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## **Can Sexy Images Drag You Down? How Gender and Self-Construal Impact Subsequent Indulgent Consumption**

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Previous research on the use of sexual imagery focused on its impacts on advertising persuasion, ignoring the consumer's subsequent behaviors following exposures to sexual imagery. This article not only investigates how exposure to sex cues may evoke indulgent consumption/choice but also explores the moderating influences of gender differences and self-construal.

### **[to cite]:**

Chun-Tuan Chang, Xing-Yu Chu, Shr-Chi Wang, and Dickson Tok (2017) ,"Can Sexy Images Drag You Down? How Gender and Self-Construal Impact Subsequent Indulgent Consumption", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 45, eds. Ayelet Gneezy, Vladas Griskevicius, and Patti Williams, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 563-564.

### **[url]:**

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1023732/volumes/v45/NA-45>

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# Can Sexy Images Drag You Down? How Gender and Self-construal Impact Subsequent Indulgent Consumption

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The cliché “Sex Sells” is apparently held in high esteem by advertisers who rely on the use of the sexy images as a marketing strategy not only in commercial marketing (e.g., Chang and Tseng 2013; Sengupta and Dahl 2008) but also in social marketing (Reichert, Heckler, and Jackson 2001). A majority of research on the use of sexy images has focused on its impacts on advertising persuasion, ignoring the consumers’ subsequent behaviors following exposures to sexy images.

In the current research, we argue that exposure to sexy images is more likely to evoke indulgent consumption/choice in a subsequent context (when compared with exposure to neutral imagery). Furthermore, we are interested in boundary conditions that could amplify or dampen the priming effects of sexy images on subsequent indulgent consumption. One potential moderator is gender differences. Gender is an important sub-cultural influence on sexual norms (Lopez and George 1995). The other proposed moderator is self-construal. Two types of self-construal, independent and interdependent, distinguish how the self is viewed in relation to others (Singelis 1994).

Nevertheless, we propose that interdependent self-construal may enhance indulgent consumption for women (compared with women with independent self-construal). Priming interdependent self-construal may make one to think collectively and place more on subjective norms (Ybarra and Trafimow 1998). Women show equivalent sexual arousal when the gender norms do not condemn erotica enjoyment (Lopez and George 1995). They are also more responsive to sexy images with romantic love. Since interdependent self-construal is consistent with how female self-regulatory goals, such interdependence will allow women to activate pleasure seeking after exposure to sexy images. Therefore, self-construal could play a dual role when gender differences are considered: independent self-construal enhances males’ indulgent consumption while interdependent self-construal increases females’ indulgent consumption after exposures to sexy images.

In Study 1, empirical data of 2016 World Auto Expo was analyzed. As a sex cue, show girls evoke impulsivity and should be appropriate to promote cars for indulgent purpose (e.g., sports car). We expected that companies were more likely to use show girls for indigent-based cars. The show girl data were assessed through enquires for the brand managers. Using show girl(s) or not served as the dependent variable. The main independent variable was car for indulgence based on two judges who were blind to research purposes. Engine displacement, county of origin, and the marque edition were also considered as independent variables. The results based on the binary logistic regression supported a positive relationship between sex cue and indulgence.

In Study 2, both gender and self-construal were considered as moderators. A 2 (sex cue: sex vs. neutral) X 2 (participant gender: men vs. women) X 2 (self-construal: independent vs. interdependent) between-subjects design was employed. Self-construal was first measured by a 24-item self-construal scale of Singelis (1994). Participants were then watched four videos either sexy or neutral (Van den Bergh et al. 2008). Chocolates (separated package with equal weight and size) were provided for them as appreciation and they

could eat as much as the liked. Chocolate consumption served as the dependent variable. The regression using Model 3 in the PROCESS macro (Hayes 2013) showed a three-way interaction. For men with an independent self-construal, those in the sex cue condition ate more chocolates than the counterparts in the neutral condition. No such difference was found for men with an interdependent self-construal. On the other hand, women with interdependent self-construal in the sex cue condition ate more chocolates than the counterparts in the neutral condition. Similar chocolate consumption was found on women with independent self-construal regardless of the sex cue.

In Study 3, two sex cues were classified. A 2 (sex cue: gratuitous sex vs. romantic love) X 2 (participant gender: men vs. women) X 2 (self-construal: independent vs. interdependent) full-factorial design was conducted. Self-construal was manipulated through movie synopsis with a poster (independent self-construal: *Iron Man*; interdependent self-construal: *Avengers*). Participants were then invited evaluate ten perfume ads (with gratuitous sex or romantic love). Gratuitous sex was presented through the image with a sexually charged close up of a partially clothed men and women passionately embracing each other. Romantic love was manipulated through a pair of wedding rings and a slogan to express their commitment. After participants completed the above measures, they chose one of two tickets to the forthcoming auto expo as a thank-you gift. Sports car and hybrid car exhibition represented indulgent and non-indulgent choice, respectively, which served as the dependent measure. We used slopes analyses (Aiken and West 1991) after the three-way interaction was found. The results indicated that men were more likely to choose an indulgent choice when independent-self was primed. Such effects were stronger when the sex cue contained gratuitous sex. In contrast, women with interdependent-self were more likely to choose an indulgent choice when using romantic love in sex cues.

The current research makes several contributions. First, this research contributes to the sex literature by a) demonstrating subsequent indulgent consumption after sexy image exposure, and b) identifying the boundary conditions in which this effect might occur. Second, this investigation also contributes to the reward-processing literature, which has received recent attention, by demonstrating that motivational mindsets such as sex can have unique effects on consumer choice. Third, it shows that different sexy images may have the dual impacts of both decreasing and increasing indulgent consumption, depending on individual differences in gender and self-construal.

This research points to some interesting directions for future studies. First, it is worth to explore how other typology the sexy images (explicit vs. implicit) (Chang and Tseng 2013) and the level of nudity in sexy images may influence subsequent indulgent consumption. Second, since evolution-based theories suggest gender differences on mating motivations (Malamuth 1996; Symons 1979; Saad 2004), future research may manipulate mating motivation through a priming task to replicate the results found in the current study. Third, since exposures to sexy images may produce a generalized motivation to seek rewarding outcomes and immediate gratification, it is then possible that people become more likely to eat unhealthy foods, procrastinate, and engage in aggression.

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