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Female Nudity in Advertising: What Do French Women Think?

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the reactions of French women to advertisements depicting female nudity. Initially, it appears that French women are not explicitly shocked. However, several factors influence their reactions to these ads: erotica and sexuality, the presence of humour, the congruence between nudity, the product category and the situation presented in the ad, the representation of the product and aesthetic aspects.

INTRODUCTION

Non-French visitors coming to France are frequently surprised by the number of ads depicting naked women or showing parts of the nude body. These ads stage what Goffman (1976) calls a hyper ritualisation, standardizing, exaggerating situations and characters: « an ad is a ritualisation of social ideals, such as everything preventing the manifestation of the ideal has been cut, suppressed”. In some countries, nudity is explicitly forbidden in advertising, in others, it is allowed but not widely used, and in France or Italy, nudity is allowed and widely used but a degrading representation of human beings is prohibited. Is nudity a degrading representation of people? How is it perceived by target audiences? To address this issue, we analyse what women think about female nudity in advertising. To our knowledge, there is no international survey on nudity in advertising. However using the different but connected concept of decency, in 1988, a survey of the International Advertising Association (IAA) inquired about the salience of “sex and decency” problems in advertising in 47 countries (Boddewyn, 1991). It established a distinction between four distinct issues, which are as follows, “tasteless/indecent ads”, “sexy ads”, “sexist ads”, ads including an “objectification of women” and “violence against women”. The IAA then identified the countries where these factors can be considered as major issues based on the statistics about the magnitude of such sex-and-decentcy problems. For instance, in the United Kingdom, among the 701 complaints received in 1989 by the self-regulatory Advertising Standards Authority on distasteful, indecent or in some way offensive advertisements, 34% alleged that the ad was offensive because of the manner in which it depicted or referred to women. Many problems stem from the inappropriate placement of ads (PlayBoy vs. a TV magazine) and from problems of execution and interpretation (Boddewyn, 1991). Unfortunately, the IAA survey did not
include France, the country in which we
have conducted our research.
Two studies investigating the
perceptions of the treatment of women
in press, magazine and poster
advertising (ASA, 1982, 1990) showed
that only a minority of women find
advertisements offensive (Elliott,
Eccles and Hodgson, 1993). Women
are very critical about advertisements
for cleaning products that “exaggerate
the importance of household chores”,
but 53% of men thought that “the way
in which women are shown in press,
magazines, and poster advertising has
no effect on the way women appear in
real life” (Manceau and Tissier-
Desbordes, 1999). However, reactions
differed significantly depending on
gender and age. For instance, 45% of women did not find nudity acceptable in advertising while only 26% of men shared this opinion. 21% of young people (aged 15-25) rejected nudity in advertising, compared to 34% of the middle-aged (35-45 group) and 51% of older people aged 55-65.

In a cultural context where female
nudity is highly represented in advertising – and much more represented than male nudity –, we focused our research on the recipient responses to these ads since recipient responses have not been widely studied in former papers on sexual appeals and nudity in advertising (Reichert & Ramirez 2000). Gender affects the perceptions of nudity. One may wonder if women interpret female nudity in advertising as a result of male domination in advertising and in economy. It has been shown that gender affects the characteristics of sexual appeals in advertising (Reichert & Ramirez 2000). Reactions to nudity can be related to the two different pornographies of men and women (Stern & Rutgers 1991).

We thus wish to investigate women’s reaction. – Do they accept or reject nudity? Are women shocked and when? What ad characteristics make nudity more or less acceptable? Do women relate nudity with sexuality? Do they accept a natural representation of nudity without sexual associations? Is nudity better accepted when represented in an esthetical setting and/or when the product is congruent with nudity?

We try to answer these questions in this research. In the first part, we review the literature on nudity and gender representation in advertising. We then present the qualitative survey we have conducted in order to understand how women react to several ads representing naked women. In part 2, we present our methodology and we then analyse the interviews, before drawing conclusions.

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Female representation in advertising

Research on female representation in advertising began in the early seventies with the seminal work of Goffman (1976). After an initial burst of research activities during the seventies, only few articles went on publishing later. Artz and Venkatesh (1991) request more research in this area because the questions have become more complex. The research on this topic scarcely deals with nudity, but more generally highlights the differences of the representation of women in advertising and the shifts in gender-based roles in society, stressing sexual stereotyping (Lundstrom and Siglimplaglia, 1977, Coutney and Whipple, 1983, Gilly, 1988). For instance, Elliott, Eccles and Hodgson (1993) showed that women are very
critical about advertisements for cleaning products that “exaggerate the importance of household chores”, but 53% of men think that “the way in which women are shown in press, magazines, and poster advertising has no effect on the way women appear in real life”.

Nudity

Nudity is a fascinating topic but also an ongoing paradox. To simplify, male or female nudity has always been represented and has frequently shocked some people in the Judeo-Christian civilisation.

The parts of the body that can be shown have changed during the centuries. In the Middle Ages, it was more disturbing to show female calves than breasts (Bologne, 1997). Medieval art did not fear nudity, as is noticeable on the portals of churches. The Renaissance period exalted the strength of bodies, frequently using mythology and ancient references. When a painter wanted to represent a naked aristocratic woman, he had to disguise her in a naked Diana the Huntress. But such portrayals were not appreciated by everybody, for example, the people stoned the David of Michelangelo. “Liberating nudity, the Renaissance has activated the most tremendous campaign of sense of modesty of the modern period” (Bologne, 1997). In the nineteenth century, nudity was frequently represented but with two means of distance: temporal distance (ancient nude) or spatial distance (oriental nude). No realism was allowed. This border was crossed by Impressionistic painters, Manet with the Olympia (Schroeder, 2000), or much more disturbing, the “Naissance du monde” by Courbet (ordered by a private collector and not shown in public before several decades).

Female nudity has always had symbolic meanings, from Eve’s nudity symbolising the original sin to the Olympia by Manet, a prostitute with a direct glance. But the representation of the nude woman body has also always been a quest for perfection, from the Venus by Botticelli to the La grande baigneuse by Ingres. “In art, the female body is the representation of nature, truth and the sublime” (Joy and Venkatesh, 1994). However, nudity is both Beauty and Sin, Paradise and Hell.

Female nudity in advertising

Consumer behaviour has paid little attention to the human body while practitioners widely depict it in advertising (Joy and Venkatesh, 1994). A recent survey revealed growing public concern about the treatment of women and nudity in advertising (Boddewyn, 1991). Several papers on the ethics of advertising focused on sex and nudity (Duke, Picket, Carlson and Grove, 1993, Henthorne and LaTour, 1995, LaTour and Henthorne, 1995). Some researchers have scrutinized the impact of a sexual content on the effectiveness of advertising. A high sexual content increases the attention paid to an ad and the interest it attracts, but it also leads to a rejection of the advertisement and harms the brand’s reputation (Aaker and Bruzzone, 1985, De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh, 1996, Soley and Reid, 1998). However, former research has found contradictory results on the impact of sexual content on the attitude towards the brand and on purchasing intentions (De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh, 1996, Severn, Belch and Belch, 1990, Vezina and Paul, 1997).

The presence of female nudity in advertising tends to be accepted when it
is congruent with the product and its usage, but is rejected when nudity is perceived as a gratuitous provocation (Peterson and Kerin, 1977). Consumer irritation in response to an advertisement turns out to be linked more to the product category and the execution than to the nudity itself (Aaker and Bruzzone, 1985). Thus, consumers may have a positive perception of the presence of an undressed model when the advertisement is for a body oil, whereas the same image is likely to be judged very negatively if it is associated with a do-it-yourself tool kit (Simpson, Horton and Brown, 1996).

Previous research has shown that men react more positively than women to the presence of naked women in ads (Peterson and Kerin, 1977, LaTour, Pitts and Snook-Luther, 1990, LaTour and Henthorne, 1995, Geuens and De Pelsmacker, 1998, Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes, 1999) – even though the result appears to be the other way round when dealing with masculine nudity (Simpson, Horton and Brown, 1996). As for age, young people are less disturbed by provocative advertisements and appreciate them more than older people, even if results vary according to the campaigns (De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh, 1996, LaTour and Henthorne, 1995, Vezina and Paul, 1997, Alwitt and Prabhaker, 1994, Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes, 1999).

Consequently, we have felt it necessary to use a precise definition of nudity: the representation of naked breasts or buttocks, considering that, in Europe, these parts of the body are generally hidden. We consider that ads representing a partially naked woman enter in our definition whenever such parts of the body are depicted shown naked. We will check if this definition is consistent with women perceptions in our interviews.

**Methodology**

Nudity in advertising has been investigated in previous studies but with a positivist approach simplifying nudity and sexuality into scaled responses to structured questionnaires. We contend that nudity is very much more complex and thus has to be investigated in more depth. According to O’Keefe (1990), one can define messages in terms of intrinsic messages features or in term of recipient responses. Most studies on gender in advertising have been based on the interpretation by of the authors, deconstructing the discourse without taking into account the point of view of the consumer. However some studies have looked the at gender in advertising through the eye of the consumer (Elliott, Eccles and Hodgson, 1993). Every consumer experiences an advertisement personally, with his/her own history, his/her own beliefs. Our choice of methodology seeks to investigate such consumer experiences when facing an ad representing a naked woman.

Following Elliott and XXX et al. (1995), we thus have adopted a discourse analytical approach, in exploring the meanings which women construct from advertisements which use images of naked women.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Definition of female nudity**

Nudity is a highly cultural concept. As mentioned previously, showing a calf for women was considered more erotic in the Middle Ages than revealing breasts. In India, it is common for women to show their navel, while a shoulder is considered indecent.
Each reader is assumed to be a dynamic participant in the reading process. We will examine the text-reader relationship, considering that the gender of the reader determines of the process of making meaning. That is why for this research, only women have been interviewed. This could also be justified by the fact that the ads we used are mainly targeted towards women.

We conducted 20 interviews with women previously known, selected in order to vary age, jobs and level of education. However no claim can be made for the generality or representativeness of the sample. This methodology seems consistent with an exploratory research. (Table 1)

To set up a portfolio of advertisements depicting naked women, we bought women magazines from various countries (USA, Germany, United Kingdom, Italy, Spain and France) in an international bookstore over a period of one month. Based on the nudity criteria depicted above, we gathered all the ads presenting bare breasts or buttocks. We then eliminated the ads presenting several women or men, in order to focus on the representation of a single naked woman. We sorted out the ads based on three criteria:

- congruence between nudity and the product category, opposing congruent products (underwear), medium levels of congruence (e.g. products congruent with the representation of the body but not necessarily naked, like tanning pills or shoes) and non-congruent products (like, for instance, an alarm-clock or a consulting company),
- level of overt sexually content, opposing overt sexually oriented ads to representations of nudity which do not refer explicitly to sex,
- aesthetics, contrasting ads with a will to display aestheticism as opposed to non-aesthetic ads.

5 female judges classified 35 ads according to these criteria. We finally selected 10 of them in order to represent the different categories (Appendix 1). We divided them into two groups, each interview including a group of five ads, differing according to the three criteria set out above. For each interview, we presented the ads sequentially on a paper sheet in a portfolio and asked the same list of questions on each ad (see interview guide in Appendix 2). However, we switched the order of presentation of the five ads because presented a shocking ad first could create irritation and then generate a halo effect on all the ads presented later. The interviews were conducted by the two authors and a master student, either at the home or at the office of the interviewees. We then switched to another ad (until five) and asked the same list of questions.

RESULTS

The two authors analysed the interviews separately in order to identify the salient themes. A comparison showed a strong homogeneity of interpretation. Five main themes were identified: the denial of women to admit they are shocked by the ads, the representation of woman and of nudity, sexual content, the congruence with the product, and the importance of aestheticism and nature. These main themes are consistent with the results of Reichert and Ramirez (2000), who studied characteristics of sexually oriented appeals in advertising.

The denial to be shocked

When the ads were presented, the interviewees generally did not say they...
were shocked, but they employed indirect words to express their disagreement. “It doesn’t shock me but I don’t like it”. “I am rather divided, I am really divided, because I think there are good ideas but the set-up, I don’t find it is successful”. They refused to reject the ad in its entirety: “I am a bit embarrassed because there are things I don’t like”. Women found excuses, telling they were too old, “too retrograde” for these kinds of ads: “I don’t like this image of the woman, I am perhaps from another generation”. This attitude could—may have been emphasised by the age of one of the interviewees, a 24year-old girl. Here are the reasons they put forward to explain why they were not shocked:

* Tolerance and openness. This denial could be explained by the will to appear tolerant: “That suits for women who like boots with a bit of an erotic look, these are for some women who would like to be like that”. Even when they rejected the ad, they asserted their openness: “I am very open to most things, but here, really!”

* Reason and logic. They found explanations for their dislike, and try to back them up with reason: “Why show breast and bottom for shoes, that’s completely irrational!”.

* Habits. They proposed habits as explanations: “It doesn’t shock me because we have seen worse, but it doesn’t add anything”. “This woman is like a sexual object but it is a bit like that in nearly all ads now”. They affected a blase indifference. “This ad is sexual, but that’s a bit in nearly all the ad made now”. “Bare women like that, you see them everywhere”. The frequent use of nudity in advertising involves generated a severe judgement on such ads, charged with an absence of creativity.

“Ads like that, in fact, are everywhere; we’ve already seen 50,000 like this one’s so much seen, there’s no new invention there, I’m not interested”. *

Refusal to name. They also refused to name what could be considered as shocking, “I mean that is to say sex:”—it doesn’t develop imagination, we just imagine one thing, it only brings one thing to mind (laughs).”

Refusal to enter the game. They also refused to confess to be they were shocked because that is the aim of the ad; to provoke. They refused to enter into this game: “I am not shocked, they are trying to provoke”. (“ça ne me choque pas on est dans la provocation”). They understand—considered that advertising used processes in order to attract them, in order to sell. And given that advertising is only for goods, for sales, this is not worth thinking about it. It is too small—too small, too futile a topic to be discussed.

But in fact, the women we interviewed refused to acknowledge several aspects in the ads that we presented to them. We have classified the words they use to reject the ads in six categories—ugliness, artifice, without reason, vulgarity, disgust and inadapted (Table 2). More precisely, here are the elements they refused.

Specifically the presence of a woman, mainly when the product was very far removed from a feminine universe: “we take her out and we put another thing something else in the ad”.

Refusal of nudity. When asked what they would change in the ad, they added knickers, systematically: “she needs pants”. “I would put a bra and pants on her”. “They should have shown a very nice dressed woman, such as a business profile”.” I wouldn’t have put a woman naked on top of that”. 

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* The sexual position of women. "the position makes the woman ghastly"; "she is nice but she doesn’t stand up straight"—also meaning "she doesn’t hold herself well" since the words are similar in French: "elle ne se tient pas bien"). Erotica is not for advertising and should not be used to promote products, it has to be protected: kept in a private sphere, and not transferred to in a commercial sphere: "What’s getting on my nerves is showing a woman in an erotic position to boost a lingerie brand".

- The non congruence of nudity with the product and the non congruence with the brand, as well as the non congruence of nudity within the environment depicted in the ad (the landscape). They did not accept an unseemly situation: a naked woman under a tree, “we are not anymore Adam and Eve anymore, we don’t live on islands stark naked". "We don’t sleep like that". “We wonder what she is doing with shoes on her belly, shoes are to be put on one’s feet, I don’t know, shoes are made to walk in". “It is not something very natural to see a completely bare woman with sport shoes". The women we interviewed also refused non congruent objects: "nudity with trainers, well, it’s beyond me completely". This topic will be addressed in a later section since congruence appears as a major and complex factor.

- The use of non direct selling messages. "I need an explicit message, I am very Cartesian, so it must be explicit".

We classified the words in five categories: ugliness, construction, Ugliness: "I don’t like it at all, I think it is ghastly". I find her indecent, clearly indecent because there is no aestheticism". "I find it horrible, she is awful".

Construction: "It doesn’t look natural". "It looks a bit posed". "There is a very artificial side that I dislike". "She is relatively disembodied". "It is very stereotyped".

Without reason: "That’s without interest". That’s ridiculous, it’s worth nothing "je trouve ça nul). That’s a little absurd". "That’s completely irrational", "it stinks".

Vulgarity: "That’s vulgar", "it really looks dowdy". "that makes bottom of the range".
Disgust and horror: “That shit”, (je trouve ça trop nase – I think it’s bust”, “I am horrified”, “I am super disgusted.” “That’s excessive”, “That’s excessive” (pub the seller).

Out of purpose: “That’s excessive”, “That’s excessive”.

They—Women preferred the ad when when:
* the nature was present: “that’s better because there is the sea behind, that makes it a bit more natural”, “this ad makes one dream, as far as there is a beach, the sand, the sea behind”,
* the ad was aesthetic,
* humor was used. For instance in the Ad “Aubade”, there is a gap between the image and the text “lesson 27”;
* the message was clear: “you see, it is like contemporary painting, I don’t like it that much because I don’t understand the message, I prefer figurative painting”.

In the following paragraphs, we analyse more thoroughly several of the above mentioned topics, such as the reactions to the way woman and nudity are represented, the reactions to sexuality, the importance of congruence and the various dimensions of this concept, and finally the impact of aestheticism.

The following definition of nudity confirmed our preliminary choice in the methodology to choose mainly ads with bare women, with showing either bare breast or buttocks.

The interviewees preferred the ads when where breast or bottom is not shown: “this ad is not badly made, aesthetically, she is shown in a position where you can’t really see everything, that’s “hidden a bit—”. In fact, nudity seemed better accepted when the body was presented from the back (“I don’t think that’s shocking.”)

Moreover, it appeared that nudity supposes perfection, perhaps in reference to painting: “Qu’importe le pub dans la position ‘qu’elle soit nue, autant qu’elle soit belle’—If she has to be bare, better that she is beautiful”. Overall, nudity was rarely accepted. It should not be shown (“I don’t see why she is naked”), Women refused to look at the naked woman: “I am more interested in the landscape”. When asked what they would change in the ad, the women interviewed systematically put clothes back on. “I think I would prefer the girl well dressed in order to see how it makes the boots stand out”. Was it a real interest for the clothes, or by a sense of modesty? They dressed up the models, but not in a modest way: “we don’t need to show the gap between the buttocks”.

When limits what she—’s waiting for with her bums in this position.” It reminds the provocation side of “I show you my bums”, that’s also at the limit of the— (“she borders on porno actress) a porno actress, and I don’t like it at all”.

This definition of nudity confirmed our preliminary choice in the methodology to choose mainly ads with bare women, with showing either bare breast or buttocks.
to the feminine universe. Clothes meant fashion, trends, creation, whereas nudity led to sexuality.

* Women - Female nudity perceived as a marketing tool

The representation of a naked woman in the ad was interpreted as a means to catch the eye, and was understood to be a marketing tool, but it was considered as illegitimate. The fact that she is stark naked, that’s a means to shock, to catch the eye, but well..., that’s not very relevant.

In fact, women attributed the presence of naked women to an advertising strategy aiming at increasing attention. This is consistent with Wright’s (1986) conclusion that consumers activate assumptions about the motives of advertisers – “control schema” - and interpret the advertisements in relation to these motives. The congruence or the non congruence with the product was the first point to be put forward. We will discuss this issue in the third part later on.

So, the woman was considered as a marketing tool. But the use of nudity in advertising was perceived as a lack of imagination by advertisers. “They use nudity at any case for anything instead of... I don’t know, finding another idea”.

*Clothes better than nudity

Nudity has not to be shown. “I don’t see why she is naked” (« je ne vois pas pourquoi elle est nue »). They refuse to see the bare woman – “I am more interested par the landscape”.

Nudity is scarcely accepted. When asked what they change in the ad they systematically put clothes back on. “I think I would prefer the girl well dressed in order to see how it renders with the boots”. To it by interest for the clothes, by sense of modesty? They dress the models, but not in a modest way: “we can have a sexy dressed girl?” “I will dress her up a minimum, even if it means she would be short skirted, little shorts, a minimum dressed, now there are little T-shirts cut just before the belly button”. Clothes appears to be closer to the feminine universe. Clothes mean fashion, trends, creation, whereas nudity leads to sexuality.

The representation of woman: the need for a face

One very frequent reaction to nudity was the need to see the face of the woman depicted.

Almost all interviewees looked for a face. “I would have put her head, the her face”. “I would have liked to see her head, and not just her body, that would have made it better... so I think”. Moreover, “It is not very frank, they hide their her eyes”. “I would like to see the eyes of this girl because she deserves it”. We see cow eyes, bovine eyes (« on voit un regard de vache - de bovin »). “Her body is nice, but we don’t see her face”. “We don’t even see her eyes” (On voit m’me pas ses yeux). “On a envie de regarder le visage pour voir si la femme est belle ou pas”. “We would like to look at the face to see if the woman is nice or not”. “This ad looks artificial because she has no eyes”.

The absence of eyes depersonalises the woman, she becomes a model, a creation. This prevented identification. How to identify with a body without eyes? A body without eyes was considered as impersonal, but and moreover, not human. Without eyes, the woman was necessarily passive, and interviewees would prefer active women, women expressing emotions. Eyes were a way to have access to the
soul, it was the expression of a human being versus an object.

We could also explain the refusal to be shocked by the fact that women considered these models only as models, not as women. “She is an incarnation, not a real woman,” “that’s just for show, clearly...”, “I look at her as a painting... as a photo in a museum”.

Several reasons explain why the women we interviewed could not identify with these models or project themselves onto the models: - the women depicted in the ads they were too young: “It could represent a young virgin”, “it is the photo of a nice little girl, it doesn’t suggest me anything, it doesn’t touch me” (ça ne m’atteint pas).
- They were too beautiful and the interviewees felt physically different: “There are always super women, and we feel a little bad beside them when we are not like that”.
- The interviewees have difficulties to identify themselves, to project themselves to the model. They feel different physically, but they considered that the woman in front of them was just a model, not a real woman in the real life: “a woman as a sex object who poses to make money and posing naked should earn more”.
- This should have bring her some money.

The women in the ads were perceived as different from the interviewees. This reflection accounted for the fact that many women were not shocked by the ads. Since this was not the real world, they kept at a distance from the pictures shown to them. They also noted that over the past few years so many ads they had seen for so many ads the last years depicting this type of desincarnated naked models without flesh and blood that they were neither surprised nor shocked anymore.

In some ads the position of the women lying down reinforced this idea of woman as a sexual object. According to Goffman (1976), women are frequently represented lying, or on a bed, position of submission. Lying, it is
difficult to defend oneself, the woman is vulnerable: men are rarely represented lying down.

The ideal woman: a feminine woman with clothes on. Behind this rejection of nudity, also lied a representation of women. A woman had to be beautiful but not too much: “She is a girl who is pretty without being a real peach, that is to say it is (c'est à notre portée) possible to look like this girl”.

She has to be entire: “Tant qu'à faire, il fallait montrer ses pieds jusqu'en bas, je trouve qu'elle est coupée”. While they do it if they really wanted to show a naked woman, “they had to show her feet entirely, otherwise I think she is cut”.

After that the woman had to be dressed. Overall, the reactions to the representation of women stressed the importance of the concept of efferent versus aesthetic reading styles proposed by Rosenblatt (1978) and Stern (2000). Female readers would be characterised by an aesthetic (affective) mode of reading versus efferent (masculine) reading. We had no comparisons with male reading, but we found that women wanted to participate emotionally in the character’s lives. They wanted the models to be happy, to look sensitive, seeking intimacy with the text. Nevertheless, rationality was present in some analyses, but rarely so. Stern (2000) argues that females enter into the world of a story of an advertisement, and that men appear to be more distant from the text. Here however, we found women distant, refusing to enter into the text when they rejected it. Stern also insists on women’s acceptance of the authorial presence as given, in contrast with men’s determination to seek out the author’s purpose. However, we found that women tried to understand the aim of the author.

Words for women
We can classify them in two categories: prostitutes, objects

1. Prostitutes: »Women as sexual object, woman, who poses to make money and who, posing bare should win more”. («Femme objet, femme qui pose se faire de l’argent et qui en posant nue doit gagner davantage»), “a woman of easy virtue” («femme facile»), “a prostitute” («femme de prostitution»)

2. That a fair object


4. Some interviewees have difficulty to classify them: “A queer animal”, “a figurehead” (une potiche).

As far as we analyse, they woman in the ads are not like the interviewees, they are perceived as different.

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**Sexually oriented content**

The fear of words

Either sexually oriented content was and sexuality are rejected or the interviewees refused to see them, to tell talk about them.

The words they employed evoked sexuality or sensuality, but indirectly:

> a bit too loose a position
>
> that’s it’s a little bit too much of and the position a little bit too arched position which shocked me.«. For instance in the ad for the lingerie Aubade, the woman had her hand slipped in her pants, and one interviewee suggested to put off take away the “thingummy of hands”:

> I would remove the fingers, because it’s a pity, to touch her pants doesn’t bring anything, what do they want to show?”

When erotica was mentioned, it was considered as a marketing tool.

As nudity erotica is understood as a tool to attract the eye (—“they put erotica to catch the eye”) but not accepted. More precisely:

- erotica and nudity

Erotica in itself was not rejected, but this specific kind of erotica was rejected. The interviewees said they would accept a more subtle erotica, without nudity and with less demonstration: —“even so, erotica supposes a bit of mystery” (—“L’erotisme, ça suppose quand même un peu de mystère”). Erotica for women supposes mystery, not to show everything (— a naked body, sexual acts), but only to suggest all this in a very subtle way.

Because—Even when sexuality was only suggested, this bothered women. “I don’t like the hands on the genitals”... “she hides her genitals with her hand”.

French culture distinguishes clearly between a beautiful and a sexy person. Some words express the concept of beauty without sexuality, like “potiche” (— a decorative object), a representation of woman as a decorative object, without a brain, but not necessarily sexy, on the contrary, too of a bimbo who is a sexy girl.

**Développer.XXXX**

**Man**

The permanent reference to men

There was no man depicted in any of the ads we used. However, whenever there was a sexual content, man is absent in these ads, but the reference to men was omnipresent because of the suggested sexuality. If the woman had a lustful position, she was described as being offered to the man. The advertised products were mainly for women and usually bought by women (shoes, pants, tanning pills etc.). However, the interviewees scarcely
considered, but the women is scarcely considered as the target. These ads seemed to them as created for men: “May be one would have to ask a man what he thinks about it” “I don’t think know what women think about this ad, but I have several pals who could not resist it” (“ça serait intéressent de savoir ce que les hommes en pensent”,” it would be interesting to know what men think about that” “I can’t judge, I am not a man” “You should have to interview men”.

Women perceived these ads as created for men even if the presented products are for women. Moreover, women refused to judge these ads. These ads were supposed to create emotion, but for men only. Women thought they had been created by men, they read male advertising text as a man. Perhaps we could use the world decipherment in this case. De Certeau (1984) uses this term for reading someone else’s language according to their own rules as reading is an interpretation made with the reader’s culture.

The other reference to man–men is concerned with the difference in representation of men and women in advertising (“They don’t do the same thing for with men”) and that was a reason to be annoyed by the presence of a naked woman.

Humour makes sexuality less alarming

The interviewees accepted nudity and erotica much better when the ad (and especially the text) included a touch of humour. This was particularly clear for the Aubade ad. “This ad is less shocking. There is more sympathy because she—it makes you laugh” “C’est vrai que c’est une note d’humour et ça; comment dire.. pas dédramatiser mais ça lève le niveau de la pub. That’s right that it is a touch of humour and that [...]’s how to say.. to make it less awesome. But that raises the level of the ad”.

We could imagine that nudity with humour was better accepted because this kind of ad appeals to the women’s mind, their brain, not only their sexual emotions.

As mentioned previously, to be accepted, a woman must be perceived as a human being, with eyes and brain. This use of humour to talk about sex in advertising had been previously noticed by Elliott (1995), who proposes that women use humour in order to “reduce the levels of their anxiety and allow them to deal with the subject matter”. But as pointed by de Certeau (1984), the reader is able to reinterpret the symbolic and resignify meanings in unintended directions.

III—

Product congruence

When starting this research, we anticipated that product congruence would strongly affect the reactions to female nudity. This is why we chose ads including different levels of congruence. The interviews showed that this is a major variable. Congruence was often the first factor.
mentioned when judging ads depicting female nudity. Women asked what the ad was about and commented on the presence of a naked woman to promote the product category. However, interviews also showed that product congruence was a more complex variable than we expected.

The level of product congruence appears as a major factor affecting the ad perception. All women commented on the product category and the relevance of nudity for such products. As one woman summed up, « Well, a woman who is naked can be justified when there is a link with the product » (« À la limite, une femme qui est nue, donc on la peut faire pour le produit »). Women were bothered by what they called « pointless nudity » (nudité inutile), which was perceived as using females as sexual objects. A low congruence generated irritation. One interviewed woman notes, « You see a naked woman and this is to promote a consulting company. Underwear, self-tanning lotion, OK. Shoes, that was already too much but, now, I am a little annoyed. They use nudity for anything instead of trying to find another idea » (« Tu vois une femme nue et c'est pour une boîte de conseil. La lingerie, l'autobronzant OK. Les chaussures c'était déjà poussé mais là oui, ça m'énerve un peu. On utilise la nue à toutes les sauces au lieu de chercher une autre idée »).

We have classified the ten ads we used in the interviews into three groups based on the perceived product congruence (Table 44). Some products seemed congruent with female nudity to all the women interviewed. This was the case of underwear, cosmetic surgery and tanning products. For these products, women understood why the ad represented a naked woman and were not shocked or annoyed by the presence of female nudity. Showing an entirely naked woman was even perceived as « logical » to promote the Doriance self-tanning pills in order to show that the tan was all over the body. However, when asked what they would change in the ad to improve it, several people said that they would add some clothes, usually light and sexy clothes such as a bathing suit (tanning product) or underwear (Rosy, Paciotti).

Other products were considered as completely non-congruent with female nudity, that is like the alarm clock or the e-consulting company. People did not understand why those ads depicted a naked woman and reacted very negatively. « Why a naked woman? What is she doing there? » (« Pourquoi une femme nue, qu'est ce qu'elle fait là ») (Inexware). Nudity was then interpreted as a way to increase attention towards the ad. When asked what they would change in the ad so as to improve it, women suppressed the presence of a naked woman. They completely changed the image and some would depict a man instead of a woman.

Among the sample of ads we used for our survey, four of them were promoting shoes. This product category generated ambiguous and heterogeneous congruence evaluations. Some people found them congruent with female nudity. They noted that if the model were dressed up, consumers would look at her clothes instead of her shoes. Nudity enabled to focus attention on the shoes as opposed to other clothing items. However, as one woman noted, the consequence was that people looked at the model’s body instead of the shoes! Other interviewees made a distinction between boots (perceived as...
congruent with female nudity because they are sexy products) and sports shoes (perceived as non congruent). As for beach shoes, some people found it natural to be naked on the beach while other insisted on adding a bathing suit to the depicted body.

When congruence was perceived as low, consumers usually tried to use other elements of the ad to understand the presence of a naked woman. They usually then read the slogan. For the Reebok («Natural classic») and the Inexware ads («Being rich of essential things: Knowledge») especially, they commented on the congruence between the slogan and female nudity. However, note that the congruence between female nudity and the product category was considered as less important when the product seemed interesting to the consumers. This phenomenon was particularly obvious in regard to the ad promoting the alarm clock projecting time on the ceiling. Many persons interviewed were positive about the product and considered it as highly innovative and do not comment on the image depicted in the ad. The presence of a naked woman appears as anecdotal to them and does not generate any reaction. As one person says: Here, honestly, the woman is less important, I am more attracted by the product. («La bonne affaire, pour moi, la femme passe plutôt au deuxième plan, je suis plutôt attirée par le produit.»)

The moderating role of product representation

Besides the product congruence, many women insisted on the explicit presence in the ad of the product being promoted. They were bothered when the product did not appear explicitly and/or was not proposed. Nudity was then perceived more negatively. Then note that «You should see the product» («il faut qu'on voit le produit»), «you should know what the ad is promoting» («on sait ce que vend la pub»). One woman we interviewed compares the non-explicit representation of the promoted product to «abstract art representation that [she did] not feel comfortable like that much» («l'air abstrait que je n'aime pas trop»).

This phenomenon mostly affected elderly women in their 60s and, to a lower extent, women in their 40s. These women were bothered by the Rosy ad because no underwear appeared in the picture, even though they considered the product as congruent with female nudity. They said they would have depicted some products that the brand was selling, some «lace» or «nice bras-bras». These women were less shocked by the ads promoting The Seller beach shoes or Paciotti boots because the products were put forward, in the foreground in both images – even though the congruence was lower and the depicted women more erotic and provocative. They want the message to be explicit about the products to be promoted.

Congruence with the situation and the model’s position

Other types of congruence also seemed of key importance in understanding perceptions of reactions to female nudity. The environment and the situation depicted are supposed to help justify and explain the presence of female nudity. The question was whether it was natural or not to be naked in such a situation. If the ad showed a beach, the situation was perceived as congruent. This is why
The Seller ad was often well perceived. As for the seaside landscape depicted in the ad promoting Doriance tanning pills, reactions were more heterogeneous and differed according to the personal history of the people interviewed. One person noted: "I was a nudist when I was young. The woman here is naked but it is OK in this ad."

++One person noted++: "Tell me where you would see a woman who is completely naked under a pine tree?"++Some even noted that a "slanting tree" ++was not natural in this context. As for advertisements showing naked women wearing shoes (Cox, Paciotti), the main criticism dealt with the situation congruence: ++"and you, would you wear shoes when lying in silk sheets?"

++One wonders why she is in that bed wearing boots++: "On se demande pourquoi elle est dans un lit avec des bottes." These reactions recalled why painters from previous centuries had to find reasons for the nudity of the characters they painted. Under the Renaissance or the reign of Queen Victoria, for instance, painters frequently referred to ancient mythology in order to find a situation justifying the absence of clothes. The same need for justification featured in our interviews.

When it seemed natural to be naked in that the situation presented, people the interviewees commented on the position of the woman placed in the ad. For instance, regarding the Oregon alarm clock: ++one notes++: "When lying down, she would not hold her breast like that when she was getting awakening up". ++Another person says++: "You just woke up, you're in good shape, you raise up your legs." ++On the one hand, people appreciated realistic ads in which they could project their own life. As one interviewee says, ++"I think advertising should be rather close to reality because otherwise, it is just considering people are stupid."++ ++This opinion was often the case shared by older women. Trust in advertising relied on the closeness between the depicted situations and reality. Many ads were appreciated because they generated identification based on a high congruence between the naked woman represented, the product and the situation. This was the case for the ads related to the Harley Medical Group."
pills and to a lower extent The Seller shoes.

On the other hand, people enjoyed beautiful ads and considered that advertising should make them dream. The Aubade ad illustrated such phenomenon a vision. It generates generated the more–most favourable perceptions shared by a very large number of people. In our sample, this ad seemed rather unique by the unanimous unanimous reactions it generated. People The interviewees find the image, the woman’s bottom and the product beautiful. Even though the product was perceived as congruent with female nudity, this was not the reason why people–women liked it so much. They enjoyed the aestheticism associated with a touch of humour in the slogan.

Aesthetics appears as a key factor of perception even though somewhat opposed to realism. One notes that « in advertising, there is a race for aesthetics that annoys me since it is disconnected from reality » while another person says that she « expects an image to create emotion and emotion comes with beauty » « attend d’une image qu’elle m’émouve, et l’émotion, ça passe par l’émotion devant la beauté ».

IV—Aestheticism

Aestheticism thus appeared as a key factor even though somehow opposed to realism. One noted that “in advertising, there is a race for aesthetics that annoys me since it is disconnected from reality” while another person said that she “expects an image to create emotion and emotion comes with beauty”.

A key factor of perception

When women commented on the women ten ads we have shown to them, they often evaluate them in terms of aesthetics. The ad beauty—aesthetics was often presented—mentioned as the first reason for liking or disliking it. Aesthetics seemed to be a respectable and easy-to-admit criterion to evaluate ads. While women were reluctant to admit that they were annoyed by the presence of female nudity, they easily proposed the aesthetic aspects.

Some women, especially in their 40s, analysed the image depicted very precisely. The words they used to assess aesthetics dealt with « light and shadow effects » « les jeux d’ombre et de lumière », « lines » « les lignes », « the image structure » « la structure de l’image », its homogeneity, the colours used. Black and white, satin-like textures and sparkling colours were appreciated. Light control made images more sophisticated, which was perceived as positive by many people since « sophisticated » « les images sont sophistiquées » ads were opposed to « rough » « grossières » « vulgar » ones.

The beauty of the woman depicted in the ad also appeared as a key element in the esthetical assessment. The women we have interviewed analysed her outline (silhouette), her figure—her lines—, her skin, her position. They commented on her beauty and her body, sometimes distancing themselves afterwards, mentioning that « ads always show super women » « c’est toujours des super nanas » or that « the image can be manipulated », that « they can do anything » « l’image est peut être trafiquée. Ils peuvent tout faire ». 
Ugliness appeared to bother and sometimes shock consumers. They did not like sagging breasts, bathing suits marks, strange superpositions that could refer to a sickness or a malformation (like the flowers on the breast of the Rosy ladymodel).

A way to make nudity more acceptable

Aestheticism appears to reduced the reluctance towards female nudity. It made acceptable ads that would have generated hostile reactions if they were not so beautiful, for instance because of a low congruence or because of a high sexual evocation.

Some people interviewed even mention it explicitly: « It is provocative but it is beautiful » (Cox shoes), « For that product, I find it strange, but it is true that it is beautiful » (Inexware consultants).

Overall, the impact of aestheticism in advertisements depicting nudity seemed twofold. Firstly, it made female nudity more acceptable to women since beautiful naked women were not considered less as much as sexual objects. Women appreciated the representation of women as beautiful: « If one puts naked women, I had rather have it really aesthetically pleasing », « Well, if there is a naked woman, I want her to be beautiful » (Si on met des femmes nues, j’aimerais qu’elle soit vraiment esthétique, Quelle à ce qu’elle soit nue, autant qu’elle soit belle). Aesthetical nudity enabled to attract attention toward the ad (which was the general role attributed to nudity in advertising) without generating any rejection. Secondly, esthetical nudity increased the acceptance of repetition. Since the image was beautiful, people enjoyed seeing it again and again, and thus memorised it better. This was particularly the case for the Aubade ads. Aesthetics generated a better perception and made repetition more enjoyable.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have intended to understand the ambiguity of the reaction of French women towards the representation of naked women in advertisements. It appeared that French women did not say that they were shocked by these types of ads. However, more than nudity, they rejected the representation of women as a sexual object or as an object without blood, flesh and mind. These ads were considered as an intentional provocation from advertisors. Women refused to react as expected and to give more importance to advertising than it deserves. It could be interesting to deepen this analysis to understand whether French women internalise the masculine norms of the representation of women, or if their lack of interest for these ads results from a lack of interest for consumption society in the face of more important issues. Unquestionably, French women were blase when confronted with these ads. It would be interesting to know if these ads have been designed by men or women (O’Donohoe, 2000). Future research could also be aimed at interviewing men in order to compare their reactions to the same ads, following Stern (2000) and the concept of the androcentric versus gynocentric reading of a text, as experienced by Brown, Stevens and Maclaran (1997) or analysed by Mick and Politi (1989). In this context, the evolution of advertising results from two trends within the society: firstly, the will to...
provoke in order to get attention; secondly, the quest for a more modern representation of women, which does not systematically exclude nudity but which implies a positive role of women as human and thinking beings, aesthetically represented and in accordance with the situation depicted. According to Goldman, Heath and Smith (1991: 349), advertisers have attempted to turn the discourse of feminism into “hard currency”. One example of the advertising attempt to appropriate feminism is the trend towards presenting the female body and female sexuality, not only through the male gaze, but also as a view of women’s own pleasure and empowerment. This rhetoric, for example, surrounds the Wonderbra advertising campaign (Hailstone, 1995). We also noticed that our interviewees preferred ads presenting women as more liberated, in an active position and happy with their body, mastering the situation.

NOTES

1 This study only investigated three age groups.
2 This distinction between advertising and the real world is contradictory with the work of Baudrillard (1981) suggesting the impossibility to distinguish between the real world and advertising, becoming more real than reality.
3 Note that when we had selected this ad, we considered the product to have a medium level of congruence, justifying that a body could be shown in the ad, but not necessarily naked. The interviewees apparently did not agree with that and found the product congruent with nudity.

REFERENCES


<table>
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<tr>
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Table 1 - List of interviewees
I don’t like it at all, I think it is ghastly. “I find her indecent, clearly indecent because there is no aestheticism”. “I find it horrible, she is awful”.

“It doesn’t look natural”. “It looks a bit posed”. “There is a very artificial side that I dislike”. “She is relatively disembodied”. “It is very stereotyped”.

“That’s without interest”. “That’s ridiculous, it’s worth nothing”. “That’s a little absurd”. “That’s completely irrational”. “It stinks”.

“That’s vulgar”. “It really looks dowdy”. “It looks bottom of the range”.

“That’s shit”. “I think it’s bust”, “I am horrified”, “I am super disgusted. “That’s sickening”, “that’s gore”.

“That’s excessive”, “That’s ridiculous”.

<table>
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<th>Words</th>
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| Ugliness       | “I don’t like it at all, I think it is ghastly”. “I find her indecent, clearly indecent because there is no aestheticism”. “I find it horrible, she is awful”.
| Artifice       | “It doesn’t look natural”. “It looks a bit posed”. “There is a very artificial side that I dislike”. “She is relatively disembodied”. “It is very stereotyped”.
| Without reason | “That’s without interest”. “That’s ridiculous, it’s worth nothing”. “That’s a little absurd”. “That’s completely irrational”. “It stinks”.
| Vulgarity      | “That’s vulgar”. “It really looks dowdy”. “It looks bottom of the range”.
| Disgust and horror | “That’s shit”. “I think it’s bust”, “I am horrified”, “I am super disgusted. “That’s sickening”, “that’s gore”.
| Inadapted      | “That’s excessive”, “That’s ridiculous”                                 |

Table 2 - The words used to reject the ads

| Prostitutes          | “Woman as sexual object, who poses to make money and who, posing bare, should earn more” |
|                     | “A woman of easy virtues” |
|                     | “A prostitute” |

| Objects              | “A sandwich woman” |
|                     | “A woman on display” |
|                     | “Women as merchandise” |

Table 3 - The words used to describe the women in the ads

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<td>Doriance tanning pills</td>
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Table 4 - Level of product congruence as evaluated in the interviews


Rasdrillard (1983)


Brown, S., Stevens L. and Maclaran, P. (1997), “If I said you had a beautiful body: literary theory, Mikhail Bakhtin and the gender agenda”, in R; Ashford et al. (eds.), marketing without borders: proceedings, 1st annual academy of marketing conference Manchester University, 113-128.


