

# Research suggests sexual appeals in ads don't sell brands, products

June 22 2017

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University of Illinois advertising professor John Wirtz found that sex doesn't sell in advertising the way many assume it does. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Could it be that sex actually does not sell? An analysis of nearly 80 advertising studies published over more than three decades suggests

that's the case.

"We found that people remember ads with sexual appeals more than those without, but that effect doesn't extend to the brands or products that are featured in the ads," says University of Illinois advertising professor John Wirtz, the lead author of the research.

Wirtz and his co-authors conducted a first-of-its-kind meta-analysis of 78 peer-reviewed studies looking at the effects of sexual appeals in advertising. Their findings were posted online this week by the *International Journal of Advertising*.

Their research found that not only were [study participants](#) no more likely to remember the brands featured in ads with sexual appeals, they were more likely to have a negative attitude toward those brands, Wirtz said.

Participants also showed no greater interest in making a purchase. "We found literally zero effect on participants' intention to buy products in ads with a sexual appeal," Wirtz said. "This assumption that sex sells - well, no, according to our study, it doesn't. There's no indication that there's a positive effect."

Co-authors on the research were Johnny V. Sparks, a professor of journalism at Ball State University, and Thais M. Zimbres, a doctoral student at the University of California, Davis.

As defined in the research, sexual appeals included models who were partially or fully nude; models who were engaged in sexual touching or in positions that suggested a sexual encounter was imminent; sexual innuendoes; and sexual embeds, which are partially hidden words or pictures that communicate a sexual message.

"The strongest finding was probably the least surprising, which is that

males, on average, like ads with sexual appeals, and females dislike them," Wirtz said. "However, we were surprised at how negative female attitudes were toward these ads."

When not separating the results by gender, the effect of sexual appeals on participants' attitudes toward ads was not significant, he said, but separately "they're just going in completely opposite directions."

Wirtz said he decided to pursue this research because he sees meta-analysis - the application of statistical procedures to data from a range of studies - as a powerful tool.

"The average number of participants in each individual study was about 225, but by using a meta-analysis, we could combine studies and conduct some analyses with more than 5,000 [participants](#) - in one analysis, with more than 11,000," Wirtz said. "This means that our results present a more accurate picture of what happens when someone sees an ad with a sexual appeal."

The implications of the research for advertising practitioners are mixed, given that ads with sexual appeals are remembered more - and advertisers want people to remember their ads, Wirtz said - yet they don't appear to help in selling brands or products. "Certainly the evidence indicates that the carryover effect to liking the ads doesn't influence whether they're going to make a purchase," he said.

This could be one reason why a national restaurant chain, known in recent years for ads selling its sandwiches with scantily clad models in suggestive poses, made a very public break with that approach in a three-minute commercial in the last Super Bowl, Wirtz said.

"If the 'sexy ads' had been effective, it's unlikely the company or ad agency would have made such a drastic change," he said. "When product

is moving, people don't make changes."

**More information:** The effect of exposure to sexual appeals in advertisements on memory, attitude, and purchase intention: a meta-analytic review, *International Journal of Advertising* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/02650487.2017.1334996](https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2017.1334996)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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