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Economics of Sex in Advertising: Are Men More Receptive to the Provocation?

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Abstract

In this paper, the central objective is to analyze the visual rhetoric of selected fashion ads in *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Maxim* and *GQ* (Gentlemen Quarterly), to show how sexually explicit images of the female body is used to sell products to consumers, and to determine whether this is in response to the fact that the male is prone to gratuitous sex than the female. In this instance, I analyze the images from ads in female fashion magazines *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* in comparison to ads in male magazines *Maxim* and *GQ*, using tropes of sexuality and femininity. I provide basic insights to the nature of advertisements in contemporary fashion magazines, drawing on two theoretical frameworks rooted in the evolutionary and socialization models of human sexuality; the social exchange theory and the sexual economic theory espoused by Baumeister et al. (2001). The inference deduced from the theoretical constructs in the literature show that men are more economically empowered to taking decisions in the sex bargain and have a higher propensity to consume sexually explicit images of women in advertisements.

Key Words: Sex, Advertising and Visual Rhetoric

Introduction

The art of advertising is used to convey a message to the consumer about a product. Advertisements often reflect the socio-cultural perspectives of society. Over the years, the advertisements for products such as alcohol, fashion and cosmetics to mention but a few have used sex to attract consumers to the product. Men are increasingly attracted to sexually explicit ads than women (Sengupta and Dahl, 2008), this follows the cliché that ‘sex sells’. There is a tendency that the changing demographics of interest may also determine the nature of advertisements. The heterosexual normative indicates that ads targeting the male audience are more sexually explicit than advertisements targeting their female counterpart. Even though ads for female consumers tend to suggest that they look attractive, it is all to the admiration of the opposite sex. A recent study finds that sexually explicit images of women are often used in ads because men are increasingly attracted to sex and as such have a high propensity to engage in casual sex than women, whereas women value the emotional intimacy and commitment that can surround the sexual relationship (Dahl et al. 2009). In this paper, I would argue that both male and female oriented fashion magazines use sexually explicit images of women to attract their audience and drawing upon Goffman (1979) theories to explain why women’s negative response to gratuitous sex is based on their power of negotiation in the exchange of sex and questioning how the rhetoric of these visual constructs are interpreted.

I therefore use the social exchange theory and the sexual economic theory espoused by Baumeister et al. (2001) to analyze the visual rhetoric of selected fashion ads in *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Maxim* and *GQ* (Gentlemen Quarterly) to show how sexually explicit images of the female body is used to sell products to consumers, and to determine whether this is in response to the fact that the male is prone to gratuitous sex than the female. In this instance, I will analyze the images from ads in female fashion magazines *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* in comparison to ads in male magazines namely *Maxim* and *GQ*, using tropes of sexuality and femininity. Tropes are the visual representations of the argument presented in an advertisement. The inference deduced from the theoretical constructs in the literature show that men are more economically empowered to taking decisions in the sex bargain and hence have a higher propensity to consume sexually explicit images of women in advertising. This paper is presented in three sections, introduction, literature review and theoretical concepts, and the conclusion.

Literature Review and Theoretical Concepts

Goffman (1979) examined the ways women are portrayed in advertisements; he was displeased with the contemptuous representations of women in comparison to their situations in life. Goffman stated the idealistic representations of gender, which he observed in categories such as the theme of the relative size of the model as the basis of symbolization; the feminine touch as a ritualistic touching to be distinguished from the utilitarian kind that grasps, manipulates or holds; function ranking within the ad where a man and a woman collaborate face-to-face in an undertaking and it would seem the man is most likely to perform the executive role; the ritualization of women’s subordination and licensed withdrawal of women. In other words, as an elaboration on the ritualization of subordination, Goffman finds that women and children are more likely to be pictured on the floor or bed. He interprets this kind of “lowered” placement as a cultural symbol of their submission to men, who tend literally to be positioned above women in advertising, to signify superiority. In the same vein, Goffman observed that women are more

likely to caress objects, whereas men firmly grasped them, and women are often portrayed as children or childlike compared to their male counterparts in the ads.

The central objective of this paper is to analyze the visual rhetoric of selected fashion ads in *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Maxim* and *GQ* (*Gentlemen Quarterly*) to show how sexually explicit images of the female body is used to sell products to consumers, and to determine whether this is in response to the fact that the male is prone to gratuitous sex than the female. In this instance, I will analyze the images from ads in female fashion magazines *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* in comparison to ads in male magazines namely *Maxim* and *GQ*, using tropes of sexuality and femininity. Tropes are the visual representations of the argument presented in an advertisement. Oftentimes, the argument is presented in a figurative form, which refreshes the way an audience thinks about a familiar issue from an unexpected perspective (Scott 1994).

I consider the images of ads drawn from the February 2013 issue of *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *GQ* and *Maxim*, using the premise established by Goffman (1979) to analyze the genre and thematic concepts in relation to contemporary fashion advertising as shown in figures 1, 2, 3 and 4. Figure 1 is a two page ad for *Chanel Boutiques* in *Vogue* magazine – a contemporary female oriented fashion magazine; in this ad the images are symmetrical and consciously demonstrating the elegance of femininity. On the left page is a photograph of two girls; one standing with her legs open as if renouncing the conservatism of female sexuality. Although both ladies are dressed alike, they seem not to look the same way, both of them seem to be saddened by the events of life, but the one facing the camera is more receptive to changing times than the other who seem to strike a conservative pose. However, on the foreground is another photo of a more liberal lady lying on a wooden bed, dressed in what looks like a bed-time attire, but with a dress shoe on, this means that the same could be worn for evening outings.



Figure 1

Although, this ad does not depict any form of amorous sexual display; it conforms with Goffman's theory of the subordination of the female sex in ads, where the female is either portrayed as an object of sexual pleasure or subordinate to their male counterpart. Figure 2a is

the cover story of February 2013 issue of *Cosmopolitan* – a contemporary female oriented low fashion magazine. This ad depicts a special call for a Valentine’s date and a plan for an out-of-the-box night for a couple. The image in this ad is a beautiful young woman dressed in red bra and underwear, the red color depicts love since the message is for a lovely night for a couple. The lady is pictured with a cooking pot and holding a string of spaghetti over her open mouth. The message in this ad is metaphorical to the extent that it is a call for whoever is concerned by this ad to be treated to a lovely dinner like ‘mom’ used to make. The explicitness of the sexual language in this ad pushes the message to the male partner creating the illusion that this is a season of love; a good bowl of homemade spaghetti and a beautiful half-naked girl will make the night a pleasurable one. To the female, the message on the ad is that the way to a man’s heart is through good food and sex. Although this ad is figuratively sending a message which visually speaks to the purpose, some ads overtly do otherwise, for example the ad in figure 2b from the same issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine addressing a similar subject matter of Valentine’s day and gift, is for the purchase of an aerie bra, that is supposedly packed in a little gift box. The lady in the ad is dressed in what seems to be a replica of the bra and passionately holding a gift box with both hands. The figurative expression in this ad conforms to Goffman’s feminine touch as an element of the genre of this advertisement. The image is bold, passionate and sexy demonstrating elegance and attraction. Valentine’s gift most likely come from loved ones and more so from the opposite sex. The images in figure 2a and 2b share a commonality of half-naked photo of girls advertising an outing and/or a gift for lovers on Valentine, but the language of the message



Figure 2a

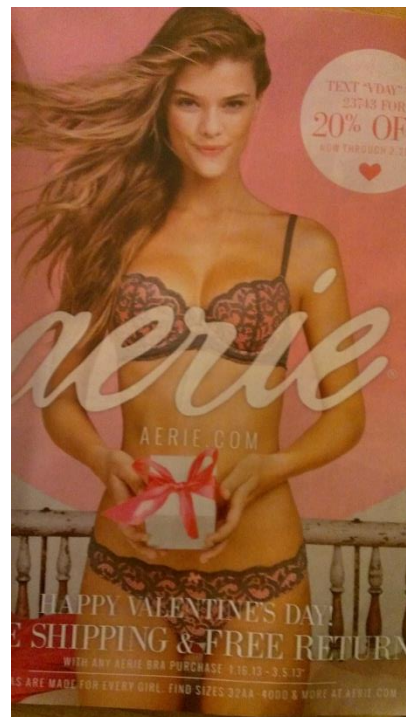


Figure 2b

differs, while figure 2a figuratively speaks to dinner and love, figure 2b expressly implies the purchase of a feminine gift for the fulfillment of a happy Valentine's night. The question that readily comes to mind is why the advertiser used the photo of sexy looking half-naked girls to market these products? In the first instance, the advertiser has conceived sexual attraction as a product of love and in the second case the advertiser believes that the recipient of the gift is a female who must be sexually attracted to the purchaser of the gift. In both cases, the idea is that the male partner will be attracted to the female on the basis of her sex appeal. In a heterosexual society, there is a fundamental assumption that the woman is an object of love and sex for the use of man; in this case if you buy the gift, you get the woman, this has instituted a strong gender stereotyping.

In advertising, gender stereotyping often refers to social roles for women, usually as homemakers, sex objects, or dependent and insignificant adornments of men (Ford, 2008). A study by Courtney and Lockeretz (1971), which looked at sex-role portrayals of women in advertising found four major gender stereotypes, which existed in the early 1970s advertising. Using content analysis, the authors looked at 700 advertisements from eight general interest magazines that appealed to both men and women. The first stereotype found in the study suggested that women's main role is as homemaker. Second, the study found that the advertisements assumed that women do not make important decisions. Third, most advertisements made women appear dependent on men, and, fourth women were portrayed primarily as "sex objects," which the researchers defined as the decorative-only role women tend to play. Women, the researchers argue, are used for pleasure only and there is no interest in the women as resourceful. The ad in figure 2a portrays the woman as homemaker, in terms of preparing a pot of spaghetti and also as a symbol for love and affection, whereas the ad in figure 2b portrays the woman as a product to be bought by a man unlike the ad in figure 1 which construes the woman as an object of substance.



Figure 3

On the portrayal of women as sex objects, figures 3 and 4 are the images of ads from *GQ* and *Maxim* respectively. The image in figure 3 is for the advertisement of Dolce & Gabbana fragrance in *GQ* magazine. In figure 3, the image is a typical example of a gender role reversal, here the male is naked, at least on the visible upper body and the female is partly dressed exposing the cleavage of her breasts. The space covered by the man and woman are almost equal but the man's head is placed in the foreground where Goffman (1979) referred to as the position of the dominant character. The man and woman appear to display the head cant that Goffman (1979) describes as required to navigate around the noses in preparation for kissing. Although, the visual elements show a gender role reversal from the traditional concept of female being naked, there is evidence of female insubordination and female power since the female is seducing the man. The female is making the move on the man with a feminine touch caressing his chest and upper body. This sensual move by the female is in total contrast with the images in the ads featured in the feminine magazines analyzed in figure 1 where the images signify resourcefulness and figure 2 where the female is presented as an object for the man. In this image from *GQ* there is an equal negotiating power in the exchange, but in the heterosexual personification of sex the basic assumption is that the female gets subdued by the man. The level of intimacy exemplified by this ad shows the female is aroused by the fragrance of the man's body and that has passionately dragged her into making the move for sex. The visual rhetoric of this ad is that the woman is exercising control over the man by making herself irresistibly more difficult to be lured into casual sex by the man.

On the other hand, figures 4a and 4b are visual representations of advertisements in *Maxim* – a low fashion magazine for the male audience. The models depicted in figures 4a and 4b are not actually selling any particular product, except the magazine itself. In both images we could see Goffman's theory of women subordination at play; the women are photographed lying on the floor with the breasts exposed for figure 4a and the sexy positioning of figure 4b. In figure 4a, the woman is photographed looking away from the camera but making a sensual move to the reader. This move connotes attraction and making herself ready for sex, although there is no male figure in the picture but in a heterosexual male dominated world the overtures of her body is an invitation for sex with the male reader.



Figure 4a



Figure 4b

According to Goffman (1979), the woman lying on the floor depicts the use of the woman as a sex object. The objectification of women in magazine has been supported by the sexual economics theory, which describes the woman as an object of desire by the male and as such has a higher negotiating power in the exchange for sex. A woman lying on the floor or on a sofa according to Goffman (1979) seem to be a conventionalized expression of sexual availability, in this case the *Maxim* ads portrays the women as readily available for possession by men who read the magazine. This level of visual expression is demeaning to the female sex because it places the feminine sex as an object rather than a resourceful woman who partners with man in the scheme of life. The strong social power possessed by women is idealized by society and triggers a culture of beauty that is captured by fashion advertising.

The changing trend in the idealization of the woman's body in the United States across the 20th century was described by Shields and Heineken (2002) as the cinched-waist ideal of 1900, the flat-chested and straight bodied flapper of the 1920s, the full-chested hourglass figure of the 1950s, the skinny waist of the 1970s, the muscular, tanned breast-implanted aerobicized body of the 1980s that continues today, albeit with smaller hair. This idealization of the woman's body is carried into the culture of the society through advertisements. Fashion advertisements especially those targeting urban middle class, show nudity, suggestive dress, and intimate situations thus leading researchers to conclude that the women in the ads are increasingly represented as sex objects. Understanding sex as a fluid continuum of cultural phenomena implicated in social institutions and power structures suggests that cultural manifestations of sex, such as visual representations of women in advertising, are available for criticism. Using images from *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *GQ* and *Maxim* magazines, I provide basic insights to the nature of advertisements in contemporary fashion magazines, drawing on two theoretical frameworks rooted in the evolutionary and socialization models of human sexuality; the social exchange theory and the sexual economic theory espoused by Baumeister et al. (2001).

The social exchange theory posits that there is an inequality in the desire to exchange sex amongst humans, which yields an imbalance in power: the person who is less eager to make the exchange is in a position of strength because she or he can hold out until ideal conditions are met. In contrast, the person who pines for the exchange has little power because she or he is dependent on the other to decide if, when, and how the exchange will occur. This suggests that sex as an end in itself is less valued by women than men (Baumeister et al. 2001). Building on exchange theory, therefore, sexual economics theory posits that women possess substantially greater negotiating power than do men in the context of a sexual exchange. These theories to a large extent determines why men are most likely to be attracted to sexually explicit images of women, and why advertisers have taken advantage of this stance to use the female body as a sex object in a bid to attract consumers to their products.

Conclusion

In this paper, we observe that the propensity to demand sexually explicit images in magazines is high in men than women, hence the desire for fashion advertisers to target the male audience. The advertisement in figure 1 for Chanel Boutique has featured models for female apparel and presented in a female oriented fashion magazine, but the connotation in this ad speaks to the desire of the female to be attractive, the two models standing dressed in mid-sized conservative attire and the one lying on the bed dressed in what seems to be an evening

outing/sleep gown. The models here are not presented in sexually explicit photos because the advertiser believes the audience will be basically female. However, for the images in figures 2a and 2b, the models are presented in sexually explicit dressing to signify the product and mood expressed in the ads. In this case the advertiser hopes that despite the fact that the ad is featured in female oriented magazine, the partner of the reader is a heterosexual male who will be attracted to fulfill the obligations of the ad in satisfaction of his erotic fantasies. Even though both ads were presented in feminine magazines there is a contrast in the use of sex based on the advertiser's assumption of the audience.

This ideological difference in the presentation of sex in ads follows the exchange-based conceptualization, which suggests that women will think sexual contact is most permissible when valued resources are offered by the man to the woman. In the same vein for figures 3 and 4, the advertisers have used amorous and sexually provoking images to sell the products hoping that the audience will be the typical conventional heterosexual male who is consciously attracted to sexually explicit images of women. This account thus shows that although both male and female fashion magazines use sexually explicit ads to sell products, women respond negatively to casual non-invested sex as opposed to an evolutionary urge toward casual, non-invested sex in men.

However, the underlining inference from this study is that advertisers use sexually explicit images of women to capture the interest of men to buy products or even magazines that are targeted for the female audience. In the same vein, advertisers lure the interest of men to these products knowing that the economic power of men is higher than that of women even though this assertion is not supported by any empirical evidence, but by hindsight. Because women possess a higher negotiating power in the exchange of sex the tendency is for the male counterpart to use his available resources in the balance of negotiation. In view of Goffman's theory and the objectification of women folks in advertising, men are literally placed on a higher threshold of desiring the female sex for the fulfilment of sexual fantasies. In a bid to fulfill their sexual fantasies men are therefore attracted to sexually explicit images and willing to use their resources for the acquisition of products whose advertisements appeal to their erotic desire.

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