

# Literature Review on the Use of Sex Appeal vs Non-Sex Appeal Advertising in the Malaysian Context

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Received: March 14, 2018 Accepted: April 26, 2018 Online Published: May 7, 2018

doi:10.5539/ijms.v10n2p28 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijms.v10n2p28>

## Abstract

This research examines the perception of customers towards sex appeal advertising. Effect of sex appeal advertising has to be measure in terms of ABC model of attitude, which are affective, behavioural and cognitive. Through the sex appeal advertising, cultural values, lifestyle and behaviours can be affected. Acceptance of nudity among different gender and religious had been investigated in Malaysia market. Research findings show that Chinese are more likely to accept mild sex-appeal advertising while Muslims could not accept it. Women perceive sex appeal more negatively than men, yet react quite positively towards sex appeal advertisements that is linked with the product itself. Other than that, high nudity levels in advertisements was not well received. Further analyses on the acceptance of sex appeal ads in Western countries compared to Asian countries where there're major difference identified in terms of religion constraints and gender issue. Findings signify Malaysians are more conservative in terms of sex appeal advertising compared to the Westerns whereas females tend to be more sensitive towards sex appeal advertisements rather than males.

**Keywords:** sex appeal advertising, non sex-appeal advertising, literature review

## 1. Introduction

In this ferociously competitive environment, there are too many advertisements and they are “everywhere”. It is quite difficult for advertisers to grab attention and hence certain companies used sex appeal advertising. Sex appeal can be known as the message or brand information with persuasive appeals that are associated with sexual information (Reichert et al., 2001). According to Sarpal et al. (2015), sex appeal advertising is a kind of emotional-based advertising, many advertisers believe it works better as compare to other advertising method. This is especially true for sex appeal advertising because it easily brings impact and emotionally affect the people. However, it often arouses controversy about its appropriateness to the public because advertising can influence social values.

Malaysia is a country that have different races living together, the citizens have different beliefs and cultures. In this case, cultural diversity is clearly an issue of great concern in the appropriateness of using sex appeal advertising. Due to the fact that acceptance of nudity in sex appeal advertising are dissimilar among different religions. Unlike the Western, Asians are more conservative. Hence, using this advertising method can seem to be quite risky in Malaysia. To critically discuss in this topic, perfume is chosen as the evaluation object.

Malaysia is a multi-cultural country with three major ethnic groups which are Malay, Chinese and also Indian followed by small amount of minority ethnic groups. Malay's which is also known Muslims possess the largest amount of population (Krishnan & Run, 2016). Therefore, sex appeal advertisements could affect these group of people positively and also negatively.

Krishnan & Run (2016) cited from Advertising Standards Authority Malaysia 2008 which states that, Malaysia practices strict Malaysian Advertising Code of Ethics for Television and Radio to control the content of

commercials and advertisement by restricting the use of sex to sell products and services. In a multi-cultural environment such as Malaysia, advertisers need to consider many factors to find a communication fit. However, sex appeal advertisements are commonly seen in a few industries such as toiletries, alcohol, fashion, beauty and etc.

## 2. Malaysian Culture & Ethnicity

Proper and effective communications will be dependent on the understanding of various cultures that exist and its critical to understand how culture influence communications (Keegan, 1999). Society is an intricate, multifaceted build. Social qualities impact, what's more, is impacted by, advertising (Belk & Pollay, 1985; Randazzo, 1993). Customers who experience childhood in a specific society get to be usual to that culture's values, convictions, and perception. They react to publicizing messages in a way that is compatible to their social qualities and standards. Hence, the social qualities and social attributes of the intended interest group may confine the decision of publicizing subjects utilized in one specific society (Zhang & Neelankavil, 1997). One of the most fundamental measurements of society is religion. Religion can be portrayed as: "the routine articulation of a translation of life, which manages extreme concerns and qualities. Institutional religion formalizes these into values which can be taught to every era" (Pargament, 1997).

The Malaysian cultural formation is made of three main cultural identities which are the Malay, Indian and Chinese. According to Deng et al. (1994), Malaysia is categorised as an Islam country, and the Malay culture can be defined through the Islamic faith. Walter & Fam (1999) also mention that "in Malaysia, culture and religion go hand in hand. Most cultural values were actually shaped by various religion practices". Thus, it's important for advertisers to use sex appeal themes accordingly to avoid cultural or religious values conflict. According to LaTour (2000), "advertisers should be "culturally sensitive" when it comes to the portrayal of women in advertising. Johnson (2002) further elaborates that "the economic hardship has led to a rise in nationalism in many countries in Asia and a return to deep rooted cultural and social values". According to Eve (2000) "Muslim and Catholic countries tend to frown upon all kind of salacious displays as well as upon direct or indirect sexual references".

Religion characterizes the standards forever, which thus are reflected in the qualities furthermore, dispositions of social orders and people. Such values and attitude influences behavior and practices of establishments and individuals from societies. In a religious setting, sexual introductions in promoting are viewed as hostile in Muslim nations (Boddewyn, 1991).

However, there are limited study on the influence of Buddhism, Toasim and Hindusim on the influence on sex appeal advertisement responses and perception of Malaysian consumers. This gap will be addressed as well in this research. Run et al. (2007) findings indicated that Chinese consumers in Malaysia react differently towards semi-nude females and semi-nude male advertisements and they prefer opposite gender in the advertisements. Run et al. (2008) research among Malaysian Indian consumers indicates that female Indians prefer revealing attire advertisements followed by partially sexy advertisements followed by fully clothed advertisements. Indian male respondents react more favorably only towards fully clothed male models and when they view another male in ads there is no impact of sexiness on attitude and behavior.

## 3. Religion & Religiosity

The level of religiosity of a person is another independent variable that could affect the outcome on how consumers respond to sex appeal advertisements (Gould, 1994). Intrinsic religiosity is where a person's religious values, personal religious experience and internalized belief will determine how one judge the use of sex appeal in advertisement (Allport & Ross, 1967; Donahue, 1985; Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989) cited by Gould (1994). Being in a multi religious context such as Malaysia where most consumers are from the Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Christianity and Taoist faith, the level of intrinsic religiosity might have some impact towards their responses.

Some research suggest that highly sexual content are considered unethical, unjust and morally unacceptable (LaTour & Henthorne, 1994; Simpson et al., 1998) and research by Putrevu (2004), indicates consumers high in religiosity judge sex appeal as more unethical and form inferior attitudes and purchase intent towards the advertised brand.

Ismail & Melewer (2014), Muslim in Malaysia conforms to the Syari'ah law and Islamic values which governs duties, morals and behavior collectively and individually in all aspects of life. Mokhlis (2009) was cited by Ismail & Melewer (2014) that Islamic values are affecting the perception towards products, service, brands, advertisements and consequently their decision making. It is believed that sex appeal in advertising is considered offensive to Muslims in Malaysia and the Chinese consumers, no longer regards sex as a taboo. China Daily

(2005) cited by Liu et al. (2009) indicated that sex is discussed more openly in China. Run et al. (2008), on the contrary had indicated Muslims with high or low religiosity will react the same way towards female model sexy advertisement.

In Malaysia, Islam is being practiced by 61.3% of the population, while the other religions that are Buddhism (19.8%), Christianity (9.2%), and Hinduism (6.3%) (Department of Statistics, 2010). Islam was established in Arabia and depends on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. The Arabic word "Islam" truly signifies "to surrender," be that as it may, as a religious term in the Koran, it signifies "to surrender to the will or law of God." According to the Quran, Islam is the primordial and all-inclusive religion, and even nature itself is Muslim, on the grounds that it consequently complies the laws God has imbued in it. Islamic social reasoning depends on the conviction that all circles of life, otherworldly, social, political, and monetary, structure an indissoluble solidarity that must be completely saturated with Islamic qualities.

This standard illuminates such ideas as "Islamic law" and the "Islamic state" and represents Islam's solid accentuation on social life and social obligations. Indeed, the cardinal religious obligations endorsed in the five mainstays of Islam have clear social ramifications. Islamic law, known as shari'ah (which is sourced from the Koran), is a code that endorses and oversees the obligations, ethics, and conduct of all Muslims, by and large and exclusively, in all parts of life. Olayan & Karande (2000) expressed that the shari'ah depicts the qualities that Muslims should hold, including truth, trustworthiness, social and aggregate commitments and obligations, the part of men and ladies, and the part of purchasing and offering. Muslims are not permitted to eat pork, bet, or beverage liquor, and bareness is disallowed. Moreover, Muslims should not icon revere (statutes comprehensive), must fit in with sexual codes, and must not confer infidelity (Newland, 2000; Michell & Al-Mossawi, 1999; Deng, Jivan, & Hassan, 1994).

Islam as a religion assumes a vital part in Malaysian purchasing behavior (Alam, Mohd, & Hisham, 2011). Islamic qualities are influencing their perception on brands, service, products they their decision making (Mokhlis, 2009). Buddhism originated as an ascetic development inside of the predominant Brahman convention of the day, Buddhism immediately formed into a religion. Buddhism does not empower realism, and Buddhists are most certainly not ones to self-enjoy, be materialistic or misuse others. Buddhist believes in peace and their definitive objective in life is to go after nirvana, which can be portrayed as heaven, edification, and a condition of quietness (Encarta, 1997). Dillon (1998) mentioned that Buddhism will likely to eliminate desire through individual order. Buddhists additionally trust in good conduct, genuineness, empathy, being beneficent, and magnanimity.

Morgan & Lawton (1996) claim that the entire ethos for living as a Buddhist is straightforwardness, discretion, consideration, what's more, liberality. Five statutes are illustrative of the Buddhist ethic; that one ought to cease from taking life (counting creature life); one ought to cease from wrong articulations of sexuality: sex, infidelity, et cetera; one ought to abstain from taking what is not uninhibitedly given: one ought not take; one ought to cease from wrongful utilization of dialect: for example, lying, discussing silly and vindictive themes, and tattle; one ought to avoid utilizing medications and liquor (getting to be inebriated) as these substances lead to daydream, an indistinct personality, piece mindfulness, empower savagery, and may thwart one's quest for extreme refinement of awareness. These statutes take after the idea of ahimsa, of peacefulness, what's more, serenity.

#### **4. Prevalence of Sexual Advertising Communications**

The main purpose of using sex appeal in advertising can be said is to grab attention. This is effective because it attracts both gender and creates a sense of shock value to the consumers. Advertising perfume and advertising clothes are totally different. Perfume is something that are not visible through advertisement hence sex appeal advertising has been commonly used. Perfume has always been portrayed as women's scent that attract and conquer her man, it is always linked to desire and sexual attraction (Oakes, 2012). According to Klug & Vigar-Ellis (2012) cited from Reichert (2003), this method is known as "borrowed interest" where the sexual interest created can be transfer into interest towards the brand or product.

One of the best example would be Gucci Guilty Advertisement Campaign, it used same techniques for both of their pour homme and pour femme. For men fragrance's advertisement, the male is looking into the camera while there's a woman seductively wrapped around him, and vice versa for women perfume's advertisement. This advertisement successfully delivered the message that they will have opposite sexes attract after consuming the product (Bailey, 2013). According to Bax (2015), such advertising generated interest and enhances brand recall and recognition. Even if the advertisement will be prohibited, topic about the advertisement and products will still be ebulliently discussed. This suggested that sex appeal advertising has the widespread and penetrating

effects on advertising and buyer behaviour model, says Sarpal et al. (2015).

On the other hand, Severn et al. (2013) argued that although the use of nudity in advertising may increase attention, yet it is less effective than non sex appeal advertisement in achieving brand recall. This is because the attention was often directed to sexuality instead of the brand itself. Especially in perfume industry, sex appeal advertising is widely used thus the message and shock-value may be diluted. According to Sarpal et al. (2015), different gender has different reaction and perception towards sex appeal advertisement. Women are relatively having negative views on this. Jo Malone brand is certainly creative and did not use sexuality. Instead, it uses floral theme in advertisement to convey message about their natural ingredients. This has match their elegant brand image and product uniqueness where they are well-known with the unique scents.

Sex appeal ads will actively induce sexual fulfilment (Crescendo, 2015) in terms of providing a fantasy for opposite sex and this is common in toiletries industry such as deodorants, body sprays, shampoo, toilet papers and etc. Axe and Tag are two companies who utilise sex appeal in their advertisements where majority both males and females react positively to the ads.

Sex appeal ads may be favourable in the sense of it access dreams of potential and current customers and connect it to their product (CBU Marketing, 2017). A fine example would be Axe by Unilever's Dark Temptation Body Spray which is inducing the message by creating "use Axe and get laid" fantasy for Insecure Novice (Lindstrom, 2011) by utilising varieties of women as attractions. In this case, it creates a sensuality for male audiences. Not only that, there're also amounts of ads in the industry are tied to products which are totally not related. The same example which is Axe's Dark Temptation Body Spray can be the same where body spray and chocolates are tied as one for advertising purposes.

Nevertheless, sometimes sex appeal advertisements as mentioned above may come in an offensive form. The result of it may generates negative impacts (Tangient LLC, 2017) this may effect brand image and outcome of the advertisement for potential consumers. Non-sex appeal advertisement might as well be less offensive and more acceptable. For instance, Rexona which uses simple slogans such as "United, but not uniform" to interact with their consumers. Non sex appeal advertising may be more acceptable by majority conservative individuals in Asian. Asian countries which include Malaysia tends to emphasis on family, social interests, moral and etc (Sawang, 2010) where they're likely conservative and collective than Western culture (Sawang, 2010; in Bochner, 1994).

## 5. Consumer Attitude

Consumer attitudes are known as an important topic because it helps us to determine their actions. It is the evaluations of events, objects or people. These components are highly interdependent, which means the way of a person reacts to his surrounding is called attitude. It can be positive, negative or uncertain at times (Long-Crowell, 2017; Perner, 2017). In marketing terms, an attitude is a general evaluation of a product or service formed over time, says Solomon (2008).

In ABC model, attitude is often being described in three components which are affective, behavioural and cognitive. Affect is referring to an individual's feeling towards an attitude object (Jain, 2014). Due to cultural factor, the acceptance of nudity in advertisement may be varies. In a multiracial country such as Malaysia, reaction of Islam religion can be different from Buddhist or Hindu. This is because they have different restrictions to obey. According to Ismail & Melewar (2014), Muslims are not allowed to eat pork, gamble and et cetera. The most importantly, nudity is prohibited among them. These Islamic values will influence their perception toward products, brand and advertisement. The use of sex-appeal advertising is considered as offensive to them. Whereas, there's a study showing Chinese are more open minded to this kind of ads, says Sarpal et al. (2015). Acceptance of nudity in ads are differ among the Malaysian Chinese and Chinese in China. However, the content of an ads will be strictly control by Malaysia's advertising code due to Islamic values.

Next, behaviour denotes the person's intention and how they behave towards an attitude object (Jain, 2014; Long-Crowell, 2017). Klug & Vigar-Ellis (2012) believe overt sex appeal ads may cause negative impact and reduce consumers' purchase intention. This might affect the company sales and its brand reputation. As compared to men, a study shows that women always generate negative feeling towards sex appeal advertisement. Due to the fact that women are more sensitive to female portrayal because they would reflect themselves with the female in the picture and think of it as sexually demeaning (Sarpal et al., 2015). However, when there is connectivity between sex appeal ads with the brand or product, it is found that women would react more positively. Also, consumers' attitude and interest toward the advertisement and product may be affected by sexuality level in ads. Once consumers have negative attitude toward the advertisement, this will cause negative brand attitude and decrease in customers' purchase intention (Yan et al., 2010).

Lastly, cognitive would be one of the components in ABC model of attitude. Based on Long-Crowell (2017), cognitive is the thoughts and belief that an individual has towards the attitude object. Based on Sugiarto and Barnier (2013), belief is the component that will affect others component of attitude. In sex appeal ads, female nudity may produce a physiological arousal response especially among men. This has created a negative cognition to the consumers. It can be seen through the comparison of male and female's responses. According to LaTour et al. (1990), opposite-sex-nude model advertisements were viewed more positively than the same-sex-nude. Consumers find that opposite-sex-nude is attracting but same-sex-nude is offensive because people tend to relate themselves with the individual in advertisement. For example, women may react negatively towards female nudity, where men find that female nudity brings the meaning of love, happiness and tenderness.

## 6. Non Sex Appeal Approach

Non sex appeal ads usually develops long-term relationship and connection with their consumer where it'll avoid "one-night stands" relationship which is one-time buys. A good example given would be Garnier's Fructis Shampoo where it portrays a woman with strong and healthy hair connected with their product where descriptions and slogans are inserted to persuade consumer's buying intention. On the other hand, when there's no relationship develop from the ads, effectiveness of sex appeal will eventually fade off by shifting away the key elements from the ad's message (Hermannsdóttir & Gunnarsdóttir, 2015).

According to Tangient LLC (2017), main objective of sex appeal is to connect them with the brand by capturing the attention of the viewer with the sense of shock value and attract viewers. Renova utilises sex appeal to sell their main product which is toilet paper with the slogan of "toilet paper & pleasure". The whole advertising concept was fresh and new in the early 2000s (Fslisbon, 2015) for that particular industry. Thus, it had created success where the advertisements were chosen by French Magazine Photo to promote a photographic contest inspired by the campaign (Fslibon, 2015). The effectiveness of sex appeal advertising is acknowledging as an accepted belief would be its capable in entering certain target market for the current 21st century marketing and communications as its attention grabbing (Ledesma, n.d. in Dahl et al., 2009).

It's believed that effectiveness of sales generating are tied together with the effectiveness to grab one's attention therefore grabbing the viewer's attention may effectively generate sales (Ledesma, n.d.). Based on Lindstrom (2014), one of sex appeal campaign by Axe, Unilever generates \$71 million in sales in 2006 and \$186 million in 2007 creating an instant blow where it became No.1 male brand for antiperspirant or deodorant category and it was a result ahead its nearest rival Tag.

Non sex appeal advertisement wouldn't choose to rely heavily on shock value effect whereas they'll focuses more on brand value and recognition by experts. For example, Colgate overshadowed their competitors by emphasising that they're number 1 and recommended by professional dentists including their certifications by recognised authorities and also provide real life statistics.

Many females tend to be more uncomfortable with unconcealed sex appeal advertisements compared to males. Based on Sarpal et al. (2015), there're arguments where gender may influence a consumer's response towards sex appeal advertisements. Thus, sex appeal ads may partially affect certain males successfully but it may have a reverse effect as women thinks that they're being subject as triggering stigmas for men (CBU Marketing, 2017). Both genders create same attraction where they're sex appeal ads which contains nudity of the same sex will be consider as offensive whereas if it's opposite it would be the other round. However, most of the Asians tends to be more conservative compared to Western cultures (Hermannsdóttir & Gunnarsdóttir, 2015) as there may be cultural barriers may be unwise and adverse (Hermannsdóttir & Gunnarsdóttir, 2015; in Biswas et al., 1992). In general, sex appeal in Malaysia may not be very practical as it's one of the conservative Islam Country where restrictions and cultural values are there to supervise all advertising code.

Research shows that emotion responses towards sex appeal for males are positive whereas females are negative. This is also supported by Hermannsdóttir & Gunnarsdóttir (2015), sexual appeal advertisements generate positive aftermath on male audiences rather than female audiences. It also creates greater impact in terms of emotions for male audience where they tends to recall the ads itself and brand better than women. According to Sarpal et al. (2015), gender generally possess certain level of effect on arousal. Mild sexual appeal advertising may be favourable for females rather than overt sexual appeal advertising this indicates that different level of sexual appeal may affect the emotion of females. Overt sexual advertising may agitate the female audience and develop the offensive effect in terms of their emotions. However, in Malaysia sex appeal advertising may not be able to create much impacts for both gender's emotions due to the restrictions of all sex appealing ads govern by strict Malaysian Advertising Code of Ethics for Television and Radio (Krisnan & Run, 2016).

Last but not least, overt sex appeal advertising like female nudity usually will be seen negatively where it's

against with current moral philosophical sensitivities thus it's not practical (Sarpal et al., 2015) especially in Malaysia. The conservative mind-set of most Malaysians are deeply rooted in their subconscious. For instance, Muslims are deeply religious and need to obey the teachings of Quran therefore any scenes of sexual appeal are extremely offensive for them. Restrictions set by the government law includes scenes of intimacy, disco scenes, feminine napkins, kissing among adults, models undressing are all prohibited in advertisements (Krishnan & Run, 2016; in Johnson, 2007). For Malaysia, conservative males and females will generate negative attitudes towards sexual appeal advertisements due to mind-sets and cultural issues. Still, Sarpal et al. (2015) states that not all cultures will reject sex appeal advertisements with negative attitudes. Attitudes may contribute changes towards purchase decisions where they co-dependent on one another. Positive attitudes towards sex appeal advertisement will definitely create purchasing intentions, brand value and also brand image. Sarpal et al. (2015) says that, the combination of sex appeal ads must follow by an appropriate product where it could create positive attitude among females.

In a recent focus group study conducted by the authors in 2017, both male and female respondents seem to prefer moderate sex appeal which supports the findings of Sarpal et al. (2015). This qualitative research was done across two groups in separate sessions. An average of 12 respondents for each gender were questioned on three sex appeal advertisement visuals. Another finding is that when respondents were aroused (excitement) with the sexual imagery, then tend to have positive purchase intentions. Thus, it is an important factor to be considered for further research and its impact towards decision making. Suggestions for quantitative research on a larger group of respondents could confirm its impact and the validity of the focus group findings.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, research shows that perception towards sex-appeal advertising may be differ by gender. About overt sex appeal advertisement, women tend to act negatively than men. Other than gender, religions and culture difference are also one of the main concern. An effective sex appeal advertisement has to be appropriate and associated with the product or brand. In consumers' attitude, consumers may have different affective, behavioural and cognitive component. If consumers perceived the sex appeal advertisement negatively, purchase intention of customers will definitely be decreased.

There're several resources indicate that Malaysians are resistant towards sex appeal advertising due to religion constraints, cultural issues and mind-sets. Sex appeal advertising covers a wide range where it includes perceptions, emotions and attitudes towards it where it provides guidance for marketers. Individuals differs by cognitive, emotions, attitude shaping by their own religion constrain, culture, gender, mind-set and etc. Emotional factors such as arousal should be studied further to determine its impact on cognitive responses as well. Thus, these factors will develop positive or negative feelings where it'll influence final decision of purchase intention.

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