

The Impact of Self Referencing on Lust Filled and Loving Advertising Effectiveness

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The term 'Sex Sells' is often used in advertising to represent the assumption that modern consumers are attracted to sexualised messages in advertising. This research looks closely at the way in which sex is cognitively processed by viewers of advertisements and what impact psychological concepts such as self concept and self-referencing have on the liking of an advertisement.

'Suggestive advertising' is a common term, often utilised to describe sexualised images of decorative models in advertisements that encompasses two distinctive advertising themes namely 'lust', which depicts a more sexualised interaction in an advertisement; versus 'love', which depicts a less sexual relationship, but still an intimate one. Past research has rarely distinguished between the categories, as love-themed advertisements have predominantly been categorized as 'sexual' (Huang,2004). This is perhaps surprising since research has also shown that 'romance' and 'love' are often dominant, underlying themes in lifestyle print magazines (Gill,2007). Gardyn & Fetto (2001) suggests it is not sexual imagery that sells magazines, but rather love/romance. This research therefore distinguishes between the two advertisement themes to explore and gain a deeper understanding into how these advertising appeals may influence consumer consumption behaviour differently.

Background

According to Stewart and Furse (1986), advertising attempts to "*create desire for the product without offering necessarily a specific product claim*" and the less functional purpose a product/brand carries (e.g. alcoholic drinks-Martini 2009 campaign), the more symbolic branding it tends to emphasize (Graeff,1996: Reichert & Lambiase,2003). Nevertheless, regardless of consumer's motivations to consume, advertising and symbolic brand/product consumption plays an increasing central role in consumers' lifestyles by acting as major socializing agents in influencing consumer identities (Dittmar,2008). Yet for brand promises to influence a consumer's sense of self, it must be congruent with their self-identity, which is developed from a wide array of sources including past experiences, self-perceptions, societal and cultural values (Batra & Homer,2004).

A person's identity is developed by storing context-specific information into separate cognitive structures whereby different mental nodes activate depending on the information filtered (Hogg & Vaughan,2005). This activation of different selves or self-schemas, occur when information filtered appeal to different aspects of self (Hogg & Vaughan,2005). So how does suggestive advertising appeal to a consumer? Do consumers relate to them - whereby these ads appeal to consumer's *actual*-self? Or, do consumers aspire to them - whereby suggestive advertisements appeal to consumers

ideal-self? And lastly, how does a person's sense of self and sexual identity affect their attitudes towards the brands depicted in these advertisements? (Baumeister,1999).

Examining how a consumer's sense of self, or self-concept, may influence affect and behavioural responses toward sexual advertisement imagery offers a deeper insight into self-concept theory, consumer consumption literature and the effects suggestive advertising may elicit. And as this research will present, a person's sense of identity strongly influences their response to suggestive advertising.

This research looks at the way in which Self-Referencing can impact consumers' evaluations of advertisements that use either lustful or loving content. In this study, Self-Referencing refers to the cognitive process of evaluating an ad and determining how well the ad relates to one's own self concept. Research has shown that self-referencing enhances product recall, evaluations and persuasion (Meyers-Levy & Peracchio,1996) as it creates elaborate memory encodings in a subjects mind (Kuiper & Rogers,1979).

Klohn and Luo (2003) support this finding by suggesting individuals are attracted to people similar to themselves and the effectiveness of a message depends on factors such as the familiarity, likeability and similarity to self (Ohanian,1990). This is yet further supported by Burnkrant and Unnava (1995) who found consumers who process an advertisement links the ad information to one's self which increases the elaboration of that advertised message. Advertisements therefore should address consumers directly by reminding them of past experiences, as this may invoke self-related cognitive processing and elaboration of the message arguments in the advertisement (Burnkrant and Unnava,1995).

A person's *sexual self-concept* identifies how a person sees themselves as a sexual being and is a critical self-schema dimension that influences and guides sexual emotions, affect, behaviour, attitudes and experiences (Reichert,2007: Andersen & Cyranowski,1994). Research has historically tested sexuality and sexual response behaviour from an external response stimuli rather than self-cognitive representations of sexuality (Andersen & Cyranowski,1994). Therefore, the majority of past research on sexuality has been considered from three main perspectives; individual physiological arousal perspective, pattern of sexual behaviour and attitudinal responses to sexual stimuli (Andersen & Cyranowski,1994.p.1079). As a result, a majority of past research have focused on testing its influence on sexual risk taking (Breakwall & Millward,1997); gender roles (Bem,1974) and sexual orientation (Berkey *et al*,1990).

Anderson and Cyranowski (1994) empirical research on sexual behaviour hypothesized a person's sexual self-concept is a critical dimension of a person's sexuality and sexual behaviour. The authors developed an extensive sexual-schema scale that, despite struggling with internal validity problems, has extended sexual self-concept literature (Hill,2007).

The authors suggest that depending on a person's positive or negative sexual self-concept, it strongly shapes their sense of sexuality, sexual liberalisation and sexual

behaviour whereby negative-self concept individuals tend to rate themselves with low levels of sexual arousal, desire and weak romantic relationship attachments, while positive-self concept individuals rate themselves positive to sexual cues and have greater liberal attitudes towards sexuality (Cyranowski & Andersen,1998: Andersen & Cyranowski,1994: Kuffel & Heiman,2006).

A person's level of sexual liberalisation therefore, strongly influences their attitude towards sex and the use of sexualised imagery in print advertising (Hendrick & Hendrick,1987). Therefore, the following can be hypothesized:

H₁: Participants who report High [Low] levels of self referencing towards an advertisement will subsequently show significantly higher [Lower] A_{Ad}, A_{Brand}, and Purchase Intentions regardless of whether the tone of the advertisement is lust filled or loving.

The following section outlines the method employed to test these hypotheses.

Method

This research employs a 2 (Advertisement Tone: Lust vs. Love) x 2 (Self Referencing: Low vs. High) between subjects full-factorial experimental design. A total of 201 students from a South Western British University volunteered to take part in the study.

The first independent variable of advertisement tone required two advertisements to be chosen; one with a lust filled tone while the other a more romantic, loving tone. The authors initially analysed 30 different advertisements that were deemed to be 'sexually suggestive' and categorised them as being either having a lust or love tone. From here, 30 postgraduate students were used to identify which advertisements were deemed to be most lust filled and most loving in tone, yet still be sexual in nature. From the pretest, two perfume advertisements were chosen to be used in the main study. The advertisements were for a major fragrance label and both advertisements contained perfumes designed for men and women to help avoid any inherent gender biases from choosing an advertisement only targeted at one sex. From the final sample, 100 participants received the love advertisement and 101 received the lust filled advertisement. The second independent variable of Self-Referencing was measured using Burnkrant and Unnava (1995) scale. Internal reliability for this scale was high ($\alpha = .92$). Figure 1 show the final advertisements used in the current study.

The dependent variables for this research are Attitude Towards the Model (A_{Ad}), Attitude Towards the Brand (A_{Brand}), and Purchase Intentions. Internal reliability analysis of the A_{Ad} scale showed a high internal reliability ($\alpha = .90$). A_{Brand} was measured using Mitchell and Olson's (1981) scale, which also reported a high internal reliability ($\alpha = .93$). Finally, Purchase Intentions (PI) was measured using MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch's (1986) scale and similarly reported a high internal reliability ($\alpha = .89$).

Age, Gender, Marital Status, Education Level and Attitudes Towards Sex were all used as covariates in the current study.

Figure 1: Lust Filled (Left) versus Loving (Right) Advertisements

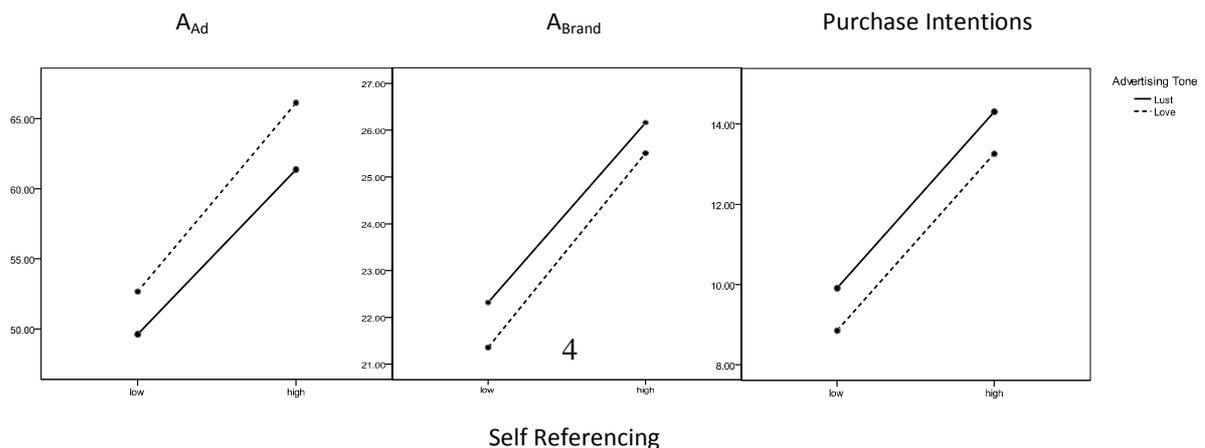


Analysis and Findings

A full factorial MANCOVA model was used to test the hypothesis. From the analysis it was shown that a significant main effect was found for Self-Referencing (Wilk's Lambda < .001) and Advertisement Tone (Wilk's Lambda = 0.03). Closer analysis showed that Self Referencing had a significant main effect on A_{Ad} ($F(1,201) = 48.59, p < .001$), A_{Brand} ($F(1,201) = 15.90, p < .001$) and PI ($F(1, 201) = 60.42, p < .001$). However, Advertising tone had a lesser effect with significance only showing for A_{Ad} ($F(1,201) = 5.08, p = .025$) and partial significance for PI ($F(1,201) = 3.76, p = .054$). A_{Brand} was insignificant for advertising tone ($F(1,201) = .70, p = .40$).

No interaction effect was reported for Self Referencing and Advertisement tone for A_{Ad} ($F(1,201) = .240, p = .625$); A_{Brand} ($F(1,201) = .03, p = .87$); or PI ($F(1,201) < .001, p = .99$). Figure 1 shows the results for the different effects found in the current study.

Figure 1: Impact of Self Referencing on A_{Ad} , A_{Brand} and Purchase Intentions



As it can be seen from Figure 1 it is clear that Self Referencing plays a major role in determining participants' A_{Ad} , A_{Brand} , and PI. Interestingly, this effect is far more crucial to the effectiveness of suggestive advertising than the level of sex in the advertising.

None of the demographic covariates, including gender and age, showed a significant effect in the current MANCOVA model. However, Attitudes Towards Sex showed that those who reported significantly more liberal perceptions towards sex reported significantly higher A_{Ad} ($F(1,201) = 3.60, p = .05$); A_{Brand} ($F(1,201) = 13.81, p < .001$); and PI ($F(1,201) = 15.41, p < .001$) for the lust filled advertisement versus the loving advertisement. This is consistent with the context of the study where a more liberal attitude towards sex would result in higher levels of self referencing towards advertisements which had a more sexual tone, such as those shown in the lust filled advertisements. The following section presents the discussion and the implications for the current study.

Discussion

This study shows the impact that Self Referencing has on determining the liking of suggestive advertising. Participants who show little personal relevance in the advertisements' tone showed little liking towards it. This was irrespective of the type of suggestion (love versus lust) and irrespective of demographic variables, such as age and gender. Overall, the research shows that both love based advertisements and lust filled advertisements can be effective, as long as they focus on a representation of the viewer's self concept. In this case, Self Referencing measures viewers' match up between the advertisement and their perceived actual self. Again, this is interesting given the use of sexual tone advertising can be used to focus on viewers' sense of ideal self. A key implication from this study is that the level of sexual content is likely to be unimportant, but rather how closely the sexual content matches the target market's sense of self. That is, the use of highly sexualised advertisements for a market where sexual liberation is low is unlikely to be seen favourably. Further research should investigate whether attitudes towards sex truly mediate the effects shown here, as the current study suggests. Future research should also investigate whether the effects are always positive as long as high self referencing exists or whether there comes a point where the level of sexual content becomes inappropriate, regardless of how closely it matches ones own sense of self.

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