)

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO OFFENDED ATTITUDE FORMULATION

The formulation of offended attitudes is a multidimensional process and it is proposed that there are several, identifiable components that contribute to this process. These components are the Ad Intrinsics and the group of the Evoked set of Values and Beliefs of the individual viewer.

Multiple constructs concerning ad situational factors have been identified by a number of authors (Alexander and Judd 1978; La Tour, Pitts, and Snook-Luther 1990; Morrison and Sherman 1972; Richmond and Hartman 1982; Sciglimpaglia, Belch and Cain 1979; and Steadman 1969). La Tour, Pitts, and Snook-Luther (1990) recommended further study concerning ads utilizing the following variables: the presence of perfume, the use of nudity, the color, focus, and framing of the ad.

Additionally, life-style factors, beliefs, and values should be encompassed in the study to provide some measure of the cognitive processes that would be generating the attitude. These should include the viewer's attitude about themselves, their bodies, relations with other people, as well as political and behavioral values which they hold.
THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF NUDITY AND SEXUAL SUGGESTION

Offendedness from nudity in advertising is evaluated on the following dimensions: the amount of nudity displayed, the contextual application of the nudity, the amount of sexual suggestiveness perceived in the ad, and the evoked set of values intrinsic to the individual viewer (Peterson and Kerin 1977).

The amount of nudity shown in ads used in previous studies has been provided on several scales. The degrees of nudity identified in previous studies have usually been three: partially nude, fully nude, and fully clothed (Belch et al 1981; La Tour, Pitts, and Snook-Luther 1990; Sciglimpaglia, Belch, and Cain 1979). It is believed that most of these studies utilized only exposed breasts as the full nudity extreme. Soley and Reid (1988) using existing ads from 1964 and 1984 utilized four levels of nudity, but not including full nudity. Alexander and Judd (1978) had four levels including full frontal nudity. In most of the previous studies the extreme range of nudity was only a female model with exposed breasts (LaTour 1990). It is assumed that the range of stimuli is limited in most of these studies and therefore the findings are confined to a narrower range than would be present in the proposed study. Even in the narrower ranges, there is some belief that nudity is an "all or nothing affair" when measured by females (Morrison and Sherman 1972).

Some self-reporting studies do find that women report being sexually aroused by high nudity (Morrison and Sherman 1972). However, in this study the sample was very small (31) and the degree of nudity was from ads appearing in popular magazines at the time. Alexander and Judd (1978) were the first to use full frontal nudity in testing, but only used males as subjects. Even among men, they found that pastoral scenes were reported as recalled more often than any level of nudity.

The contextual application of the nude model is important in the evaluation of the offendedness of the ad. As Tinkham and Reid's (1988) findings concerning the "Functional"aspects of the ads indicate, if the viewer perceives that the nudity conveys the application, usage, or imagery of usage, the ad will rank lower in offendedness due to this contextual apperception.

The third dimension contributing to offendedness is the amount of overall sexual suggestiveness perceived in the ad (Peterson and Kerin 1977). Sexual suggestiveness may be influenced by several factors: the headline or copy, the degree of dress/undress of the model, the role of the model, the perceived body language of the model, and the contextual confirmation of the nudity. It is proposed that the amount of nudity used in the ad tends to be offensive if it is used in a highly sexually suggestive context or that the nudity is not congruent with the ad scenario. Thus, two ads showing a model in lingerie may be perceived differently if one also possesses a suggestive headline and the model is posed in more provocative body language.

Belch et al (1981) found that females tended to find suggestive ads and those with nudity more offensive and less interesting the more the degree of each was increased. Males tended to report lower scores of offendedness across the entire span of nudity used in the study.

Among the physiological studies females tended to show stronger reactions than males to nudity as a stimulus. The Belch et al study found that women viewed ads with nude female models as less interesting, less appealing, and more offensive than their male counterparts. (This study was conducted using students as subjects although the mean age was not disclosed.) They concluded (1981, p. 426):

"...the arousal may be a result of offensiveness and/or dislike of the advertisement. Thus, while more reactions are elicited, which may be desirable, the fact that these reactions may lead to negative evaluations may carry over to the product itself--an obviously unfavorable reaction. Based on these findings and those reported in previous studies it would appear as though those ads targeted at a specific sex should not employ nudes of the same sex. Further, it would appear that ads employing suggestiveness would not be useful for attracting favorable reactions among females.

Life-Style, Social Roles and Self-Concept of the Viewer

It is also believed that the individuals' perceptions about themselves, their bodies, and their relationships with other people play an important part in forming offended attitudes about the display of nudity (LaTour 1990; La Tour, Pitts,
Snook-Luther 1990; Sciglimpaglia, Belch, and Cain 1979; Weller, Roberts, and Neuhaus 1979). To this end, future research should address issues concerning individuals' feelings about their bodies, their satisfaction with their relationship with their spouse/significant other (if applicable), their satisfaction with the sexual aspect of their lives, and their satisfaction with their relationships with other people.

Some key demographic questions that should be examined are age, education level, marital status, and household make-up (Aaker and Bruzzone 1985). Wise, King, and Merenski (1974) found that people's attitudes about sex in advertising varied conversely with age and gender, with females of several age groups reporting that "Advertisers make too much use of sex appeals in their advertisements."

**Values of the Viewer**

Lastly, offendedness due to nudity is believed to be formulated from the stimuli perceived in the ad and processed against the individual's evoked set of intrinsic values. These values are believed to include religious and moral values, societal role values, and values associated with self-image.

These religious and moral value variables might contribute to attitude formulation as proposed by Alexander and Judd (1978) and LaTour (1990) with surrogate variables such as the size of town where the viewer's formative years were spent and regular church attendance (Alexander and Judd 1978, Barnes and Dotson 1990). The changing roles of women must now be included as increasing numbers of women are no longer housekeepers and the awareness of the utilization of female models for sexual attention is widespread (LaTour 1990). Therefore, it is important that some assessment of the viewer's values concerning feminism and major women's issues be determined if for no other reason than to avoid alienation of a growing and vital segment of the market (Lowry 1986).

**SUMMARY**

The advertising industry is under ever-increasing scrutiny from governmental, consumer, and political groups as never before (Advertising Age 1985, Advertising Age 1975, Richmond and Hartman 1982, Tinkham and Reid 1988). Therefore, the issue of utilizing nudity within advertising copy must be studied with an eye to the implications for media and marketing management as well as society as a whole. Such a study should address the identified contributing issues and make recommendations to advertisers. If the advertising recipients believe that offensiveness is increasing in media messages, there is a variety of ramifications that must be considered ranging from the development of negative goodwill to increased governmental regulations.

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