

Does sex sell - adverts eye tracking study

Kristian Pentus
University of Tartu

Maria Ruusu
University of Tartu

Andres Kuusik
University of Tartu

Kerli Ploom
University of Tartu

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DOES SEX SELL – EYE-TRACKING GENDER STEREOTYPES IN ADVERTS

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to determine how using sexualized images in advertisements influences the preference and attention of consumers with a modern attitude towards sexualizing. We combined an eye-tracking study with a control question to measure how the general attitudes towards sexualizing mediated attention and preference. The results show that sexualized adverts did not catch more attention than non sexualized in the sample of young people, who have modern attitudes toward sexualizing. This effect is similar amongst both men and women and for advertisements depicting either male or female models. Sexual advert does not automatically catch attention faster.

Keywords: advertising, Eye-tracking, sexualization, gender stereotypes

Introduction

Consumers are exposed to 360 ads per day, but only 150-155 are noticed (Media Dynamics Inc. [MDI], 2014). These numbers, however, do not include various marketing messages or brand exposure. Because the markets are overcrowded with media, there is high competition among advertisements to stand out from the crowd (Pilelienė and Grigaliūnaitė, 2016).

Rayner, Miller and Rotello (2008) argue that the characteristics of advertisements affect people's attention. These elements include colour, font, slogans and illustrations such as pictures of models. Pilelienė and Grigaliūnaitė (2016, p. 489) suggest that "first visual impressions do often influence mid-and long-term human behaviour and are influenced by factors such as context."

There is considerable research on how gender roles are portrayed in different types of advertisements (Plakoyiannaki et al., 2008; Baxter, Kulczynski and Ilicic, 2014; Grover and Hundal, 2014; Matthes, Prieler and Adam, 2016). Furthermore, most of these articles focus on women in advertising and how women are usually portrayed as "decorations" or as "caretakers" more often than men (Grover and Hundal, 2014; Plakoyiannaki et al., 2008; Matthes, Prieler and Adam, 2016). Men are also portrayed as a "representation of traditional masculinity" (Baxter, Kulczynski and Ilicic, 2016, p. 971), although not as frequent as women in an advertisement.

People no longer prefer sexual adverts over non-sexual ones (Lull and Bushman, 2015; Haines, Deaux and Lofaro, 2016). Eye-tracking allows us to observe which type of adverts people look at first and the most. This viewing is much more related to subconscious cognitive processing and less continuous. Previous work has looked at how genders differ in their gaze behaviour (Yoon Min and Kun Chang, 2018; Kraines, Kelberer, and Wells, 2017; Rupp and Wallen, 2007). Far less has been done to see how people portray gender roles in advertisements and if these gaze behaviours differ between men and women.

This paper aims to determine how using sexualized images in advertisements influences the preference and attention of consumers with a modern attitude towards sexualizing. The authors wanted to determine what types of advertisements catch more attention (sexual or non-sexual ads), which advertisements are preferred and if general attitudes towards stereotypes could explain this. This article looks into the differences in gaze behaviour between adverts with sexualized pictures of models and non-sexual adverts.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Advertisements. Gender roles and stereotypes

Printed advertisements show ad messages and content with an effect on the consumer involvement (Pillai, Katsikeas and Presi, 2012; Schmitt, Tavassoli and Millard, 1993; Huhmann, Franke and Mothersbaugh, 2012; Fennis, Das and Franssen, 2012; Olsen, Pracejus and O'Guinn, 2012). Format meaning, for example, some colours in the ad, size of the ad, layout in the ad or headline of the ad. Ad content should include all three elements: imagery as visual information, verbal information (body-copy) and the brand name (Schmitt, Tavassoli and Millard, 1993). The headline and visual image should capture attention first, then body copy informs and influences buying behaviour, and brand names describe the company and the product they are selling (Kurtz and Boone, 2015).

Regarding advertisement effectiveness in capturing attention, eye-tracking research has shown that advertisement that consists of both imagery and text is more effective (O'malley, Latimer and Berenbaum, 2011) than those that do not include both. These pictures also affect how people interpret the advert and its message. According to the scholars' Ford and LaTour

(1996), the representation of gender in ads can impact the corporate image they give consumers. Therefore, it is essential to comprehend the effects of such content as gender roles influence the viewer.

Previous literature has shown gender roles portrayed in different advertisements (Plakoyiannaki et al., 2008; Baxter, Kulczynski, and Ilicic, 2016; Grover and Hundal, 2014; Matthes, Prieler and Adam, 2016). Notably, social scientists have been interested in using precisely advertisements in their studies to analyze gender stereotypes (Milner and Collins, 2000). Some scholars argue that it is the outcome of the "feminist movement" that focuses on bringing equality between women and men in media or critical approaches toward traditional gender categories (male and female), where LGBTQ+ people are omitted (Araüna, Dhaenens and Van Bauwel, 2017). Stereotypes are defined in different ways, but based on Hilton and Hippel (1996), the authors consider stereotypes as "beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviours of members of certain groups". A distinctive stereotype that is often used in advertisements is a gender stereotype.

Tartaglia and Rollero (2015) define gender stereotypes as a "set of beliefs concerning attributes that are supposed to differentiate women and men." Gender roles can make people believe that they are only correct for one social or professional role. Thus, they often specify which role is more suitable for each gender (firefighter, nurse) (Eagly and Karau, 2002). So this also has affected how female and male models are pictured in advertisements. Many researchers have studied female roles in advertisements (Grover and Hundal, 2014; Plakoyiannaki et al., 2008; Matthes, Prieler and Adam, 2016) and have noticed it undervalues women's roles on a professional level but also often sexually portrays women.

Women are primarily shown in decorative roles or family-oriented roles such as decoration for their beauty or as housewives (Grau and Zotos, 2016). A decorative role denotes a passive model which aims to use sexual stimulus to attract consumers to buy goods or services (Grover and Hundal, 2014). Men are commonly shown as more independent, with authority and in professional roles with no regard for physical attributes (Reichert and Carpenter, 2004). However, Baxter and Kulczynski and Ilicic (2016, p. 971) argue that also male gender roles in advertising are often seen as a "representation of traditional masculinity" or as a "sex object."

In addition, researchers have shown that advertising on printed ads impacts people's perceptions and their body image (Plakoyiannaki et al., 2008). For example, Kilbourne (2001) argues that the depiction of women in advertisements can lower their confidence and support health issues like eating disorders. Furthermore, Pollay and Gallagher (1990) point out that over the years, the imagery of advertisements has had a significant impact on how stereotypes are justified amongst larger communities.

In advertising, gender is a "primary segmentation variable in developing marketing strategies and defining target groups" (as cited in Matthes, Prieler and Adam, 2016, p. 314; Milner and Collins, 2000, p. 67). In addition, so-called "gender advertising" takes advantage of gender roles and gender-specific fantasies to customize it for a specific audience (Grover and Hundal, 2014). Plakoyiannaki *et al.* (2008) concluded that women in advertising have very stereotypical roles despite the type of audience: for female- or male audiences, women were portrayed as decorative, dependent and non-traditional roles, and for the general audience, women were portrayed as housewives or equal to men. Furthermore, scholars Latour (1990) and Lass and Hart (2010) argue that male audiences accept stereotypical roles such as female nudity better in advertisements than female audiences. Hence, Wyllie, Carlson and Rosenberger's (2015) research shows that women react more positively to mild-sexual stimuli than explicit sexual stimuli, where females are depicted in a highly sexual way. However, even though women and

men both get recognition for their physical appearances, women get evaluated by their looks (Langlois et al., 2000). Content analysis from Lass and Hart (2010) also demonstrated an increase in explicit sexual stimuli of women across the printed advertisement.

According to Deaux and Lewis (1984), there are four gender stereotypes: trait descriptors (emotional, self-confident), physical characteristics (height, weight), role behaviours (taking care of finance, taking care of children) and occupational role (firefighter, housewife). Occupational status and physical attributes are the most stereotypical components of all the components (Tartaglia and Rollero, 2015). Nevertheless, Deaux and Lewis (1984) believe that only physical appearance is the most dominant gender stereotype, which is why it is the most "potent source" of stereotype. Therefore, the gender role explored in this research is the physical appearance of females and males. More specifically, the authors look at portraying sexual appearance vs non-sexual appearance.

1.2 Sexualizing hedonic products advertisements

Brands are using gender roles to position their products so that consumers feel that the product enhances their sex-related benefits (Veloutsou, and Ahmed, 2008). The research from Plakoyiannaki and Zotos (2009) emphasizes that women have been depicted differently in product, hedonic and utilitarian product categories. Hedonic products are mainly related to sensory attributes that generate consummatory effective gratification, whereas utilitarian products are related to functional attributes that generate fulfilment of instrumental needs (Crowley, Spangenberg and Hughes, 1992). Women are portrayed as decorative when advertised with hedonic products, while advertisements consisting of utilitarian products involve female gender roles such as non-traditional, traditional and decorative (Plakoyiannaki and Zotos, 2009).

Matthes, Prieler and Adam (2016) argue that globally, women are more often than men linked with beauty, personal and cleaning products in advertisements. However, men in advertisements usually sell technological products or leisure products (Furnham and Farragher, 2000). Hence, this research's product category lime lighted focuses on more hedonic products.

Women in advertisements are portrayed as decorative, dependent, non-traditional roles or as a housewife or equal to men depending on the audience (Grover and Hundal, 2014; Plakoyiannaki et al., 2008; Matthes, Prieler and Adam, 2016; Grau and Zotos, 2016). Also, men are portrayed in masculine roles to evoke the sexual stimulus of consumers (Baxter, Kulczynski, and Ilicic, 2016). However, men are represented in advertising in more modern roles than women (Grau and Zotos, 2016). The male audience accepts female stereotypes such as nudity more than the female audience (Latour, 1990; Lass and Hart, 2010). However, women seem to have positive attitudes toward mild-sexual stimuli in ads, and they describe the ads as romantic and sensual (Wyllie, Carlson, and Rosenberger, 2015). According to previous research, physical gender attributes are used in advertisements because they most dominantly capture consumers' attention (Tartaglia and Rollero, 2015; Deaux and Lewis, 1984). The research by Pollay and Gallagher (1990) shows that advertisements considerably impact stereotypes and what is accepted in society.

Women nowadays are more prominent in their professional roles and, already at a younger age, are performing better than boys in some areas of education (Adema, 2013), but female characters in advertisements do not mirror the contemporary gender roles (Plakoyiannaki and Zotos, 2009). In comparison, traditional male gender roles have moved to represent more modern roles of men in past few years (Grau and Zotos, 2016). For example, men are portrayed as spending time with their children and are shown in more egalitarian roles. People continue to stereotype women and men based on specific characteristics. (Haines, Deaux and Lofaro, 2016).

The scholars Haines, Deaux and Lofaro (2016) argue that despite the change in attitudes and acceptance of women and men in modern, non-traditional roles, people perceived gender differences differently 30 years ago.

The Public's perception of gender roles and sexuality seemingly changes toward gender neutrality in advertising (Haines, Deaux and Lofaro, 2016). For example, nowadays, ads that overly sexualize women can bring negative attitudes and feelings amongst some consumers (Grover and Hundal, 2014).

2. Research methodology, sample and used advertisements

The research methodology consisted of an eye-tracking study to measure gaze behaviour and a control question to measure a person's general attitude towards sexualizing. Since the authors are interested in understanding how sexual stimuli affect attention and gaze patterns, eye tracking was used to measure the eye movements of the participants. A significant number of researchers use eye-tracking to see differences between genders (Yoon Min and Kun Chang, 2018; Kraines, Kelberer, and Wells, 2017; Rupp and Wallen, 2007). However, there are fewer eye tracking researchers about gender roles in advertisements and how these roles are perceived differently amongst men and women. Twenty perfume advertisements were selected, from which five portrayed male models sexually and five portrayed male models non-sexual way.

Similarly, five ads were selected with female models portrayed sexually, and another 5 portrayed a female model in a non-sexual way. Two non-sexual male and two non-sexual female adverts were selected as neutral pictures. For example of images, see (Appendix A).

The two visuals were placed on the far edges of the screen (resolution: 1920x1080). Hence, participants saw six frames of male ads and six frames of female ads in random order. Tobii X2-60 remote eye-tracker was used, and the results were analyzed using Tobii Pro Studio. Before the research, a control question was used to determine attitudes towards gender ideology amongst participants. The question used for this purpose was, "is it O.K. for the husband to take care of the kids and the wife to work" (as cited in Baxter, Kulczynski, and Ilicic, 2016, p. 975). Only people who answered yes to this question and had more egalitarian and modern views towards gender roles were recruited for the eye-tracking research.

The general attitude towards gender roles can be measured among six categories (Davis and Greenstein, 2009). For this study, only one question was looked at, which addresses one category, "Working woman and relationship quality," directly and one category, "Belief in separate gendered spheres" indirectly (Davis and Greenstein, 2009). The sample consisted of N= 22 participants, 11 women and 11 men, aged 17 to 31 (Mean = 21,86). The sample consisted of 11 different nationalities: Finland, Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Russia, Ukraine, Croatia, Czech, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Japan. An important side note is that attitudes towards gender stereotypes do not vary between different nationalities in this sample.

3. Eye-Tracking research results and generalized findings

Eye-tracking variables time to first fixation (TFF) and total fixation duration (TFD) were used. The overall TFF of sexual advertisements are 1,1405, and for non-sexual advertisements, 1,04. This means that it took on average 1,1405 seconds for the participants to direct their gaze at a sexual ad and 1,04 seconds to gaze at non-sexual ads, which means that in general, subjects of the sample looked at non-sexual advertisements first.

According to theory, it could have been predicted that participants would look at sexual, stereotypical ads first. However, the TFF data shows that, on average, non-sexual ads caught attention faster amongst participants. Additional analysis was done on which side of the frame

(left or right) sexual or non-sexual adverts were placed. The ads on the left side, in general, are noticed substantially faster than the ads on the right side. However, since the subjects of the sample are used to read from left to right, this could be why left ads are viewed first. In our design, we placed the same advert on the left for half of the sample and on the right for the other half of the sample. This mediated the bias to look left is then evened out of the results.

Sexual advertisements where male models are portrayed sexually and decorative are looked at first compared to non-sexual male ads. Sexual ads are noticed in 1.22 seconds, compared to non-sexual ads seen by men (1.19 sec). Sexual ads were noticed by women in 1,01 seconds compared to 093 seconds for non-sexual ads. Interestingly, the same pattern does not exist between the female sexual and non-sexual ads. Subjects of the sample have mostly looked at non-sexual female adverts first. However, also, in this case, there is an exception. Shalimar (sexual ad) has a shorter average time to first fixation (0,97) whereas, in the case of Valentino (non-sexual ad) average TFF time is 1,08. This means that participants have looked at the Shalimar advertisement first. The fastest looked ad was a non-sexual female model ad from Montblanc.

There are no significant differences in time to the first fixation when analyzing neutral frames of female or male models. There is only a slight difference in times in the case of neutral advertisements for males (Horizon versus Trussardi). Trussardi advert caught attention faster (1,095 seconds), yet, the Horizon ad's average TFF time was not too distinctive (1,125 seconds). Moreover, there were no apparent differences in time for the neutral ad pair of females compared to sexual vs non-sexual advertisement frames. The Repetto ad was looked at 0,02 seconds faster than the Elixir ad.

There are no significant differences between genders. Both genders looked at non-sexual ads first. Males participants noticed non-sexual ads in 1,1898 seconds on average, while female participants noticed the ads in 0,9306 seconds. Although, women noticed non-sexual ads faster than men did. However, women also noticed sexual ads faster than men did. It took 1,0138 seconds for women to notice sexual ads, and for the men, 1,2147 seconds.

The total fixation duration for sexual advertisements was 39,24 seconds. For non-sexual ads, TFD is 46,58, which means that these ads looked the longest. There were no expressive differences between observation times if the ads were pointed on the left or right side of the frame.

The results showed that all the non-sexual ads had been looked at longer than sexual ads. Neutral ads (Trussard=58,7 and Repetto=55,02) were looked at the longest. During the eye-tracking research, participants chose which advertisement they preferred more. Participants acknowledged that it was more challenging to choose between neutral ads because they look so similar. That is why they probably looked at the ads the longest.

Non-sexual advertisements were observed longer than sexual ads amongst women and men. Non-sexual ads were observed on average for 2,453 seconds amongst men and women for 1,893 seconds. Sexual ads were looked at 2,078 seconds amongst men and women for 1,644 seconds. Therefore, there are no noticeable differences between men and women. Although, generally, men looked at both types of ads longer than women did. In addition to this, all participants preferred non-sexual advertisements more than sexual ones.

Overall, non-sexual ads had more influence than sexual ads regarding time to first fixation (TFF) and total fixation duration (TFD). Non-sexual ads were noticed faster and observed longer. I. However, sexual male ads were noticed faster than non-sexual male ads. On the other hand, non-sexual ads for females were noticed faster than sexual ads. However, both ad types had

exceptions. In the case of total fixation duration, non-sexual ads were observed longer regardless if the advertisements contained female or male models.

There was no apparent difference between male and female participants. Both genders, on average, noticed non-sexual ads first, and women noticed non-sexual ads faster than men. Moreover, total fixation duration did not show substantial differences between women and men. Men observed both advertisement types longer: sexual ads for about 2,078 seconds and non-sexual ads for 2,453 seconds. At the same time, women used less time gazing at the ads (Av.Sexual=1,644 and Av.Non-sexual=1,893).

Conclusions

The purpose of advertising is to influence customers so that the advertiser can inform, persuade, and remind consumers to affect their purchasing decisions. Therefore, advertisers have exploited sexual and gender roles in advertisements throughout the years to capture attention. Previous studies have shown (Grover and Hundal, 2014; Plakoyiannaki et al., 2008; Matthes, Prieler and Adam, 2016; Grau and Zotos, 2016) that females in advertisements are frequently portrayed sexually, decoratively or traditionally as housewives. Although, men, too, are often portrayed by their physical characteristics, such as being muscular and tall (Baxter, Kulczynski and Ilicic, 2016). Based on previous research, it could have been expected that sexual advertisements which try to attract sexual stimulus would catch attention better. This logic is seen in adverts for hedonic products, which were applicable and often used sexualized images of models in their adverts.

Nevertheless, based on the eye-tracking results, non-sexual advertisements mainly capture attention faster than sexual ads. In addition, non-sexual ads are observed longer than sexual ads. The results for the male and female participants are more or less the same, so there is no significant difference between the two genders of the participants. The results are also more or less the same with either the male or female model shown in the advert. This altogether means that these outcomes are not compatible with the results of the previous studies. Sexual stimuli are not more eye-catching compared to non-sexual.

Interestingly, perfume products generally were not noticed in the ads. This is crucial information because, for an advertiser to sell its products, the product has to be observed in the ad. The model's face, body, and text got more attention than the perfume product and brand itself in this research. Although, if products were placed in front of the model's body, then the products were recognized, especially in sexual ads. To conclude, instead of attracting consumers with sexual content, these brands should try to attract consumers to the product to advertise it effectively.

However, like Haines, Deaux and Lofaro (2016) mentioned, attitudes towards gender stereotypes have changed and are more negatively perceived nowadays than centuries ago. The findings of this research support these pieces of evidence. Non-stereotypical adverts were preferred more than sexual advertisements amongst women and men. The most preferred adverts were compared to the sexual ads that portrayed male and female models as highly sexual. Finding out why the time to first fixation (TFF) shows that sexual ads which include male models are noticed first would offer a clear direction for further studies. Additionally, how consumers' preferences toward advertisements affect their purchasing decisions could provide helpful information.

It appears that young people's attitudes alongside their preferences are changing; what was thought to attract attention before does not function as well today. Gender roles in

advertisements, although, have not changed. Therefore, more research is needed on gender roles and stereotypes, especially the sexualized portrayal of models in advertisements.

The sexualized adverts do not catch more attention of people with a modern view towards stereotypes, nor are they noticed faster. Also, sexualized advertisements can hinder the brand image as non-sexual advertisements are preferred instead. The results for implications and practice are as follows.

- Non-sexual adverts were noticed faster compared to sexualized adverts.
- Non-sexual ads were more preferred than sexual ads.
- Non-sexual ads were looked at longer compared to non-sexual ads.
- There are no significant differences between male and female participants in terms of neither preference or gaze behaviour.

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Appendix A. Examples of used sexual and non-sexual ads

