

# Viewers' Perception of TV Ads: The Role of Sex Appeal

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Sex appeal is on its way to pop up Indian advertising industry and its impact on the target audience's perception has gained less academic attention. The question which seems to be less addressed in literature is that sex appeal will be an effective and a worthy tool of promotion in a market place, like India where stringent regulatory measures are in place and controversies and bans over such appeal in ads (advertisements) are quite common. The present study investigated the youth's general perception towards the use of sexual appeal in advertising and its influence on effectiveness of ads. General linear model was applied to study the effect of perception on effectiveness of different sexual appeals. The results suggest that there is an influence of perception on ads effectiveness at the multivariate level.

*Keywords:* TV ads (television advertisements), perception, wild/mild sexual stimuli, ad recognition, brand recall

## Introduction

TV (television) has emerged as an indispensable medium of entertainment and the growth of TV channels has been immense in the past decades. This has not only widened the opportunities for the advertisers to stay connected with the target audience, but also intensified the noise in the cluttered media environment. Positioning the brands in the target minds is no longer an easy task, and thus, prompted marketers to look for strong executional cues which will stand out in the bombarded advertising environment. Advertisers realized sex appeal as one amongst such cues and started using it as a communication strategy in mainstream advertising. Such attempts gained eyeballs and controversies in addition. Exploring how far advertisers are successful, in executing sex appeal in their ads (advertisements) themes, in eliciting a favourable perception towards such ads and how this favourable or unfavourable perception influences the effectiveness of ads will be of immense help for international and national advertisers to decide on what degree and form of sex appeal will be appropriate in converting their targets to brand users.

## Literature Review

### Sex Appeal—A Favorite of Advertisers

Marketers responded exorbitantly well to the increasing receptiveness to the sexual contents in mainstream advertising across countries and India is no exception to it. Previous decade paved way for an increase in sexual stimuli ads in number and content. This was well augmented by the advertisers (Wise, King, & Merenski, 1974; Soley & Kurzbard, 1986; Soley & Reid, 1988; Severn, G. E. Belch, & M. A. Belch, 1990; Reichert &

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Lambiase, 1999; Kilbourne, Painton, & Ridley, 1985). Researchers identified that suggestive behavior, interaction, nudity, and factors, like setting and context, are some of the forms of sexual appeal. Sex appeal can be defined as message in sense of brand information or an appeal in any context which is associated with sexual information (Reichert, Heckler, & Jackson, 2001). Sex appeal is also defined as the amount of nudity or sexual lucidity (Reichert, Heckler, & Jackson, 2001). Sex appeal is defined as sexual presentation of a product or service with the sexual motives or the exploitation of the female or male body (Richmond & Hartman, 1982). According to the study of Shimp (2003), using sexual components to increase attention, interest, involvement, or recall of the message can be qualified as sexual appeal. Sexiness of clothing, amount of sexual imagery, body language, wording, and amount of nudity, were perceived sexiness (Goodrich, 1999).

Studies on sexual appeal showed mixed result. Sex appeal is more engaging, involving, interesting, entertaining, attention grabbing, favourable and original than non-sexual ads (Bello, Pitts, & Etzel, 1983; Dudeley, 1999; Jude & Alexander, 1983; Severn et al., 1990; Reichert & Alvaro, 2001; Reichert, Heckler, & Jackson, 2001). Sexual stimuli had led to increased attention and recognition which was validated with empirical evidences by various researchers (Vezina & Paul, 1997; Chestnut, LaChance, & Lubitz, 1977; Reid & Soley, 1981, 1983; De Pelsmacker & Geuens, 1998; Tissier-Desbordes & Manceau, 2002). There are equal numbers of studies on negative effect of sexual appeal. Steadman (1969) found that sex appeal may act as detractor deviating the viewer from brand which may result in lower brand recall and generate poorer product and manufacturer's perceptions, this effect is multiplied if the sexual explicitness is not matched well with product advertised (Peterson & Kerin, 1977; Alexander & Judd, 1978; Grazer & Keesling, 1995; Judd & Alexander, 1983; Reichert & Alvaro, 2001; Cui & Yang, 2009).

### **Is Sex Appeal Really Effective?**

Advertisers often emphasize sexuality and the importance of physical attractiveness is an attempt to sell products. Shimp (2003) clarified why sex appeal is often found to be a favorite attempt of the advertisers. Sex appeal acts as an initial attention lure to the ad, which is referred as the stopping power of sex (Yovovich, 1983); Next, it enhances the target audiences' ability to recall the message advertised as sex is arousing, easy to relate, emotion inducing, and most of all, memorable; Finally, sex appeal evokes emotional responses, such as feelings of arousal, excitement, or even lust, which in turn can create stimulation and desire for the product (Bumler, 1999). Although it is believed that sex sells, it sells at the consequence of the controversy (Treise & Weigold, 1994). There is nothing wrong in the use of sexual ads, tastefully done, to sell some kinds of products (Treise & Weigold, 1994). Indian consumers are more receptive and responsive to appeal which they can relate to their senses (Anil, 2009).

### **Perception Towards Sex Appeal in Ads**

Researchers showed that regardless of the period, people constantly are in the opinion that there is an excessive use of sex appeal in ads (Wise, King, & Merenski, 1974; Treise & Weigold, 1994; Singh & Vij, 2007) and it was females who had higher scores for the above agreement (Wise, King, & Merenski 1974). It was found that females seem to find interaction between couples as sexual but physical description of the model is sexual for males (Reichert & Ramirez, 2000). Asian countries seem to be more conservative than US (United States) with respect to nudity in ads (Frith & Mueller, 2006), but contrary to this, Cheng, Liu, and Li (2009) reported that Chinese consumers hold similar perception towards sex appeal ads as US consumers and even more favourable perception than Australian consumers. Appropriate application of sexual appeal will stimulate

more positive ad execution related thoughts than non-sexual appeals (Reichert et al., 2001) and will influence the effectiveness of ads (Shanthi & Thiyagarajan, 2012). Individuals not only prefer provocative sexual stimuli in ads in general (Pope, Vogues, & Brown, 2004), but also exhibit more favourable responses and intention to purchase (Grazer & keesling, 1995).

Negative reactions to sexual stimuli if it is not appropriate and in tasteful manner in ads have also been reported by researchers. Peterson and Kerin (1977) found that seductive or decorative model was perceived most favourably by all respondents, where as a nude model was perceived as least appealing, the product as the lowest quality and the company as the least reputable. Steadman (1969) and Courtney and Whipple (1983) warned that the use of overt sex appeal in advertising will be less effective than the non-sexual illustrations in achieving brand and appeal evaluations as well as poor product and manufacturers' perceptions. The use of highly sexual theme in a print advertisement was not well received and was viewed as less ethically "correct" than the use of a mild sexual version of the ad (LaTour & Henthorne, 1994). Further empirical evidence emerged that unethically perceived ads have significantly potential negative effect on the consumers' response variables (Simpson, Horton, & Brown, 1996).

### **An Empirical Gap in Literature**

Many researchers have contributed much on this topic yet little agreement has been reached concerning the appropriateness and effectiveness of sex appeal used in ads. The lack of consensus creates space for researchers to explore the effect of sex appeals in ads. Even though enormous studies have interrogated the effect of sex appeal on ad effectiveness, all such studies have carried out either exploring gender difference in responses to different degrees of sex appeal (Belch et al., 1981; Jude & Alexander, 1983; LaTour & Henthorne, 1994; Peterson & Kerin, 1977; Sciglimpaglia, Belch, & Cain, 1979; Simpson, Horton, & Brown, 1996; Jones, Stanaland, & Gelb, 1998; Orth & Holancova, 2004; Jeong & Hwang, 2005; Sengupta & Dahl, 2008) or under conditions like low/high involvement, low/high need for cognitions (Severn et al., 1990; Putrevu, 2008), and low/high arousal (LaTour, Pitts, & Snook-Luther, 1990). Prior studies have explored perception as a response dependent variable and sex appeal in ad stimuli as independent variable. Not much research work has been reported about influence of perception on effect of sex appeal TV ads in Indian context. The current study tries to fill in the gap by studying the influence of perception towards the use of sex appeal in TV ads on ad effectiveness with reference to India.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study are:

- (1) To study the viewers' perception on use of sex appeal in TV ads;
- (2) To find out the effectiveness of sex appeal in TV commercials among the respondents (using ad recognition and brand recall measures);
- (3) To explore the influence of perception on the effect of sex appeal (wild/mild) ads both at univariate and multivariate levels.

### **Methodology**

After reviewing the previous research studies, it was found that most of the effectiveness studies on sex appeal have opted for stimuli containing the print image of sexy female or male model fully clothed, partially clothed, or nude. Only few researchers (Fisher & Byrne, 1978; Rubinsky, Eckerman, Rubinsky, & Hoover,

1987; Severn et al., 1990; Smith, Haugtvedt, Jadrach, & Anton, 1995; Reichert, Heckler, & Jackson, 2001; Thiyagarajan & Shanthi, 2012) have taken couple images as an experimental instrument. Literature shows that there is a significant amount of research studies conducted on the effect of sex appeal, most of which are the Western studies, few studies conducted in China and Korea. Not many prior studies have looked at the influence of perception towards the use of sexual appeal in ads in general on ad effectiveness incorporating TV commercials showing sexy females (partially clothed/mild sex appeal and less clothed/wild sex appeal) as stimuli particularly in Indian context. Hence, generalizing the results of previous studies to India would make less or no sense. So this study attempted to look at the influence of perception towards the use of sexual appeal in ads in general on ad effectiveness incorporating sexy female models in varying degree of clothing as stimuli to fill up the gap found in literature.

### **Perception, Effectiveness, Recognition, and Recall Tests**

Perception towards usage of sex appeal in ads was measured on a 5-point Likert scale using statements relating to attractiveness, acceptance level, reachability, receptiveness, and persuasion (impulsive/boycott brands) of sex appeal.

Advertising effectiveness is a degree to which an ad achieves its much needed objective of reaching the eyeballs and catching the targeted minds. Hence, this study adopted ad recognition and ad (brand) recall tests to quantify effectiveness of an ad. Ad recognition and ad (brand) recall tests measures were employed not merely because these measures are used widely in ad appeal studies but are also accepted as most reliable metrics (Steadman, 1969; Chestnut et al., 1977; Reid & Soley, 1981; Richmond & Hartman, 1982; Courtney & Whipple, 1983; Tinkham & Reid, 1988; Severn et al., 1990; Thiyagarajan & Shanthi, 2011; Shanthi & Thiyagarajan, 2012). To conduct the recognition test, participants were shown an ad and were asked whether he/she remember seeing it and can remember any of its salient points and as part of recall test, the participants were asked to recall the ad or brand name.

### **Selection of Ad Stimuli**

Unlike previous studies where selection of sexual stimuli is purely a judgment and discretion of the researchers, this study chose ads at random. As the first step in selection of ads, all the sexual appeal commercials aired in popular channels, for a 4-week period (December, 2010), were pooled. These pooled ads were later shown to a small group of 30 respondents and were asked to rate these ads, on a 5-point scale, on the basis of the amount of clothing of a model. All ads with mean score of three and above were grouped as wild appeal and the ones with a mean score of below three were grouped as mild appeal. One ad was selected at random from each cluster or group and these were the two ads used for the final study.

### **Method of Data Collection**

Data were collected from 350 respondents in and around Chennai City by employing a non-probability sampling method. But the final sample for the study was 280 comprising of 140 males and equal number of females in the age group of 18 to 35 residing in Chennai and its suburbs. A structured interview schedule was the instrument used for data collection. The respondents were met at their homes and college classrooms (after college hours with the permission of the faculties) to create the much needed privacy mainly to ease true response. In the first half an hour's session, the respondents were asked to reveal their general perception towards sexual appeal in ads. Perception was measured on a 5-point scale which had a reliability of 0.793. In the next 20 minutes, the selected ads' (two in number) brands were concealed and were played with a help of

laptop to the respondents after which they were asked to recognize the ads and recall the ads with the brand. Based on these test results effectiveness scores were derived. MANOVA (multivariate analysis of variance) was used to see the influence of perception on different sexual stimuli ads. In a day, an average customer is exposed to many types and levels of ad stimuli that is why this methodology was adopted for the study.

### Findings and Discussion

From Table 1, it can be seen that 60.7% of the respondents have a favourable perception towards sexual stimuli ads in TVs. Advertisers can take this as a positive sign as majority of the young respondents are liberals towards these types of ads, there will be less resistance for sex appeal ads and advertisers can effectively use sexual stimuli to promote their products.

Table 1

#### *Perception Towards Sexual Appeal in TV Commercials*

Perceptual group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Favourable	160	60.7
Not so favourable	110	39.3
Total	280	100

Table 2 is about the effectiveness of wild and mild sexual appeal stimuli ads. It can be seen from Table 2 that wild sexual appeal ads are effective among 49.64% of the respondents while mild sex appeal ad is effective among an overwhelming 73.21% of the respondents signaling that mild appeal ads reach better than the wild ones.

Table 2

#### *Effectiveness of Sexual Appeal TV Commercials*

Effectiveness	Bold		Mild	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Effective	147	49.64	205	73.21
Not so effective	133	50.36	75	26.79
Total	280	100	280	100

Null hypothesis (Ho): There is no influence of perception on effectiveness of sex appeal ads.

General linear model was applied to study the effect of perception on effectiveness of different sexual appeal. From Table 3, it can be said, by looking at the intercept, that the mean effectiveness of the sex appeal ad is different from zero, because the significance for all the tests is less than 0.05, indicating a variation in effectiveness in the population. By looking at the perception and its significance for all the tests which is less than 0.05, null hypothesis (Ho) is rejected. From this, it can be concluded that there is an influence of perception on effectiveness at the multivariate level. All these results indicate that effectiveness of the sex appeal (regardless of the degree of sex appeal) as a message strategy primarily depends upon the perception of the viewers. If the viewers are liberal and have an open mind towards sex appeal ads, these ads can be more effective and successful. Furthermore, when looking at the univariate level, perception has an influence on wild sex appeal but not on mild sex appeal (see Table 4). This is throwing up an interesting message to the advertisers those want to use wild sex appeal in their message strategy to rethink about such attempt as it may elicit positive responses among the group who have a favorable perception towards sex appeal ads but the same

might be counterproductive among unfavorable group. Hence, to play safe is always better to design the ads strategies with mild sexual stimuli where the risk and uncertainty are relatively less. This is evident from the difference in the mean scores for mild appeal which is less between the different perceptual groups.

Table 3

*Effect of Perception on Sexual Appeals*

Sexual appeal	Perception	Mean	Effect	Value	F	Sig.	
Bold	Not so favourable	1.15	Intercept	Pillai's trace	0.830	675.913	0.000
	Favourable	1.98		Wilks' lambda	0.170	675.913	0.000
	Total	1.61		Hotelling's trace	4.880	675.913	0.000
				Roy's largest root	4.880	675.913	0.000
Mild	Not so favourable	2.38	Perception	Pillai's trace	0.086	13.085	0.000
	Favourable	2.28		Wilks' lambda	0.914	13.085	0.000
	Total	2.32		Hotelling's trace	0.094	13.085	0.000
				Roy's largest root	0.094	13.085	0.000

Table 4

*Tests of Between-Subjects Effects (Individual Effect)*

Source	Dependent variable	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Corrected model	Bold	48.238	1	48.238	24.546	0.000
	Mild	0.739	1	0.739	0.560	0.455
Intercept	Bold	675.067	1	675.067	343.508	0.000
	Mild	1,496.810	1	1,496.810	1,135.888	0.000
Perception	Bold	48.238	1	48.238	24.546	0.000
	Mild	0.739	1	0.739	0.560	0.455
Error	Bold	546.329	278	1.965		
	Mild	366.333	278	1.318		
Total	Bold	1,321.000	280			
	Mild	1,876.000	280			
Corrected total	Bold	594.568	279			
	Mild	367.071	279			

a.  $R^2 = 0.081$  (Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.078$ )

b.  $R^2 = 0.002$  (Adjusted  $R^2 = -0.002$ )

## Conclusions

Indian society is multifaceted, though it is undergoing significant socio-economic changes; it largely remains a conservative society. Youth has been observed as trendsetters, early adopters, literate, more positive, idealistic, and multicultural, and usually care for practical ads that sell a life style instead of just a product (Maciejewski, 2004). Reality also echoes the same as youngster are seem to be an adult of mixed properties like dynamism, vulnerability, idealism, and fun-seeking. Catching the eyeballs and minds of this particular segment is not the easy task. Responsibility of the advertisers goes beyond designing an ad campaign in country like India where conservative mentality and liberal perception prevail simultaneously. Actually, the challenge lies not only in how effectively the advertisers are constructing the commercials with vibrant wild sexual stimuli, but also in how convincingly it has been executed among various target groups with

perceptual differences. To conclude, sex appeal ads could be effective in communicating and in reaching the audience's subject to its conformity to the perception of the target viewers.

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