

Sex and Puffery in Advertising:

An Absolutely Sensational and Sexually Provocative Experiment¹

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Abstract: A sample of 295 students participated in a 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 between subjects full factorial design experiment which examined the effects of advertising puffery and sexuality on attitude toward the ad. Subjects viewed ads and were evaluated on the following factors: model nudity (nude/clothed), message puffery (puffed/non-puffed message), and sex of the model (male/female). Additionally, sex of the subject was used as a blocking variable to create the fourth factor. No main effects were found for nudity or puffery. A strong and consistent opposite-sex effect was found for men where they preferred the female model. In contrast, women were not consistent with the opposite-sex effect. Men preferred the non-puffed message while women preferred the puffed message. Managerial implications are offered for the findings.

Key words: Puffery; Sex; Print advertising; Nudity; Attitude

In the best of all worlds, advertising is used to inform, persuade, and/or remind consumers about a beneficial product, service, organization, or idea. Unfortunately, advertising may also be used as a means to unethically manipulate consumers. Two advertising tactics that have come under public scrutiny (Gifford 2007; Preston 1998) are the use of sex appeal and the exaggeration of puffery in advertising. These two tactics have been combined in an effort to garner the ever waning attention of a population increasingly inundated with sexual messages.

The intensified exaggeration of sexual advertising may in part be explained by Weber's Law. According to Weber's Law, as the intensity of the stimulus (e.g. advertisement) increases, the ability to detect a difference between the two levels of the stimulus decreases (Miller 1962). The ability to detect this difference is known as the just noticeable difference (JND). Therefore, as ads become more intense sexually, it becomes more difficult for the audience to discriminate or notice any difference from less sexual ads so exaggerations continue to occur but with diminished marginal returns. So for sexual-based ads to penetrate the JND, they have had to become increasingly exaggerated or puffed.

Interestingly, while the use of sex in advertising is commonplace, its success as an advertising tool has had mixed results in empirical studies (Judd and Alexander 1983; Severn, Belch, and Belch 1990) and

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*Received 5 January 2011; accepted 15 February 2011

requires further study. Additionally, while the use of puffery has been declared “legal” by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) under the assumption that no rational consumer would believe such exaggerated claims (FTC 2004), advertisers continue with its use and there is empirical support for the effectiveness of puffery (e.g., Cowley 2006). Thus, puffery should also be further investigated given that its “legal” status has been based purely on anecdotal evidence by public policy makers rather than through empirical research. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to empirically test these two controversial advertising tactics: sex appeal and puffery using an advertising experiment.

Sex appeal and puffery have each been examined separately in the advertising literature but not in combination as an intriguing means of powerful persuasion. This study utilizes an experiment where advertisers attempt to sway audiences by combining “puffed” advertising messages along with the attention grabbing power of sexually provocative images in a product area associated with sex appeal, the perfume and cologne industries.

SEX APPEAL IN ADVERTISING

Sex in advertising has been a matter of controversy for many years. Our society’s preoccupation with the human body in advertising has adversely affected both men and women by making them more prone to persuasion (Cohan 2001). There have been movements by women in the 1970’s and 80’s that vilified advertisers for portraying women as sex objects and more recently in the early 1990’s, the men’s movement was partly a reaction to similar treatment of men. Given that there are more women used as sexual stimuli in ads than men, it is no surprise that there is evidence that women find sex in advertising more objectionable than men (Dahl, Sengupta, and Vohs 2009; Ford and Latour 1993).

So the question can be asked, does sex really sell? The prevailing assumption by those in the advertising industry remains that sex sells (Gifford 2007; Stephey 2009). In an effort to break through the clutter and penetrate JND, the intensity and suggestiveness of male/female contact in advertising has increased significantly. Putrevu (2008) found that sexual appeals lead to better memory, attitudes, and purchase intentions among low-involvement consumers. Also, low need for cognition (NFC) consumers favor sex appeals while high NFC customers favor non-sexual appeals. Severn, Belch, and Belch (1990) found that a more sexually explicit appeal results in more favorable attitudes toward the ad and greater purchase intentions, but not more favorable brand attitudes. A review of the literature by Belch, Belch, and Villareal (1987) suggested that the effectiveness of sexual imagery is based on the sex of the recipient, product advertised, and the dependent measure used. For example, sex appeals can have different measurement dimensions such as nudity, sexual attractiveness, or sexual suggestiveness (Bello, Etzel, and Pitts 1983).

Nudity. When an ad used a nude model, the model was judged least appealing, while the product and company were evaluated most negatively (Severn, Belch, and Belch 1990). Similarly, Peterson and Kerin (1977) found men and women considered nude ads to be the least appealing of all ads in their study. In another study, Dudley (1999) found that nudity resulted in greater attention-getting interest, more ad appeal, and more distinctiveness to the brand. Additionally, he found the ad for a totally nude model was rated more favorably than a topless model, suggesting that advertisers should consider going “all the way” with nudity rather than “adding a little spice.” LaTour, Pitts, and Snook-Luther (1990) found evidence that the use of female nudity in perfume ads is significantly less effective for females than for males. The effects of nudity appear mixed. However, two of the three studies mentioned here demonstrated that partial nudity is perceived more favorably than full nudity.

Men vs. Women. Sex appeal seems to vary between the sexes. Dahl, Sengupta, and Vohs (2009) found that women’s attitudes toward sex in advertising improved when the values of emotional intimacy and commitment were communicated, while men’s attitudes were very positive toward recreational sex. These findings suggest that men and women react differently with respect to sex in advertising.

In the media, there is evidence that advertisers use female sexual imagery 3.7 times more often than male sexual imagery (Reichert 2003). Such findings are consistent with the notion that men are generally believed to be most sexually aroused with visual or suggested nudity while women are aroused by romantic notions (Anne 1971; Garrett 1993). Peterson and Kerin (1977) found males responded more favorably than women to all ads depicting a female model in varying levels of dress. Similarly, both Reidenbach and

McCleary (1983) and LaTour and Henthorne (1993) found results that men were not only far more positive than women in their attitudes toward an ad with a nude female but held significantly more positive attitudes toward the brand and product. Conversely, women have been found to generate more tension and negative feelings toward explicit female nudity in print ads than men (Alexander 1986; Dahl, Sengupta, and Vohs 2009; LaTour 1990). What is effective for one sex may be offensive to the other (Reichert, Heckler, and Jackson 2001).

There is further evidence that the effectiveness of sex appeal appears to be related to one's sex. Baker and Churchill (1977) found that men and women rated ads portraying a model of the opposite sex higher than those portraying a model of the same sex. Simpson, Horton, and Brown (1996) also found evidence of an opposite-sex effect with ads studying male nudity. Female respondents' attitudes toward the ad increased with levels of nudity but declined with the suggestion of full nudity. Interestingly, Garrett (1993) found that ads using female models attracted equal attention of men and women viewers but ads using a male model generated an increased interest in women only. Among Chinese consumers, men and women had more favorable responses toward ads featuring models of the opposite sex with "low" sexuality, suggesting an affinity toward a toned down sex appeal (Liu and Li 2005).

It can be surmised that nudity is an important dimension to measure sex appeal and that men and women vary significantly in their perception of it. There is support for women to be more objectionable to nudity and with the exception of Garrett (1993) there is an opposite-sex effect with nudity.

With respect to the question "does sex sell," while there is a time and a place for advertising nudity/sex appeal, it doesn't work well in all situations. For example, sex appeal tends to work better when associated with a sexual-related (congruent) topic rather than a non-sexual (incongruent) one (Baker and Churchill 1977; Blair, Stephenson, Hill and Green 2006; Courtney and Whipple 1983; Peterson and Kerin 1977). In this study, we use a congruent topic, that is, fragrance products (i.e., perfume and cologne).

While sex in advertising continues to raise some controversy, there has been an increased toleration of its use. Part of the increased toleration may be explained by an increasingly sexual permissive society and media, which carries over into attitudes toward advertising.

ADVERTISING PUFFERY

Puffery is defined by marketers as "harmless exaggerations that are expressions of opinion rather than claims of some objective quality or characteristic of the product" (Rotfeld and Rotzoll 1980, p. 16). Government policymakers consider puffery to be "wildly exaggerated, fanciful or vague claims for a product or service" (p. 728) and allow it to be legal because of the assumptions that: 1) consumers can identify puffed claims as not credible and 2) consumers will not use a puffed claim as part of their evaluation because they understand it to be wildly exaggerated (Cowley 2006). The FTC defines puffery as a "term frequently used to denote the exaggerations reasonably to be expected of a seller as to the degree of quality of his product, the truth or falsity of which cannot be precisely determined" (FTC 2004). While the FTC's position is that puffery does not deceive reasonable consumers because they can distinguish between puffed and non-puffed information (Preston 1996), empirical evidence suggests that consumers form beliefs based on puffed claims (Kamins and Marks 1987; Rotfeld and Rotzoll 1980; Shimp and Preston 1981) and process the puffed claims as facts (Cunningham and Cunningham 1977; Holbrook 1978; Shimp and Preston 1981; Wyckham 1987).

Most recently, the work of Cowley (2006) supported the deceitful power of puffery. Their results suggested that while consumers were able to identify exaggerated claims as being less credible than factual claims, their brand evaluations were significantly increased after being exposed to puffed claims. Exposure to false information affected beliefs even when it lacked credibility. Overall, the implication is that puffery works. Legally allowed but misleading, puffery is an accepted practice in marketing and the temptation for marketers to make statements about products that are considered puffed has increased (Preston 1998). Perhaps Preston (1996) stated it best when he said that if puffery does not work, marketers would not use it.

Information Processing, Sex, & Probability Markers. In general women appear to be different from men when it comes to processing information. First, women are more sensitive to specific language features of

messages than men and elaborate more on verbal advertising claims, taking note of slight differences in product claims (Darley and Smith 1995). Further, research by Berney-Reddish and Areni (2006) on sex differences in information processing suggests that women view “probability markers” more negatively than men because it could suggest advertising trickery. Probability markers represent words and phrases used to signal an advertiser’s confidence or guarantee that a claim is true. One type of probability marker is “pledges,” that signal complete certainty in a claim that is made, such as the words “undoubtedly,” “definitely,” or “absolutely.” Probability markers are relevant because they are consistent with the extreme exaggerations or absolutes found in advertising puffery. Therefore, if women view advertising absolutes negatively, then they would logically be more likely to view advertising puffery unfavorably as well.

HYPOTHESES

Utilizing a 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 experimental design, the current study explores the interaction effects of fragrance print advertisements displaying either a male or female model that is either partially nude (exposed chest) or fully clothed and having an advertising message that is either “puffed” (exaggerated) or “non-puffed” (not exaggerated). In addition, the study uses sex of the subjects as a blocking variable to further assess nudity and puffery. Each of the hypotheses predicts the subjects’ attitude toward the ad. Based on the related literature review, the current study makes the following hypotheses.

H1: Overall, subjects will prefer the partially nude model (i.e., sex sells).

H2: Overall, subjects will prefer the puffed message (i.e., puffery works).

H3: Men subjects will prefer the female model over the male model (i.e., opposite-sex effect).

H4: Women subjects will prefer the male model over the female model (i.e., opposite-sex effect).

H5: Men subjects will prefer the puffed message compared to women (i.e., women’s dislike of probability markers)

H6: Men subjects will prefer nude models when compared to women (i.e., women’s objection to suggestive full nudity).

H7a: Women subjects will prefer non-puffed male model to puffed female model

H7b: Men subjects will prefer puffed female model to non-puffed male model

H8a: Women subjects will prefer non-nude male model to nude female model

H8b: Men subjects will prefer nude female model to non-nude male model

H9a: Women subjects will prefer the clothed male model to the clothed female model.

H9b: Men subjects will prefer the clothed female model to the clothed male model.

H10a: Women subjects will prefer non-nude male model with non-puffed message to nude female puffed message

H10b: Men subjects will prefer nude female model with puffed message to non-nude male non-puffed message

METHOD

Stimuli. Advertisements for fragrance products (i.e., cologne and perfume) were selected for use in the study. Fragrance products were chosen because of their relevance and interest to young adult students (the sample) and because they lend themselves to sexual advertising, being sex related products. The ads were taken from actual cologne and perfume ads for external validity and adapted for this study so that the true brand name and body copy were not visible. Two sets of four advertisements were adapted and developed, one set depicting a male model and one set depicting a female model. The purpose of having ads containing a separate male model and a separate female model was to balance the effects of sex and provide the opportunity for every combination of matchup between men and women subjects to evaluate male and female models. In each ad, the product bottle was positioned in the same location and was identical in shape

and name. The fictitious brand name of the product was "Vade," which had been determined by Peterson and Kerin (1977) to be neutral and also used by Simpson, Horton, and Brown (1996) to control for any previous brand name effects. This brand name was prominently displayed on the bottle in each of the ads.

Each model was either fully clothed or partially nude. With regard to nudity, the male model was bare-chested while the female model had no shirt but wore a suspender belt that covered the center of her one exposed breast. In addition, each ad contained body copy at the bottom center that was either puffed "Absolutely the World's Most Seductive Fragrance" or not puffed "A Seductive Fragrance."

Design. This study employs a 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 full factorial between subjects design. There are two levels of model (male/female), two levels of nudity (clothed/partially nude), two levels of puffery (puffed/non-puffed message), and two levels of sex of subject where that is used as a blocking variable.

Subjects. Two hundred and ninety five undergraduate and graduate students from a southern mid-sized university between the ages of 18 and 52 and averaging 21.5 years of age enrolled in business classes participated in the experiment. Their participation was completely voluntary. Approximately thirty six subjects were randomly assigned to each of the eight treatment groups, and then within each treatment condition they were split into two groups based on subject sex. Subjects comprised 18.6% freshmen, 9.7% sophomores, 23.9% juniors, 38.9% seniors, and 8.9% graduate students. Most subjects were Caucasian (71.1%). Other groups were African-American (16.7%), Asian/Pacific Islander (6.1%), Hispanic (2.8%), and other (3.3%). There were one hundred and sixty six men and one hundred and twenty nine women in the study.

Procedures. Five print advertisements were presented to the subjects in a packet to simulate their exposure to ads in a magazine. The four control ads were for various products: a watch, soap, an automobile, and a jacket. Subjects were randomly exposed to one treatment ad that was placed in the middle (the third ad) of the packet. Subjects were told that they would be asked to view and evaluate a series of ads related to new products. Subjects were instructed when to begin examining the first advertisement and were given fifteen seconds to view each advertisement. Fifteen seconds was used based on pretesting. Additionally, that same amount of time was used by Poels and Dewitte (2008) and Amyx, Bristow, and Robb (2009) in their print advertising experiments. Upon having viewed all of the ads, the subjects were directed to complete the attached survey.

Dependent Measure. The dependent variable attitude toward the ad was used to assess the effectiveness of the advertisements. Attitude toward the ad was measured using a slight adaptation of McQuarrie and Mick's (2003) scale, which is comprised of three items, each anchored on a 7-point scale with "Strongly Disagree" and "Strongly Agree": "I like this advertisement," "This advertisement is pleasant," and "I enjoyed this advertisement." Attitude toward the ad had a Cronbach Alpha of .924.

RESULTS

Manipulation checks. A number of measures were taken to ensure that the manipulations in the experiment were successful. To check for the factor of nudity, two questions were asked: "The person in the advertisement was nude" and "Sex appeal was used with the person in the advertisement." Subjects responded with a seven point Likert scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." For both questions, those subjects who had the partially nude model had a significantly higher mean level of agreement ($p < .000$) than those subjects with the clothed model. Thus, nudity appeared to be a salient manipulation.

For the factor of the sex of the model, a manipulation check question was asked: "The person in the advertisement was ___Male ___Female." Of the subjects who had the male model, 121 out of 125 or 96.8% correctly identified the sex. For subjects who saw the female model, 115 out of 122 or 94.3% correctly identified the sex of the model. Therefore, the manipulation of model appears to be salient.

In the matter of the message puffery, a manipulation check question was asked: "The advertisement message was deceitful" and subjects responded with a seven point Likert scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." This question was created with the notion that a puffed message would deceive the reader more so than a non-puffed message. While the mean values were in the proper direction, there was

no significant difference between those who received a puffed or non-puffed message. An explanation for this result is that the puffed message "Absolutely the most seductive fragrance in the world" may not be deceptive to people because it may not be taken seriously, just as the FTC supports. Rather, the message may be merely an obvious exaggeration, which is not deceitful. Unfortunately the extent of perceived exaggeration was not measured. Yet while deceitfulness was not statistically supported with the question used, it is believed that a salient manipulation of message puffery is still likely because of the message's exaggerative nature.

ANOVA. Analysis of Variance was used to analyze the hypotheses. Results for each hypothesis are provided below.

H1: Overall, subjects will prefer the partially nude model (i.e., sex sells). Hypothesis not supported. No significant difference was found between the clothed and the partially nude model. This lack of a main effect could have been offset by the sex of the subjects, where any preferences for nudity by men could have been countered by a lack of preference about attitude toward the ad by women.

H2: Overall, subjects will prefer the puffed message (i.e., puffery works). Hypothesis not supported. Interestingly, neither the puffed nor the non-puffed ad was significantly preferred. This is consistent with what the FTC says about puffed ads, that they are simply so exaggerated that nobody in their right mind would believe such a claim.

H3: Men subjects will prefer the female model over the male model (i.e., opposite-sex effect). Hypothesis supported ($F=37.08, p<.000$). Men subjects exhibited a strong preference for the ad with the female model, supporting an opposite-sex effect.

H4: Women subjects will prefer the male model over the female model (i.e., opposite-sex effect). Hypothesis not supported. Interestingly, women subjects did not indicate a preference of the male model over the female model. Instead, the mean value ratings of the two models were almost identical.

H5: Men subjects will prefer the puffed message compared to women (i.e., women's dislike of probability markers). Hypothesis is rejected. Here, men significantly ($F=5.70, p<.018$) preferred the ad with the non-puffed message compared to women. Further, women exhibited a significant preference with the puffed ad compared to the non-puffed message. This is in direct contrast to the literature related to probability markers and how women respond to them. Rather than being opposed to a probability marker such as "absolutely," women were drawn to them.

H6: Men subjects will prefer nude models when compared to women (i.e., women's objection to suggestive full nudity). Hypothesis not supported. Interestingly, and contrary to prior research, men did not prefer nudity relative to women.

H7a: Women subjects will prefer non-puffed male model to puffed female model. Hypothesis is not supported.

H7b: Men subjects will prefer puffed female model to non-puffed male model. Hypothesis not supported. Whether the model was male or female, men did not have any kind of preference about the message.

H8a: Women subjects will prefer the nude male model to the nude female model. Hypothesis is supported ($F=22.60, p<.000$). This is an example of the opposite sex effect but considers the influence of nudity. While women tend to be turned off by nudity, this particular ad was a partial nude picture and therefore is not surprising that women would prefer a partial nude male over a female ad.

H8b: Men subjects will prefer the nude female model to nude male model. Hypothesis supported ($F=22.60, p<.000$). Similar to H8a, the opposite sex attraction seems to be strengthened by partial nudity for men. Men are less prone to be offended by nudity so the results here support previous research and are robust as both attitude toward the ad and brand were found to be significant.

H9a: Women subjects will prefer the clothed male model to the clothed female model. Hypothesis rejected. Women subjects significantly preferred ($F=22.60, p<.000$) the clothed female model to clothed male model. This was a surprising result given that an opposite sex effect had been previously found. Perhaps the women were able to identify with the female model who was clothed more so than the male model.

H9b: Men subjects will prefer the clothed female model to the clothed male model. Hypothesis supported ($F=22.60$, $p<.000$). In contrast to H9a, men exhibited a strong opposite sex effect here and supported prior research.

H10a: Women subjects will prefer non-nude male model with non-puffed message to nude female puffed message. This four-way interaction was not supported.

H10b: Men subjects will prefer nude female model with puffed message to non-nude male non-puffed message. This four-way interaction was not supported.

DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

First, we discovered from the findings that sex may not really sell! At least for this experiment, there was no main effect for nudity when one was expected. This result was surprising considering the amount of advertising out there that focuses on nudity or partial nudity. The level of nudity in these ads was relatively conservative, where the male model was shown naked from the waist up and the female model, though bare from the waist up had one breast completely covered and the other partially covered by a suspender. It may be that the level of nudity was so conservative that it was not considered a major deal to the students. The media does tend to desensitize us from what seems to be ever increasing sexuality and nudity and the younger generation has grown up with that. For marketers, this sends a message to not count on the power of sex appeal, even if it is related to a sexual based product. Maybe the power of sex isn't what it used to be.

Another surprising finding was that the puffed message was not preferred to the non-puffed message. Could the FTC be right in its claims that puffery does not really work? Our study seems to support that point of view. While other studies (e.g., Cowley 2006) supported the claim that puffery works, it may not work as well where there is sexual imagery. For example, could the sexual imagery be overwhelming the puffery, negating any positive effect of the message? This is a question that requires further investigation. Perhaps greater varying levels of sexuality needs to be considered in conjunction with the more extreme puffed messages to penetrate the consciousness of a relatively desensitized audience. For marketers, this suggests that using exaggerated claims may be no more persuasive than more factual based claims and that any exaggeration is just taken too lightly to be meaningful.

An opposite-sex effect took place only in certain circumstances. First, as predicted, men preferred the female model to the male model. Further, men preferred the nude female over the nude male and the clothed female to the clothed male. Yet surprisingly, women exhibited no preference at all. This could have been a function of the attractiveness of the models in the ads. However, when nudity was considered with the opposite-sex effect, women preferred the nude male model to the nude female model but preferred the clothed female to the clothed male model. Therefore, it seems that it was necessary to account for the nudity factor to elicit a preference among women. For advertisers/marketers, these findings suggest that men operate in a simpler schema than women when it comes to the opposite-sex effect. While men consistently preferred the female model, women reversed their preference when the models were clothed. This could be attributed to women identifying with the woman in the ad when the model was clothed. That is, it may have been easier for women to identify with a clothed model than a semi-nude one. Again, this seems to go back to the earlier finding in this study that sex doesn't seem to sell; at least not consistently for women. Also, men did not prefer nudity in general to women. Just as there was no main effect for nudity, men did not view nudity as being inherently more positive. Thus to some extent, sex doesn't sell for men too.

Regarding the puffed message, there was a reversal in what was expected for preferences among men and women. That is, men preferred non-puffed messages compared to women. Also, women exhibited preference with the puffed message. The puffed message in the experiment used a probability marker "Absolutely" and thus was predicted to be thought of by women as an extreme attempt by an ad to persuade or manipulate. So why did the reversal of preference among men and women occur? While "Absolutely" is a probability marker, it may also provide a sense of assurance, like a promise or a guaranty. For marketers, this may be a lesson learned that women want to be assured and the young generation of student women in this sample have not become jaded yet with the notion that "Absolutely" means something negative. It could be that how probability markers are viewed is a function of one's age and experiences as a consumer, and our sample was a relatively young one (average age 21.5 years).

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation is that this was a student sample. However, students were appropriate for the experiment because it was for a product that they are highly involved with and major purchasers of, cologne and perfume.

Another limitation of the study was that the experimental materials that the subjects received were a packet of five ads. While this packet was an attempt to simulate reading through a magazine, it is not the same as reading through an entire magazine with content and numerous advertisements.

A final limitation of the study was that there was some question about the salience of the message manipulation. It may be that the copy was subtle in comparison to the picture for this experiment so a more extreme, exaggerated puffed message could be more obvious to subjects. Alternatively, the message could have been fine and the manipulation check question could have tapped into the wrong concept (i.e., deceit vs. exaggeration).

Future researchers should continue to extend the work of puffery in advertising as it is a relatively untouched area of research. Puffery and sexuality are a natural fit for each other as both are forms of advertising manipulation. Future studies could examine how sex roles interact with puffery. For example, do exaggerated claims about appearance affect women differently than men. Additionally, the medium of study could be changed from print to television or radio. While perhaps more risky, puffery of more provocative ads would be another direction that this research could go.

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