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# Does sexual-stimuli intensity and sexual self-schema influence female consumers' reactions toward sexualised advertising? An Australian perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Limited empirical research has investigated the impact of varying intensity levels of sexual-stimuli in print advertising on consumer behaviour together with the influence of sexual self-schema (SSS). Therefore, an exploratory experimental study was conducted with Australian women that examined the influence of explicit (high) versus mild (low) sexual stimuli intensity in print advertisements, and positive (high) versus negative (low) sexual self-schema levels on their reactions toward sex appeals. The results suggest that mild sexual-stimuli intensity has a more positive influence on women's attitudes and intended purchase behaviours, and that SSS has a limited influence. Further analysis suggests that the dimensionality of the SSS construct has shown divergent findings to prior U.S. centric research, calling for further studies to scrutinise the construct beyond this advertising context. Practitioner implications and future research directions are discussed.

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## CHINESE ABSTRACT

有限的经验主义研究已探讨了平面广告中不同的性刺激强度水平对消费者行为的影响以及性自我图式 (SSS) 的影响。因此, 对澳大利亚女性进行了一项探索性的实验式研究, 考察了平面广告中露骨 (高度) 的和轻微的 (低度) 性刺激强度, 以及肯定型 (高度) 和否定型 (低度) 性自我图式水平, 相比较之下对她们对性吸引力的反应的影响。结果表明轻微的性刺激强度对女性的态度和预期购买行为有更正面的影响, 而性自我图式的影响则有限。进一步的分析表明性自我图式概念的维度表现出与先前美国的中心研究相分歧的研究成果, 需要在此广告背景以外进行更进一步的研究以仔细考察这个概念。[同时也]探讨了从业者启示与进一步的研究指示。

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## 1. Introduction

Sex appeals remain a common advertising technique used in mainstream media as a mechanism to draw consumer attention (Hyllegard et al., 2010) and breaking through the clutter of the media environment (Putrevu, 2008). It has also become a powerful tool for practitioners in positioning their brand as making the consumer sexually attractive, with propositions of sex-related benefits highlighted to the brand's purchaser (Reichert and Alvaro, 2001; Veloutsou and Ahmed, 2005), which is the norm in the promotion of a wide range of female consumer products (Reichert and Carpenter, 2004; Reichert et al., 2011). As a result of changing moral standards, a blurred line is emerging between sexual stimuli women perceived as appealing and sexually stimulating (i.e. mild sexual

stimuli) and sexual stimuli they perceived as unethical and degrading (Advertising Standards Bureau, 2013, Reichert et al., 2011) which brings into question its advertising effectiveness.

Given these emerging developments, advertising practitioners utilising sex appeals need to pay closer attention to, and ensure greater scrutiny of, the intensity of the sexual stimuli employed in an advertisement and the aspects of consumer behaviour that best induce women's favourable reactions towards sex appeals (Reichert et al., 2011). Reflecting on research in the domain of sexual stimuli intensity in advertising, scholars have particularly noted that research is deficient on the effects of women's reactions to varying sexual stimuli intensity (mild versus explicit) in print advertising in light of their sexual personality, which influences the underlying variations in their responses to sex appeals (Black et al., 2010; Reichert et al., 2011). This being the case, research is needed to optimise the configuration and targeting of sex appeal advertisements that are congruent to a practitioner's brand and product category, in order to maximise advertising effectiveness and achieve communication objectives.

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Beyond distinctions driven by sexual-stimuli intensity, less is known about personality concepts that may influence reactions towards sex appeals. To better understand women who are more receptive to sexual stimuli in advertising, researchers have begun to investigate the role of sexual personality variables, such as sexual self-schema (SSS, e.g. Davies et al., 2007; Reichert et al., 2011), with findings from these empirical studies underscoring the complexity associated in the processing of sex appeals.

Addressing these concerns and gaps in the advertising literature, a replication approach is made use of to broaden the effects of sexual stimuli intensity advanced in the work of LaTour and Henthorne (1993), and Sexual Self-Schema in the work of Reichert et al. (2007) by applying the conceptualisations and original SSS scale to an Australian female sample. Thus, this replication targets two main objectives: First it examines the effect of sexual stimuli intensity (mild versus explicit) and incorporates sexual self-schema (SSS, how they perceive their sexuality) into the research model to examine the role and extent to which a woman's SSS influences their reactions towards sexual stimuli in print advertising. The second objective of the replication is to expand the knowledge surrounding the SSS scale by contrasting the factor structure of the scale to the original findings (Andersen and Cyranowski, 1994).

A replication approach was chosen as replications are regarded as integral, and an important component of scientific method for a discipline (Easley et al., 2013; Hubbard and Armstrong, 1994). This approach is in line with research in the domain of marketing and social sciences, as it plays a vital role in contributing to the establishment of external validity, by enabling the extension of empirical findings to other populations and thus advances knowledge accumulation (Easley et al., 2000; Hubbard and Lindsay, 2012; Uncles et al., 1994). Further, replication studies help to establish boundary conditions for theories where the generalisation will fail to hold (Hubbard and Lindsay, 2012; Lynch, 1999), which leads to a 'higher level' of understanding (Bass, 1995) and the advancement of science. Replications involving modifications are preferable, such as those by different researchers at different times and locations (Easley et al., 2000; Hochwarter et al., 2011; Monroe, 1992). In this study, we focused on expanding our knowledge base by employing a different national sample and product category.

Thus, this research aims to contribute to the body of advertising research on sex appeals and provide theoretical and managerial guidance in order to optimise the targeting, configuration and use of sex appeals as a device in advertising efforts. As such, the article initially reviews the relevant literature in the area. The methodology is then described, followed by the findings of the study. Finally, this article examines the implications, limitations and future research directions.

## 2. A review of the literature

### 2.1. Sex appeals in advertising

Issues of magazines (e.g. *Rolling Stone*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Cleo*) not only include stories of sexual escapades, but the covers and advertisements used throughout these publications also demonstrate models in various stages of undress and sexually suggestive positions (Reichert et al., 2011). For example, in 2015 musician Rita Ora is featured in a cleavage bearing swimsuit on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, while in 2014 actor Neil Patrick Harris appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* wearing only a top hat and bowtie. Further, research has indicated an increase in the use of sex appeals targeted at women (American Psychological Association, 2010), with more female models appearing nude and more couples illustrated in positions suggesting sexual intercourse in advertising (Reichert, 2007; Zimmerman and Dahlberg, 2008). Most recently conducted content analyses also indicate an increase in explicit sexual stimuli

across consumer-oriented print (Lass and Hart, 2004), television (Reichert, 2007) and online (Peter and Valkenburg, 2011) media. For example, 41% of women in television media wore revealing clothing, with an equal amount depicted partially or completely nude (Downs and Smith, 2010), 59% of music videos feature female-related sexual stimuli (Zhang et al., 2010), and 43% of women were explicitly dressed in magazine advertising (Reichert and Carpenter, 2004).

There is a considerable body of literature in the area of sex appeals, with much of this research focused on the increasing occurrence and explicitness of sexual stimuli within advertising (e.g. Reichert and Carpenter, 2004), ethical concerns (e.g. Blair et al., 2006) and the influential power linked to sex appeals (e.g. Simpson et al., 1996). Furthermore, this body of research has maintained a heavy emphasis on investigating the effects of sex appeals through an analysis of explicit sexual stimuli (e.g. nudity and sexual acts) versus non-sexual stimuli (Dudley, 1999; Reichert, 2002), with these studies reporting inconsistencies regarding its effectiveness in both women's attitudinal and behavioural reactions (Reichert et al., 2011; Yan et al., 2010). For instance, one stream of empirical research in the area of sex appeals has indicated that, in comparison to non-sexualised advertising, sexualised advertising generated significantly more favourable attitudes and intentions to purchase (Reichert and Alvaro, 2001; Severn et al., 1990).

Conversely, another stream of research has indicated that women exhibited greater tension and significantly less favourable attitudes towards the advertisement and brand (LaTour and Henthorne, 1993) due to the advertisement's perceived offensiveness and unethical disposition (Gould, 1994). These findings are further exemplified in this literature stream, whereby sex appeals are argued to enhance the level of sexual preoccupation in consumers' minds (Blair et al., 2006), whilst also challenging their sense of decency, due to the stimulus's perceived pornographic nature (Pollay, 1986). Consequently, the attention given to the consumer brand and the advertisement may be hindered by the negative consumer reactions towards the use of sex appeals. However, prior studies in advertising have failed to view the spectrum constituting sex appeals as varying from narrow to broad, with the narrow composed of imagery that explicitly involves the use of cheapening sex, nudity and objectification of women [explicit sexual stimuli] and the broad including sexual reference [mild sexual stimuli] that were perceived as sensual rather than explicit (c.f. Advertising Standards Bureau, 2013; Reichert et al., 2011). On this basis, difficulties emerge in the translating of women's reactions of sexualised stimuli towards varying sexual stimuli intensities, specifically milder intensities of sexual stimuli (i.e. sensual and sexually stimulating imagery), which is also a prevalent technique used in advertising. As such, what is unclear are the effects that mild sexual stimuli in advertising has on a woman's consumer behaviour, with limited empirical work (e.g. Dahl et al., 2009; Reichert et al., 2011) having explored the influence of explicit versus mild sexual stimuli on women's reactions. Arguably, then, there is the need to improve theoretical understanding in this area in order to maximise the effective use of sex appeals in advertising that work towards minimising the negative effects associated with sex appeals that are perceived as inappropriate.

Relevant to improving the understanding of sex appeal effectiveness, a stream of research in the area of sexual psychology has identified that the belief and intentions held by women towards sexual relationships assists in their evaluation of sexual stimuli in advertising and media (Amyx and Amyx, 2011). Whilst women may have a variety of motives for having sex (e.g. fun, boredom and escape), practitioner and scholarly studies suggest that relationships have a large role to play in terms of sexual intimacy and fulfilment (PRNewswire, 2013). In the scholarly literature, the beliefs and intentions held by women towards sexual activities are often based upon the prevalence of a relationship, with ideals of intimacy and commitment a key factor in their decision to enter into sexual relationships

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