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The influence of mating goal activation and gender differences on the evaluation of advertisements containing sexual words

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the impact of humans' mating motivation on their attitudes toward and recall of advertising that contains words with sexual connotations (e.g., "Sexton Plumbing" and "We Sell Boxes"). Due to gender differences based on evolution-based and socialization-based approaches, this research predicts differential evaluations between men and women for advertising that contains words with sexual connotations. The results of two empirical studies reveal that men in a mating mindset condition show more positive attitudes toward advertisements containing words with sexual connotations than do men in the control condition. In contrast, a different pattern is evident for women. Women in a mating mindset show similar attitudes toward such advertisements compared to women in the control condition. A similar pattern was also found for the recall of advertisements.

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1. Background

Imagine that you are walking on the street and you see a sign that reads, "We Sell Boxes." Did you automatically perceive the last three letters of the word "boxes" as "sex"? In ordinary situations, most people would not interpret the sign's message in this way. This may be because the sexual word appears in the context of an advertisement inadvertently. Another possibility is that this advertisement is a common one, which people see every day. If this is the case, when will people exhibit bias toward advertisements containing sexual words? Furthermore, are there gender differences in how such words are perceived?

Over the past decade, research on the effects of sex in advertising has focused heavily on gender-based attitudes and reactions toward the use of explicit sexual appeals in advertising. Although these appeals succeed in grabbing marketers' attention, in reality people view ordinary advertisements containing sexual words (e.g., "Sexton Plumbing," "Chocolate Kisses," and "We Sell Boxes") more often than explicit sexual stimuli in advertisements. These ordinary advertisements convey their original meaning (e.g., Sexton as the surname of a person; boxes as a container), but it is possible for people to perceive a sexual meaning in some situations. We believe that this is an important issue because people's biased interpretations could influence their attitudes toward some products or company reputations.

The major goal of the present research is to examine the differences between men's and women's attitudes about ordinary

advertisements containing words with sexual connotations. In detail, compared to the majority of advertising that employs sexual appeals mainly via visual cues such as nudity (Reichert, 2002), the present research focuses on advertising using subtle and verbal representations of sexual cues. To the best of our knowledge, the present paper is the first to examine the mating motivation effect in the context of advertisements containing words with sexual connotations.

The present research also has important implications for researchers and marketers, given that prior research has examined attitudes toward sexual imagery in advertisements (Alexander and Judd, 1978; Dahl et al., 2009; Davies et al., 2007; LaTour, 1990; LaTour and Henthorne, 1994; Peterson and Kerin, 1977; Sengupta and Dahl, 2008; Vohs et al., 2013). On the other hand, the present research will examine attitudes involving sexual text (words) in advertisements, an area that has not been undertaken in prior research. There are a few articles investigating sexual words in advertising (please refer to Reichert, 2002). However, most articles have investigated the effect of sexual words with other sexual stimuli, such as the sexual image (e.g., Reichert et al., 2007) or have focused on gender differences in the interpretation of words (e.g., Rozin et al., 2012). To the best of our knowledge, no previous research has investigated the pure stimuli of sexual words in advertising.

From a theoretical perspective, the present study extends evolutionary psychology research by examining the moderating role of mating motivation in attitude formation toward ordinary advertisements containing words with sexual connotations. The reason we have used mating motivation, instead of experimental tools employed in prior research to examine the effects of sex in advertising, is that mating motivation is more directly related to sexual constructs. For instance, Sengupta and Dahl (2008) and Vohs et al. (2013) manipulated cognitive load in their experiments to evoke individuals'

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gut-level affective response (thin slice processing). However, it is possible that the mating prime is more directly related to sexual constructs and could elicit a stronger affect. To support this argument, recent studies have shown the strong impact of mating motivation on various domains of behaviors, such as purchase intentions for luxury goods (Griskevicius et al., 2007), the acceptance of brand extensions (Monga and Gürhan-Canli, 2012), preference for pro-environmental green products (Griskevicius et al., 2010) and creativity (Griskevicius et al., 2006b). This argument will be discussed further in the next section of this paper.

2. Conceptual development

2.1. Gender differences in the perception of advertisements using sexual appeals

Sexual appeals in advertisements have attracted a great deal of attention from researchers over the past decade (Alexander and Judd, 1978; Dahl et al., 2009; Davies et al., 2007; Griffitt and Kaiser, 1978; LaTour, 1990; LaTour and Henthorne, 1994; Oliver and Hyde, 1993; Orth et al., 2010; Peterson and Kerin, 1977; Sengupta and Dahl, 2008; Vohs et al., 2013), and their studies have yielded mixed messages, especially for gender differences in evaluating advertisements with sexual appeals. Earlier research has shown that both men and women dislike explicit sexual imagery in advertisements, as many people perceive the use of sex in advertisements to be unethical, resulting in negative evaluations of the advertising (LaTour and Henthorne, 1994; Peterson and Kerin, 1977). However, more recent research has started to demonstrate positive attitudes toward such advertisements, especially under spontaneous evaluation conditions, in that men like explicit sexual imagery in advertising more than women (Dahl et al., 2009; Sengupta and Dahl, 2008). Sengupta and Dahl (2008) argue that this result occurs due to “thin slice” processing, which is a meaningful gender difference that can only be obtained under circumstances that evoke spontaneous affective reactions (vs. deliberate cognitions). Therefore, mixed results for gender differences in evaluating sexual appeals in advertising could be attributed to many factors. One of these factors might be different evaluation modes, in that men generally express their negative evaluation toward advertising in a deliberate response mode (LaTour and Henthorne, 1994), whereas their evaluation is more positive in the cognitively busy condition or the thin slice response mode (Dahl et al., 2009).

The key mechanism underlying the difference between men's and women's attitudes toward explicit sexual stimuli in advertising involves gender-based beliefs about sexual relationships (see Putrevu, 2001, and Buss, 2012, for details). In particular, this gender difference may be explained by two different models: socialization and evolution.

First of all, from a socialization-based perspective, men tend to value sexual intercourse as light recreation and emphasize its pleasurable, fun and physical aspects (Carroll et al., 1985; Hill, 2002). On the other hand, women perceive sexual intercourse as a much more serious activity. Specifically, women consider love, commitment, intimacy, and trust as prerequisites of sexual relationships (Carroll et al., 1985; Cohen and Shotland, 1996; Hill, 2002). A study by Cohen and Shotland (1996) showed that 20% of women were less likely to have a sexual relationship without emotional involvement. On the other hand, 66% of men were not concerned about emotional closeness or physical attraction. Further, Carroll et al. (1985) found that 85% of women required an emotional attachment before participating in a sexual relationship, whereas 61% of men did not.

From an evolution-based perspective, women and men have different parental investment strategies. In terms of biological factors, women have more to lose than men. For instance, men have more

plentiful sperm compared to the number of eggs that women have (women can produce only one egg per month). Moreover, women have to carry babies for nine months. During this period, women invest a great deal of resource, suffer psychological stress and physical pain, as well as bearing the risk of losing the baby (Buss, 1989; Trivers, 1972). As a consequence, women are more selective in terms of choosing their potential mates, and thus show negative responses toward sexual relationships without commitment and intimacy (Dahl et al., 2009; Sengupta and Dahl, 2008). In contrast, men have the biological desire to reproduce their genes as much as possible. Therefore, men are more likely to participate in sexual relationships without any emotional involvement (Buss, 1989).

In summary, both socialization- and evolution-based approaches draw a similar conclusion, that men show more positive attitudes toward explicit sexual appeals in advertisements than do women. Apart from theoretical support, prior empirical findings support this underlying mechanism. For instance, LaTour (1990) finds that women perceive explicit female nudity in print advertising more negatively compared to men. Sengupta and Dahl (2008) examined the difference between genders in regard to perceptions of gratuitous sexual appeals in advertising. In comparison with a control advertising condition (a mountain scene), women perceived explicitly sexual advertising more negatively than did men. However, women's negative attitudes about explicitly sexual stimuli are attenuated when the sexual stimuli were associated with valuable resources (e.g., expensive product price and relationship commitment; Dahl et al., 2009; Vohs et al., 2013).

If the previous reasoning is correct, it implies that when women view an ordinary advertisement containing words with a sexual connotation, their negative attitudes should decrease, or they should even show positive attitudes, since the sexual appeal is very subtle. For example, “Sexton” contains various meanings. Some people might perceive the word as a surname, whereas other people might perceive it as a word referring to an official in a church in charge of the edifice and ringing the bell. Thus, people may be less likely to perceive the word “Sexton” as a sexually related word due to cognitive accessibility.

However, we could argue that when the mating motivation is active, it could boost cognitive accessibility, and thus, both men and women would be more likely to perceive ordinary advertising text as having sexually related meanings. To support this argument, Davies et al. (2007) noted that “a prime can enhance the accessibility of stored information, which in turn may bias the interpretation of subsequently presented information. In this sense, all priming can result in biased processing” (p. 80). Further, Griskevicius et al. (2006b) argued that a mating prime activates the reproduction mindset. Thus, both men and women desire to maximize their reproduction when they are in a mating mindset. Along this notion, McKenzie-Mohr and Zanna (1990) found that men who viewed a pornographic video recalled the physical features of the female experimenter in more detail and positioned themselves closer to the experimenter than did men under other conditions. Therefore, based on the above reasons, we will examine the role of mating motivation on attitudes toward advertising that indirectly contains sexual words.

2.2. Mating motivation

Mating motivation is a well-known theoretical concept in the research of evolutionary psychology (e.g., Griskevicius et al., 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Miller, 2009; Sundie et al., 2011). It refers to one of the reproductive efforts that men and women make (Kenrick et al., 2010).

In terms of the mating mindset, prior research has shown that mating motivation influences gender differences in various situations due to costly signaling reasons (Griskevicius et al., 2006b, 2007,

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