

Study: Does sex always sell?

December 19 2013, by Renata Bongiorno

A University of Queensland researcher has questioned the effectiveness of 'sex sells', a common rationale underlying many advertising campaigns.

UQ School of Psychology Honorary Research Fellow Dr Renata Bongiorno suggested that using sexualised [images](#) of [women](#) could actually make a campaign backfire, particularly for ethical causes such as charities and community organisations.

Collaborating with Dr Paul Bain, also from UQ, and Professor Nick Haslam from the University of Melbourne, Dr Bongiorno's research linked the sexual dehumanisation of women to reduced concern for ethical behaviour.

Dr Bongiorno said the research addressed an unresolved paradox: the effectiveness of advertising an ethical cause using unethical means.

"Sexualised images of women in advertising are pervasive and this research challenges the common view that they will always be effective persuasion tools," Dr Bongiorno said.

The research used advertisements sourced from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and involved participants from different nations and demographics.

"Participants who viewed advertisements containing sexualised images of women indicated they would reduce their support for the organisation

publishing the advertisements.

"Their responses showed that this was because the sexualised images dehumanised the women depicted, making them seem more animal-like.

"Previous research has shown that the dehumanisation of women increases tolerance for unethical behaviour towards women – specifically men's attitudes towards sexual harassment and rape.

"Therefore, it seemed unlikely that an advertising strategy that dehumanises women would be effective for increasing concern for animals, and we found that such a strategy did backfire," she said.

The research has blazed a trail for further research about the negative impact that sexualised images of women might have on promotional campaigns for other ethical causes, such as action to address poverty.

"Society faces many ethical challenges, not only in relation to animals, but also in relation to reducing social inequality and poverty and tackling climate change, so understanding how to communicate these causes most effectively is important," Dr Bongiorno said.

Dr Bongiorno hopes organisations promoting ethical causes will benefit from her research and choose [advertising](#) strategies that do not dehumanise women.

"Dehumanising tactics not only have negative consequences for women, but also for ethical causes that use this kind of strategy," she said.

More information: Bongiorno R, Bain PG, Haslam N (2013) "When Sex Doesn't Sell: Using Sexualized Images of Women Reduces Support for Ethical Campaigns." *PLoS ONE* 8(12): e83311. [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0083311](#)

Provided by University of Queensland

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