

A QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH TO ANALYZING SEXUAL APPEAL AND GENDER IN ADVERTISING – EVIDENCE FROM BRAZIL

KVAZIEKSPERIMENTALNI PRISTUP ANALIZI APELA NA SEKS I KORIŠTENJA SPOLA U OGLAŠAVANJU – DOKAZI IZ BRAZILA

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Willian Feitosa^a, Carlos Eduardo Lourenço^b, Lígia H. Rezende^c, Noemi Saeki Sunago^d, Susana Costa e Silva^e

^a Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia de São Paulo, Rua Pedro Vicente, 625 - Canindé São Paulo, BRAZIL, e-mail: willian.feitosa@ifsp.edu.br

^b Fundação Getúlio Vargas, av. Nove de julho, 2029 São Paulo, BRAZIL, e-mail: caerig@gmail.com

^c Fundação Getúlio Vargas, av. Nove de julho, 2029 São Paulo, BRAZIL, e-mail: ligia_rezende1@hotmail.com

^d Rua Paulo Orozimbo, 993, Apto 131 Cambuci, São Paulo, BRAZIL

^e Católica Porto Business School - Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Rua Diogo Botelho 1327, 4169-005 Porto, PORTUGAL, e-mail: ssliva@porto.ucp.pt

Abstract

Purpose – The use of sexual appeal in advertisements is a common practice in promotion, and its acceptance can vary throughout cultures. In the last twenty years, its use has been evaluated in several markets, including Brazil, where this research study was undertaken. The purpose of the study is to measure the effects of sexual appeal in advertisements on consumers, comparing the role of gender and perceptions about models' idealized bodies.

Design/Methodology/Approach – Two quasi-experiments were conducted on a dataset obtained from a non-probabilistic sample using online questionnaires. Both studies consider the effect of using sexual appeal in advertisements. The first used gym advertisements to compare the attitudes and purchase intention between men and women. The second assessed the use of female models with and without idealized appearance in beer advertisements.

Sažetak

Svrha - Upotreba apela na seks u oglasima česta je praksa u promociji i njezina se prihvaćenost može razlikovati od kulture do kulture. U posljednjih je dvadeset godina procjenjivana na nekoliko tržišta uključujući i Brazil gdje je provedeno ovo istraživanje. Svrha je rada izmjeriti u oglasima koliko apel na seks utječe na potrošače uspoređujući ulogu spola i percepcije o idealiziranim tijelima modela.

Metodološki pristup - Provedena su dva kvazieksperimenta korištenjem podataka iz neprobabilističkog uzorka prikupljenih putem online upitnika. Ove studije razmatraju učinak upotrebe apela na seks u oglasima. U prvoj se koriste oglasi za teretanu za usporedbu stavova i namjere kupnje između muškaraca i žena. U drugoj se procjenjuje korištenje ženskih modela s idealiziranim ili bez idealiziranog izgleda u oglasima za pivo.

Rezultati i implikacije - Uočeno je da su oglasi s manje izraženim apelom na seks bolje ocijenjeni, ali među

Findings and implications – It was observed that advertisements with low sexual appeal resulted in better evaluations; however, those with a higher level of sexual appeal were better evaluated by men if containing female models with characteristics typically considered to be attractive. On the other hand, women rated more highly the ads using female models with no features commonly regarded as attractive. Thus, it was concluded that gender can influence the advertising format to be adopted by companies: in the case of a female target audience, it is probably better to use models without “ideal” characteristics, but the opposite may have a more significant effect when it comes to a male target audience. This clearly incongruent perspective – gender-based bias – is a critical issue for managers and researchers.

Limitations – This study only focused on a narrow dataset made up of Brazilian respondents, which was used as a non-probabilistic, convenience sample.

Originality – This study is the first to use a quasi-experimental approach, connecting gender attitudes to brands and ads to bodies of idealized models and sexual appeal effects in ads.

Keywords – sexual appeal, gender, idealized bodies, advertisement

onima s izraženijim apelom na seks, muškarci ocjenjuju bolje oglase sa ženskim modelima koji posjeduju karakteristike koje se uobičajeno smatraju privlačnima. Međutim, žene bolje ocjenjuju oglase sa ženskim modelima i bez obilježja koja se uobičajeno smatraju privlačnim. Stoga se zaključuje kako spol može utjecati na format oglašavanja koji bi poduzeća trebala koristiti. Ako se fokusiraju na žene kao ciljnu skupinu, bolje je koristiti modele koji nemaju „idealne“ karakteristike, dok kod muškaraca suprotno može imati značajniji učinak. Ova očito nedosljedna perspektiva pristranosti na temelju spola presudno je pitanje za menadžere i znanstvenike.

Ograničenja - Istraživanje je temeljeno na ograničenom skupu podataka - brazilski ispitanici. Korišteni je uzorak prigodan i nije zasnovan na vjerojatnosti.

Doprinos - Ovo je prvo istraživanje koje koristi kvazieksperimentalni pristup povezujući stavove spolova o markama i oglasima s idealiziranim tijelima modela i učinke apela na seks na oglase.

Gljučne riječi - apel na seks, spol, idealizirani izgled tijela, oglas

1. INTRODUCTION

Sexual appeal is used in promotional messages to draw more attention to the advertised product (Grazer & Keesling, 1995; Fidelis, Oliveira, Giraldi & Santos, 2017). However, it was not until 1960 that the use of sexual appeal began to be studied, along with the way in which it influences persuasive communication. Nowadays, sexual appeal is employed by brands of a wide variety of goods, ranging from clothes to fragrances and alcohol. Products that target one gender, such as beer, have traditionally used sexual appeal in their ads. However, the use of sexual appeal may give rise to negative attitudes among the public, especially its members who are sensitive to the issues of a sexual nature and presence of stereotypes; this is particularly true if the public in question also includes consumers (Eisend, Plagemann & Sollwedel, 2014; Malta & Silva, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to measure the effects of sexual appeal in ads on consumers.

The objects of study were gym services and beer. Typically, ads for these products use models that represent the “ideal” female body (Richins, 1991). Sexual appeal has, therefore, been frequently employed in the media through images of women to attract greater public attention, especially from men (Eitzen & Zinn, 2001; Cooky, Messner & Musto, 2015). This leads to the continuous misrepresentation of women, who are emphasized for their external characteristics rather than their skills or sports achievements (Kane & Maxwell, 2011).

Nevertheless, in the last decade, several brands have campaigned to improve women’s representation in the sports and beer markets by breaking sexual stereotypes.

Therefore, this study focused on measuring the use of sexual appeal, which had previously been considered a tool used to draw more attention and, consequently, obtain positive responses to advertised products and brands, thereby representing an effective and positive way to influence behavior. The study aims to verify whether

there is a difference between female and male responses to ads containing a higher or lower level of sexual appeal. Additionally, it will ascertain whether there are differences in the perception about the gender of the models and the idealization of their bodies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several researchers have studied sexual appeal in advertising. Advertising messages use various types of appeal intended, including those of a sexual nature, to draw more public attention and convert a positive stimulus into buying products (Reichert, Heckler & Jackson, 2001; Reichert & Ramirez, 2000; Reichert, 2002). According to Reichert and Ramirez (2000), sexual appeal can come in many forms, including (i) physical characteristics, such as the clothing and physical attractiveness of the model; (ii) movements, including the model’s verbal and non-verbal communication and camera effects (the light and camera angle used); (iii) physical interaction between the models, such as showing affection, kissing, touching, the inclination of bodies; and (iv) voyeurism, or fantasies provoked in the viewer. Among these, Reichert (2002) outlined physical characteristics, such as variations in the amount and style of clothing and/or attractiveness of the model’s body, as being the most frequently used. Advertisements with a high level of sexual appeal often include models showing their traditionally attractive physical form (Cusumano & Thompson, 1997). Examples of this are women wearing underwear, short shorts, or cropped tops, and men in tight jeans, underwear, or without shirt. According to Dudley (1999), the reason for this is that the combination of an attractive body and such clothing is associated with more friendly, persuasive people living a better life. Thus, when viewers who are exposed to it may wish to resemble the advertising model or, when the model is of the opposite sex, feel attracted to the model, which positively affects the consumer and consequently makes perceptions of the advertisement more favorable.

Another form of content considered to be sexually appealing pertains to the behavior and movements of the models. Reichert and Ramirez (2000) claimed that sexual effects in advertisements usually arise from the models' movements, which either indicate sexual interest or serve as a way of provoking sexual interest among viewers. Examples of such performance include eye contact, smiling, provocative positions related to sexual acts, and intimate interactions between models.

Sexual appeal in advertising may impact consumers' buying attitudes and intention. For instance, Petroll and Rossi (2008) stated that the consumer's attitude toward advertising, a brand, and the company's image, as well as their intention to buy, are impacted by the variation of sexual appeal in advertisements featuring female models. The authors concluded that attitudes toward an ad and the related brand are defined according to the level of nudity employed. If the ads feature female models, consumers respond most favorably when the level of nudity is higher. By contrast, in case of male models, consumers respond more negatively if the ads contain a high level of nudity. However, in their meta-analytic review considering how sexual appeal can influence sales, Wirtz, Sparks, and Zimbres (2018) found sexual appeal to have a positive effect on ad recognition and recall, indicating an impact on memory, although the effect on brand recognition and recall was not significant. These authors also found that the effect of sexual appeal on attitude toward the ad was not substantial. Finally, they observed a significant, albeit limited, adverse impact on brand attitude but no effect on purchase intention.

These results inspired us to analyze those relationships further. Based on the above, the present study posits the following:

Hypothesis 1: Attitudes about brands and ads vary when consumers are exposed to ads with different levels of sexual appeal.

Hypothesis 2: Purchase intention varies when consumers are exposed to ads with different levels of sexual appeal.

Some studies have also revealed differences between the sexual appeal of male versus female models when they are directed at female rather than male consumers. While observing responses according to the gender of the participant, Petroll and Rossi (2008), for example, noted that female participants showed more favorable attitudes toward advertising and branding when a male model was used. Similarly, male participants had more favorable attitudes when exposed to a female model. In addition, women's attitudes were even more positive when they were exposed to male models with moderate nudity, as opposed to low or no nudity. Men, in turn, showed more positive attitudes when exposed to female models with high levels of nudity than to any other ad. Thus, it was concluded that attitudes regarding advertising and the brand improved according to the level of sexual appeal used when the model's sex was opposite to that of the viewer.

Similar effects have been observed with respect to purchase intention: consumers are more likely to make a purchase when the ad contains a model of the opposite sex and a higher level of sexual appeal than other ads. LaTour, Pitts, and Snook-Luther (1990) confirmed that, when presented with an ad featuring a female model and containing a high level of sexual appeal, male consumers tend to indicate higher favorability toward the ad compared to female consumers. Men also prefer ads that feature women and have a high level of sexual appeal, as opposed to female-model ads with a low level of sexual appeal. In a similar study focusing on male models, Simpson, Horton, and Brown (1996) found that female consumers tend to favor ads with medium-level sexual appeal and exhibit higher purchase intention when it comes to ads without sexual appeal (i.e., with no model at all).

On the other hand, in terms of both attitude and purchase intention, male consumers have been found to respond more favorably to ads without models. Moreover, in their meta-analysis, Wirtz et al. (2018) showed that men evaluate ads with sexual appeal significantly more positively than

women. However, they found a significant adverse effect on brand attitude with no effect on purchase intention.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 3: Attitudes toward advertising and buying intention vary in both male and female consumers when they are exposed to ads with different levels of sexual appeal.

Some studies have also revealed that advertisements tend to misrepresent women and their bodies. Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, and Thompson (1980) posited that there are cultural expectations about women's bodies, with unrealistic thinness and unattainable beauty being presented in ads. Typically, it is mostly female models that are shown in advertisements (Araujo, Baldissera & Stoffel, 2007). Those ideals can lead to women's unhappiness and their pursuit of the perfect body in order to conform to such beauty standards (Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann & Ahrens, 1992), which can be unhealthy (Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008; Shaw & Waller, 1995; Mazur, 1986). It can be said that some audiences do not perceive idealized beauty as a perfect representation of reality. Antioco, Smeesters, and Le Boedec (2012) pointed to certain efforts in advertising to introduce realistic characters and the audience's perception to such efforts. Non-idealized models may be better received, without defensive reactions, or even preferred (Yu, 2014; Wan, Ansons, Chattopadhyay & Leboe, 2013; Heinberg, Thompson & Stormer, 1995; Dahl, Sengupta & Vohs, 2009). Recently, the idealization of women's bodies in advertisements has been interpreted as a kind of objectification or commodification of women. This can be a violence-generating factor (Barbosa, Romani-Dias & Veludo-de-Oliveira, 2019). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 4: Perceptions about the idealization of a model's body vary according to gender.

3. METHOD

Two quasi-experimental studies were conducted to evaluate the use of sexual appeal in

advertisements and to test the hypotheses. In Quasi-experiment 1, attitude and purchase intention in response to gym ads were compared between men and women. Quasi-experiment 2 assessed the use of female models with and without an idealized appearance in beer advertisements. Gym and beer ads were chosen to make the experiment more realistic because, in the Brazilian context, sexualized models are commonly used in ads for these types of services and products. Since the experiments do not have a control group, they are classified as quasi-experiments. However, the studies were conducted using different scenarios, which enable identification of the phenomenon. The cultural context of the Brazilian respondents must also be considered. Sawang (2010) has established that cultural context can change the acceptability of sexual appeal in ads, indicating a less favorable response in Asian cultures. Brazilian consumers can be tolerant (Fidelis et al., 2017) but may evaluate the content differently according to gender (Petroll & Rossi, 2008).

3.1. Quasi-experiment 1

The study was designed as a 2 (male-female) x 2 (high- and low-level sexual appeal) experiment between subjects. It was divided into three phases:

Phase 1: Development of creative material

The first phase consisted of developing the advertisements to be used in the quasi-experiment, which were made to resemble advertisements for sporting goods brands. In an attempt to eliminate any interference outside the object of study (sexual appeal), standard designs with the following characteristics were adopted:

- (a) Static digital advertising, one page, 600 x 800 px in black and white;
- (b) Black background;
- (c) Logo, located in the lower left corner, designed especially for the experiment to avoid preconceptions about existing brands;

- (d) Slogan created especially for the study to prevent the consumers' prior knowledge from affecting their perceptions (Simpson et al., 1996);
- (e) Photo showing only the body and cutting off the face so that participants could focus on the models' clothing and position (Henthorne & LaTour, 1995);
- (f) Models with similar physical characteristics.

To create advertisements with different levels of sexual appeal, variations on the two forms of sexual appeal described by Reichert and Ramirez (2000) were used for both female and male models, as follows:

- (a) Physical characteristics focusing on nudity levels, as studied by Petroll and Rossi (2008) – ads in which the models wore more clothing (low level of sexual appeal) and in which they were semi-naked (high level of sexual appeal) were included;
- (b) Non-verbal communication, in which the level of sexual appeal varied from high to low according to different positions of the models and the angle from which the picture was taken. Therefore, advertisements were created for each of these combinations.

Phase 2: Exploration

The next phase consisted of conducting a pretest to validate the ads developed for use in the experiment, similar to Petroll and Rossi (2008) and Reichert et al. (2001). A group of 30 people of different ages and genders was selected for the pretest, which sought to ensure that they perceived the advertisements as having different levels of sexual appeal. The respondents completed an online form containing all the components (see Appendix 1) in a within-subjects experimental model (Charness, Gneezy & Kuhn, 2012). Each individual was exposed to all images, with their changes in perception measured according to the variation in sexual appeal of each image of the sequence. The procedure consisted of exposing respondents

to each advertisement and then presenting them with two related questions. The respondents were asked to rate each advertisement in terms of the level of sexual appeal and the level of image sensualization on a scale of 1 (minimal sexual appeal) to 7 (excessive sexual appeal). In addition to the level of sexual appeal, a second question was asked using the synonym "sensual" because, in advertisements containing sexual appeals, there is a logical relationship between a sensual model and the product (Motta & Piá, 1994). The second question was used to ensure that respondents understood at least one of the questions and was assessed on a scale of 1 (very unsensual) to 7 (very sensual). The questionnaire was conducted online, and the order of the questions was randomized for each respondent, preventing any particular order from biasing the outcome. After collecting the pretest results, the averages of the scores given to the level of sexual appeal and sensuality of each advertisement were calculated. The averages for each advertisement with respect to the level of sexual appeal and sensuality did not differ significantly, thus proving that respondents had understood the question. The answers related to sensuality were removed from further analysis.

Manipulation Check – The two advertisements with female models that exhibited the greatest difference in terms of the level of sexual appeal were selected and subjected to a t-test. The same procedure was followed for the two advertisements featuring male models with the greatest difference in sexual appeal. Both t-tests showed a significant difference in the respondents' perceptions of sexual appeal (p -value < 0.001). Out of the eight initial advertisements used in this analysis, four were chosen for the main experiment (see Appendix 1).

Phase 3: Application

Following ad creation and the validation pretest, the questionnaire to be applied in the main quasi-experiment was prepared. It contained multiple-choice, seven-point semantic differential questions, using the same scale as that adopt-

ed by Petroll and Rossi (2008). Each respondent was shown only one of the advertisements in a between-subjects model, based on which the responses of each group were compared with those of other groups in different circumstances (Charness et al., 2012). The respondents then answered the questions by assigning a score from 1 to 7 regarding the dependent variables – attitude toward advertising and purchase intention – using the scales based on the experiment by Simpson et al. (1996). Subsequently, they were asked about their perceptions of the intensity of the ad's sexual appeal and whether they considered the advertisement sexually appealing. At the end of the questionnaire, demographic questions were asked (such as age, gender, and frequency with which the respondent engaged in sports activities). Convenience sampling was used for the experiment in order to increase the response rate (Hair, Celsi, Ortinau & Bush, 2014). The questionnaire was distributed via social networks to users associated with sports-related groups. After exclusions, 120 responses were collected, 30 for each group.

As the next step, the results were analyzed with the help of Excel 2016 and the Minitab 17 Statistical Software. Exploratory factor analysis was performed to verify the correlations between variables, after which Cronbach's alpha was calculated to assess the confidence level of the data collection instrument. All items except "not offensive" had a factorial load above 0.32 and can therefore be considered to exhibit considerable correlation (Petroll & Rossi, 2008). In addition, with Cronbach's alphas of 0.95 and 0.93 for attitude toward advertising and purchase intention, respectively, the reliability of the data was confirmed. The sample consisted of 52 men (43%) and 68 women (57%) aged between 15 and 64 (mean = 21). Most participants were physically active and played sports three or more times a week (57%). Exposure to each advertisement was balanced between participants, with 30 people exposed to each stimulus. The group exposed to Ad 1, which used a modestly dressed male model, consisted of 12 male

and 18 female participants. The group exposed to Ad 2, which used a sexualized male model, comprised 14 male and 16 female participants. The group exposed to Ad 3, which used a modestly dressed female model, comprised 11 male and 19 female participants. Finally, the group exposed to Ad 4, which used a sexualized female model, consisted of 15 male and 15 female participants.

With regard to Hypothesis 1, significant differences were observed between attitude scores for ads with different levels of sexual appeal (p -value<0.001). In addition, using Tukey's paired comparison method and a 95% confidence level, ads with low sexual appeal resulted in significantly different and higher means for attitude to the ad using both male ($M = 5.02$) and female ($M = 5.31$) models, as did the ad with a high level of sexual appeal featuring a female model ($M = 3.87$), while the mean for the ad with a high level of sexual appeal featuring a male model ($M = 2.93$) was lower. The results are shown in Table 1.

As to Hypothesis 2, significant differences were found between ads with different levels of sexual appeal when it comes to purchase intention (p -value<0.001). Again, using Tukey's paired comparison method and a 95% confidence level, the male-model ad with low appeal ($M = 4.72$) resulted in a significantly different mean from the ad using the male model with a high level of sexual appeal ($M = 2.72$). Similar results were observed for ads featuring a female model: the low sexual appeal ad ($M = 4.98$) had a significantly higher mean than the one with a high level of sexual appeal ($M = 3.71$).

With regard to Hypothesis 3, differences were again observed in the attitude toward the ad and the buying intention between male and female consumers when they were exposed to advertisements for sporting goods with different levels of sexual appeal. The averages concerning attitude and purchase intention differed according to the participant's gender when they were exposed to different advertisements. The highest means for the attitude and

purchase intention of both female and male participants were found for advertisements featuring a male model with a low level of sexual appeal and a female model with a low level of sexual appeal.

similar across male and female participants. Once again, the participants' gender was not found to be an influencing or a differentiating factor for attitudes toward these ads.

TABLE 1: Results of Quasi-experiment 1

Variable	Male Model		Female Model	
Sexual appeal	Low	High	Low	High
Male respondents				
Attitude	5.13	2.74	5.09	3.91
Purchase intention	4.85	2.33	5.09	3.80
Female respondents				
Attitude	4.92	3.12	5.53	3.84
Purchase intention	4.60	3.10	4.88	3.62

When it comes to male-model advertisements, both female and male respondents showed a more favorable attitude when exposed to the ads marked by low, as opposed to high, levels of sexual appeal. A t-test confirmed the attitudes of male and female participants toward male-model advertising with low sexual appeal not to differ significantly (95% confidence level). The same was true of the responses to male-model advertising with a high level of sexual appeal.

As for female-model advertisements, it was again observed that female and male participants had similar responses when it comes to variations in the level of sexuality. On average, both had a more favorable attitude toward the ads which had low, as opposed to high, levels of sexual appeal. Although female respondents accounted for a seemingly higher average for male-model advertising with a low level of sexual appeal than male respondents for the same kind of advertising (95% confidence level), the averages did not differ significantly, as shown by the t-test. Similarly, the averages obtained for the female-model ad with a high level of sexual appeal were again

When it comes to purchase intention in response to male-model advertising, both female and male participants had more favorable responses to ads containing low than those with high levels of sexual appeal. In case of low sexual appeal, men and women demonstrated similar purchase intention (95% confidence level). The same was true of the advertisements with a high level of sexual appeal. Although the average purchase intention of female respondents was more favorable than that of male respondents, according to the t-test, the results were not significantly different. As for purchase intention when exposed to female-model, low sexual appeal advertising, both female and male participants had more favorable responses than when they were exposed to advertising with a high level of sexual appeal. In addition, the responses of male participants resulted in slightly more favorable averages for female-model advertisements compared to those of female respondents. However, as with previous results (95% confidence level), the answers provided by male and female respondents did not differ significantly.

To summarize, it can be confirmed that, in the case of advertisements with a high level of sexual appeal, male participants had more favorable responses to the female than to the male model (both with respect to purchase intention and attitude toward the ad). However, female participants also responded more favorably to the female model, evaluating in a contrasting manner in terms of gender.

Based on these results, a second quasi-experiment was conducted with a change in stimuli.

3.2. Quasi-experiment 2

The study was designed as a 2 (idealized vs. non-idealized body) x 2 (men vs. women) experiment between subjects. In this quasi-exper-

iment, an advertisement for beer featuring female models was developed. The manipulation was carried out by varying the woman's physical appearance so that one was more sexualized, resulting in the model's having the characteristics that can be considered more attractive; the other was less sexualized, that is, showing less attractive characteristics. The quasi-experimental research was conducted through a questionnaire created in Google Docs. For the questions concerning attitude toward advertising Holbrook and Batra's (1987) scale was used; for questions regarding attitude toward the brand, that designed by Leclerc et al. (1994) was used, with the scale authored by Bruner, Hensel, and James (2005) applied for purchase intention questions. A total of 240 questionnaires were received, 120 for each ad. In the questionnaire regarding the sexualized ad, 60% of respondents were female and 40% male, while the questionnaire for the less sexualized ad included 62% female and 38% male respondents, with ages ranging from 18 to 68 (mean = 24). All measurements were made using a five-point Likert scale. The manipulation check was successful (p -value=0.01).

Considering only male respondents, there was a significant difference in the dependent variables' mean when comparing the sexualized advertisement to the less sexualized one. Men who were exposed to the sexualized ad had more favorable attitudes toward the brand (4.9 vs. 2.8) and the ad (4.9 vs. 2.9), as well as exhibiting a greater intention to buy (4.4 vs. 2.4) than men exposed to the less sexualized ad.

On the other hand, the opposite effect was observed in the case of female respondents, but with a smaller difference than that observed for men. That is, women who were exposed to the sexualized ad had a weaker attitude toward the ad (2.4 vs. 3.6) and the brand (2.4 vs. 3.7), as well as a lower purchase intention (2.2 vs. 3.6), than women exposed to the less sexualized ad.

Regarding Hypothesis 4, significant differences were found between attitude scores for

ads with different models and genders (p -value=0.01).

It can be concluded that, on average, beer ads are better rated by men when they are more sexualized and feature "ideal" models than when they are less sexualized, with less "ideal" models. At the same time, women rate sexualized beer advertisements more poorly. It is interesting to note, however, that the difference is more significant for men than for women.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The first topic relevant to the discussion concerns Hypotheses 1 and 2. It can be concluded from Quasi-experiment 1 that attitudes toward advertising and purchase intention differ when it comes to advertisements with varying levels of sexual appeal. This was observed for both female- and male-model advertisements. Surprisingly, in Quasi-experiment 1, ads with low sexual appeal were more favored by respondents than those with a high level of sexual appeal. This phenomenon occurred in the case of both male- and female-model advertisements and concerned the response variables of attitude toward advertising and purchase intention. It was also observed that, when the level of sexual appeal employed is the same, the public has no clear preference for female versus male models in advertising. When the level of sexual appeal is low, consumers respond similarly to advertisements featuring female and male models. The same is true of advertising with a high level of sexual appeal and varying the gender of the model.

However, both experiments showed that when sexual appeal is at a higher level, men respond more favorably to a female model than to a male one (both in purchase intention and attitude toward the ad), as do women, thus evaluating in a contrasting manner in terms of gender. This can be explained by a deconstruction of thinness idealization amongst women (Yu,

2014). In addition, men exposed to the sexualized beer ad responded more favorably toward the ad and the brand. They had higher purchase intention when compared to women exposed to the less sexualized beer ad. Thus, it can be concluded that it is only beneficial for the brand to use sexualized, “ideal” models for male audiences. Considering the importance of women for the beer market, and increasing market share (Siqueira & Melo, 2019), these findings are essential to managers. While in the first quasi-experiment men did not respond more favorably to female-model ads with high, as opposed to low, levels of sexual appeal, and women did not rate male-model ads with a high level of sexual appeal more highly than those with low sexual appeal, men preferred female models, thus supporting the idea that sexual appeal continues to be relevant, regardless of women’s preference for female models.

These results have managerial implications. Brand and advertisement managers have to consider the impact of sexual appeal on communication. It is probable that different segments will respond in different ways, mainly when non-idealized female models are shown. Moreover, it is necessary to consider different results in different sales phases of consumer behavior, as a greater effect will probably be achieved in the attention phase.

One of the limitations of this study concerns the non-probabilistic, convenience sample used in the experiment. Also, Likert scales were conceived differently for each experiment (7-point in the first, 5-point in the second one). Although this can impact variance, the authors opted for the change to reduce filling time and churn rates.

Sampling was not controlled by balancing gender. As a result, the sample collected via online social networks and e-mail lists using convenience

sampling included more women than men. However, this could not adversely affect or invalidate the experiments because the results were based on central tendencies. Another limitation is that most of the sample is made up of young people who were attending or had recently attended reputable higher education institutions. In these environments, compared to other environments in Brazilian society, gender equality is widely promoted, so this segment of the public may be less tolerant to sexualized representations of women. As a result, they could have had less favorable attitudes and lower buying intention in the case of advertisements featuring sexualized female models. However, even in higher education, sports and alcohol can entail improper acts such as the commodification of women’s bodies and violence (Barbosa et al., 2019).

Where future research is concerned, it is suggested that a more extensive and probabilistic sample be used, as this would be more representative of the Brazilian population. In particular, in order to test the hypotheses raised in this study in other contexts, it would be interesting to analyze and understand the differences in attitude and purchase intention responses for each social class. Another study could compare the regional and cultural effects of the presence of sexual appeal in advertisements among different countries. Also, attitudes regarding feminism and gender could be targeted in evaluating how those variables can influence purchase intention, and brand and ad attitudes. Moreover, feminist theory could be considered as part of the Consumer Culture Theory and/or from a macro-marketing perspective (for instance, Barbosa et al., 2019; Gurrieri, 2021). Perceptions about gender equity could also be employed as another variable to analyze the presence/absence of idealized models, ad stereotypes, and purchase intention.

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Appendix 1

Stimuli, Quasi-experiment 1 (translation of ad copy: “You define your limit”)



Male — low-level sexual appeal



Male — high-level sexual appeal



Female — High-level sexual appeal



Female — low-level sexual appeal

Stimuli, Quasi-experiment 2



Non-idealized



Idealized