

Blatantly Sexual or Broadly Appealing? The Sex Appeal Effect in Marketing Post-Print

Authors: Xie Zhipeng, Qin Huanyu, Wang Ziyi, Wang Jingyuan, He Yi

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Abstract

Sexual advertising represents a common brand marketing technique. Technological advancements have rendered increasingly rich forms of sexual marketing more favored. Existing research often one-sidedly equates sexiness with sex, and the literature is scattered across multiple disciplinary domains including physiology, sociology, and psychology, lacking systematic logical coherence and yielding contradictory conclusions. A complete theoretical framework of sexual effects encompasses the definition and classification of sexual advertising, as well as the positive and negative effects generated by sexual advertising; the underlying psychological explanatory mechanisms include consumer cognition, physiological motivation, sexual self-schema, and social presence; furthermore, sexual advertising is subject to moderation by product type, advertising context, and individual traits. In conclusion, sexual advertising holds significant theoretical importance and practical value in marketing.

Full Text

Tainted or Elegant? The Sexy Effect in Marketing

XIE Zhipeng¹, QIN Huanyu², WANG Ziyi¹, WANG Jingyuan¹, HE Yi¹

(¹ School of Economics and Business Administration, Central China Normal University, Wuhan 430079, China)

(² School of Management, University of Science and Technology of China, Hefei 230026, China)

Abstract: Sexual appeals represent a common brand marketing strategy, and technological advances have made increasingly sophisticated forms of sexy marketing more popular. Existing research often narrowly equates sexiness with

sexuality, and the literature is scattered across physiology, sociology, and psychology without a systematic logical framework, yielding contradictory conclusions. A complete theoretical framework of the sexy effect includes definitions and classifications of sexual advertisements, as well as their positive and negative effects. The underlying psychological mechanisms involve consumer cognition, physiological motivation, sexual self-schema, and social presence. Meanwhile, the effects of sexual advertisements are moderated by product type, advertising context, and individual traits. In summary, sexual advertisements hold significant theoretical and practical value in marketing.

Keywords: sexual advertisements, social relations, sexual self-schema, consumer behavior

As the *Book of Rites* states, “Food and drink, and sexual desire, are the great desires of humanity.” Sexual desire possesses legitimacy and naturalness (Chen & Xia, 2022). However, influenced by Song Dynasty Neo-Confucianism’s principle of “preserving heavenly principles and eliminating human desires,” sex has become a demon in people’s hearts—once unleashed, Pandora’s box will destroy the world. For a long time, the fear of discussing sex has made people avoid sex-related topics, and sometimes even “sexiness” is labeled with negative connotations of explicitness and pornography.

Sexiness refers to an individual’s physical attractiveness or perceived sexual appeal (Lamb et al., 2016), while sexual appeal typically denotes the ability to attract attention and induce or stimulate sexual thoughts (Reichert et al., 2012). Sexual advertisements are marketing tools that incorporate sexual elements to trigger consumers’ sex-related thoughts, emotions, or impulses (Reichert & Lambiase, 2003), thereby helping brands attract consumer attention and promote products (Black & Morton, 2015).

Sexual advertisements constitute an important form of marketing communication. First, examining their manifestations, as early as the last century, the famous “sex goddess” Marilyn Monroe caused a sensation with her sexy advertisement for Coca-Cola. Such traditional sexual advertisements often displayed sexiness directly through female body exposure and gender-specific features. However, with internet technology development and gradually liberalized thinking, diverse new forms of sexual advertisements have emerged. Manufacturers now “tease” consumers through multiple channels. Specifically, besides direct displays of sexiness, advertisements increasingly use suggestive actions, text, and sound to evoke sexual associations, making sexual advertisements more diverse, indirect, and connotative. For example, on social media, Durex’s “Little Dudu” brand image and its series of thought-provoking “borderline” advertisement copy. Moreover, regarding content, as sexual elements become more widely used, brands no longer limit themselves to attracting men through female charm but also employ male sexiness to attract female consumers (Su et al., 2021). For instance, the domestic beverage brand Yeshu uniquely featured muscular “macho

men” as livestream hosts, quickly attracting large female audiences. The popular Chinese otome game *Love and Producer* created virtual boyfriends with handsome faces, exposed abs, gentle magnetic voices, and sweaty clothes, winning many female players’ hearts upon launch. Finally, regarding context, emerging technologies enable manufacturers to integrate VR (virtual reality) and AR (augmented reality) into sexual advertisements, blending them with brand promotion. Virtual idols in the metaverse often appear more bold, unrestrained, and cute, with virtual girl groups like A-SOUL, Hatsune Miku, and Luo Tianyi deeply loved by Gen Z and anime fans. For example, the 2014 “Fallen Angels” campaign on London’s Victoria train represented a perfect combination of perfume brand Lynx’s sexual advertisement *Angel Falling* and cutting-edge AR technology. People standing in AR-marked areas could see angels landing at their feet on hall screens, creating realistic interactive effects that stimulated product interest and left lasting impressions. Furthermore, AR girlfriends in games achieve organic integration of AR, anime, and sexual advertisements—players can see their “girlfriend’s” flushed face, feel her breathing and heart-beat anytime via mobile apps, creating immersive gaming experiences.

However, using sexual advertisements yields mixed effects, potentially positive or negative (Hyllegard et al., 2011). On one hand, sexual advertisements produce positive marketing effects. The integration of sexiness and advertising helps manufacturers achieve marketing goals (Anabila et al., 2015). First, sexual advertisements attract consumer attention (Cummins et al., 2021; Samson, 2018; Myers et al., 2020). For example, international fashion brand CK (Calvin Klein) gained fame through sexual advertisements, from models appearing almost nude in 1982 to multiple models semi-nude in 2010, attracting substantial consumer attention. Second, sexual advertisements enhance positive consumer attitudes (Choi et al., 2016). Popular online games like *Genshin Impact* and *Overwatch* attract players by creating numerous sexy female characters. Expensive, exquisite sexy anime figurines satisfy otaku fantasies by building IP peripheral products. Additionally, sexual advertisements meet consumers’ compensatory emotional needs. COVID-19 restrictions on spatial mobility and Eastern cultural taboos have constrained emotions and desires, while sexual advertisements that challenge taboos provide stimulating emotional compensation (Sabri & Obermiller, 2012; Veer & Golf-Papez, 2018), explainable through the forbidden fruit effect derived from psychological reactance theory (Binder et al., 2020).

On the other hand, sexual advertisements also negatively impact brand marketing. First, they reduce consumer attention to brand information itself (Das et al., 2015). In the fragmented information era, consumers’ attention is highly dispersed. While sexual elements quickly capture attention, overly direct displays may cause advertisements to lose focus, with sexual elements overshadowing product content. Consumers recall sexual information from advertisements (Lawrence et al., 2021), weakening brand memory and attention (Das et al., 2015). However, overly subtle sexual advertisements may be imperceptible to consumers, failing to achieve desired effects. Second, sexual advertisements may cause psychological reactance. Homogeneous brand promotions and advertising

bombardment have made consumers numb, and carefully designed sexual advertisements may be perceived as manipulative seduction strategies, leading to negative evaluations. Moreover, direct sexual stimuli and excessive innuendo are easily considered immoral (Latour & Henthorne, 2013; Liu et al., 2009) and carry legal risks. Peng (2011) notes that in Asian countries including China, influenced by restrained Eastern culture, consumers more easily develop negative moral perceptions about sexual advertisements, damaging social customs and generating negative brand evaluations. For example, clothing brand CK's advertisement featuring a semi-nude female model shot from below made many consumers feel voyeuristic, triggering boycotts. Food brand Juewei Duck Neck once displayed a cartoon female figure in shackles, lying on a bed in shorts with legs spread, accompanied by copy reading "Fresh and juicy, want some?"—criticized for sexual innuendo, vulgarity, and disrespect toward women, resulting in forced removal, apology, and a ¥600,000 fine. Finally, sexual advertisements raise privacy concerns. For inherently sexual products, using sexual advertisements deepens negative perceptions and fails to protect consumer privacy or enable public promotion. Consequently, increasingly many sexual products are "de-sexualizing," using artistic, healthy, and cute styles to weaken sexual perception. For example, Durex combines brand promotion with Chinese style, using classical poetry and ink paintings to minimize sexiness. Global sexual wellness brand Dame uses solid colors, exquisite and premium designs for female sex toys, attempting to convey health, minimalism, and neutrality, avoiding shame and pornography labels.

Sexual advertisements have a long history, evolving significantly since the mid-20th century. First, the degree of sexualization is gradually decreasing, exemplified by shifts in exposed body parts. Previously, sexual advertisements limited sexiness to model nudity (Signorielli et al., 1994), such as the world's first sexual advertisement in 1871 for Pearl cigarettes featuring a straightforward semi-nude female image. Today, brands evoke sexual impulses through non-exposed forms like eye contact and facial expressions (Gong et al., 2017) to attract attention while maintaining brand tone. This lower-risk expression avoids legal and moral pitfalls while achieving good marketing effects. Additionally, female status in sexual advertisements is changing from sexual objectification to sexual empowerment. Early advertisements often objectified women (Kordrostami & Lacznia, 2022; MacKay & Covell, 1997), presenting female models as helpless or petite to arouse protective instincts. However, with social civilization development and legal improvements, women's social status has risen, making traditional sexual advertisements unsuitable. Modern sexual advertisements increasingly empower women, depicting them as independent, confident, or elegant (Choi et al., 2020; Erika & Melika, 2020). Finally, sexual advertisement carriers have transformed dramatically. Previous research focused on print and TV advertisements with one-way corporate-to-consumer communication. Internet penetration and advertising technology advances enable two-way interactive communication with large-scale rapid dissemination and consumer evaluation. In the internet sharing economy, access-based sexual advertisements differ from traditional consump-

tion scenarios in effectiveness (Liang et al., 2023). Moreover, Gen Z and anime fan groups have different understandings of sexiness, being more open and inclusive, preferring refined, cute sexiness while rejecting outdated, vulgar traditional sexual advertisements.

Thus, contradictions abound in marketing's sexy effect theory and practice. With advertising technology and carrier transformations, ideological liberalization, and broadened sexiness definitions, sexual advertisements present new forms that traditional theories cannot fully explain. Therefore, existing research urgently needs systematic analysis to re-examine sexual effects in advertising and lay foundations for improved marketing theory. Meanwhile, increasingly refined consumer demands mean inappropriate sexual displays may trigger unexpected negative effects. It is necessary to clarify sexual advertisements' marketing effects and applicable contexts to guide brands in proper usage. This paper integrates multidisciplinary perspectives to organize sexual advertisements' main categories, effects, mechanisms, and boundaries, mapping research trajectories and exploring future directions.

2. Classification of Sexual Advertisements and Their Marketing Effects

2.1 Classification of Sexual Advertisements

Contemporary mass media diversification has enriched sexual advertisement forms. Current scholarship offers two classification approaches: by sexual display method and by sexual stimulus medium.

First, classification by display method. Research indicates sexual display can be described through two dimensions (Yan et al., 2022): explicit sexiness, which displays sexiness through actions and body parts directly related to sex, including nudity (Wirtz et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2019) and sexual contact actions (Soley & Kurzbard, 2013). For example, wearing tight clothing to show body curves or exposing well-proportioned limbs uses physical sexual appeal (Reichert, 2003). Sexual contact actions directly indicate sexual behavior, such as intercourse, kissing, embracing, and caressing (Anabila et al., 2015). The other dimension is implicit sexiness, or sexual innuendo (Rigoulot et al., 2020). Implicit sexiness lacks direct sexual reference but induces sexual associations through language, sound, and actions not directly related to sexual behavior (Wirtz et al., 2018). For example, using double entendres, women bending over, biting lips, touching collarbones, men showing Adam's apple movement, sweating profusely, or making low, deep voices can trigger sexual thoughts. Thus, sexual advertisements divide into explicit and implicit categories.

Second, classification by stimulus medium. Severn et al. (2013) view sexual advertisements as using sexual stimuli to convey information and attract consumers. Hamilton (2021) distinguishes between image and text stimuli—image stimuli arise from models' sexy images in pictures and video ads, while text

stimuli are language inducing sexual thoughts (Reichert & Lambiase, 2003). Combined sexy images and suggestive text also serve as stimuli. Accordingly, sexual advertisements can be categorized as image-stimuli, text-stimuli, or combined types. With enriched content and diversified forms, cross-category sexual advertisements have emerged, making classification increasingly complex.

Although scholars have proposed classification methods for traditional sexiness research, no consensus exists on sexual advertisement classification standards, nor has any study systematically organized them. Existing classifications struggle to encompass various forms like “de-sexualization,” “sexual innuendo,” and “over-sexualization.” Therefore, this paper organizes domestic and international research from psychology, sociology, and management, classifying sexual advertisements into three types—direct expression, indirect expression, and social relationship expression—and elaborates on them (see Table 1). This classification facilitates more comprehensive and systematic understanding and research on sexual advertisements, providing effective references for theory and practice.

Table 1. Classification of Sexual Advertisements

Type	Subcategory	Description	Representative Literature	Examples
Direct Ex-pres-sion	Sexual Exposure	Reducing models' clothing and increasing body exposure to display sexiness	Sparks & Lang (2015); Bailey et al. (2021)	Fashion brand CK' s advertisements featuring fully or semi-nude models
	Sexual Activity Actions	Displaying actions representing sexual activity	Choi et al. (2022)	Chanel 2014 advertisement showing models kissing passionately amid music and fragrance

Type	Subcategory	Description	Representative Literature	Examples
Indirect Ex- pres- sion	Sexual Imagery and Text	Using images and text that trigger sexual thoughts	Anabila et al. (2015)	Budweiser advertisement with model in swimsuit merging with beer bottle; NARS blush series named Orgasm and Sex Appeal
	Suggestive Behavior	Using language, actions, or sounds not directly sexual to induce sexual associations	Wirtz et al. (2018)	Durex 2018 International Mother Language Day slogan: “Shh, don’ t scream”
	Sexual Information Embedding	Incorporating elements related to private or gender-specific body parts	Jiang et al. (2010); Schick et al. (2013)	Durex poster with two ladybugs on a tree trunk shaped like male genitalia

Type	Subcategory	Description	Representative Literature	Examples
Social Re-lax-tion-ship Ex-pres-sion	Relationship Types	Commitment relationships (high-commitment monogamous partner-ships) vs. casual relationships (no-commitment sexual part-nerships)	Mark et al. (2015); Collins & Horn (2018)	Jo Malone Blue Wind Bell perfume: “From the moment I smelled her perfume, I had already lived a lifetime with her in my mind”
	Social Emotion Expression	Different emotions perceived in social interaction (e.g., pas-sion/coolness)	Norcia et al. (2015); Martins et al. (2020)	Givenchy perfume: “No taboos, indulge alone” ; Honor of Kings “female heroes” with sharp eyes and cool skills

Source: Compiled by authors

2.1.1 Classification by Direct Expression Direct expression in sexual advertisements refers to directly displaying sex-related features to evoke sexual thoughts (Peng, 2011). Current common direct expressions include three types: sexual exposure, sexual activity actions, and sexual imagery/text.

First, sexual exposure is the most intuitive direct expression, displaying sexiness by reducing models’ clothing and increasing body exposure, especially gender-specific and sexually sensitive areas (Bailey et al., 2021; Sparks & Lang, 2015). Previous literature describes sexual exposure as full nudity (Wirtz et al., 2018),

semi-nudity (e.g., only underwear or bikinis) (Cui & Yang, 2009; Huang & Lowry, 2012), sexy attire revealing figures (e.g., short skirts or tight tops) (Wirtz et al., 2018), and highlighting or exposing specific body parts (e.g., covering breasts with products or complete breast exposure) (Rajaobelina et al., 2019; Trivedi & Teichert, 2021). Brands typically use models' physical representations to display sexiness (Jones & Reid, 2010; Wong et al., 2019).

Second, models directly displaying sexual activity actions (Choi et al., 2022; Reichert, 2003) also serve as direct expression. For example, models touching breasts or buttocks (Hur et al., 2020; Yan et al., 2010) or male-female kissing and embracing (Cheung et al., 2013; Choi et al., 2022; Matthes & Prieler, 2020) directly express sexiness. Global luxury brand Chanel' s advertisement shows models kissing passionately amid music and fragrance, while DVB' s advertisement features David and Victoria Beckham flirting and kissing in an elevator, and Victoria' s Secret models lightly touching their chests while wearing pink underwear.

Third, brands incorporate sexual imagery and text that trigger sexual thoughts (Anabila et al., 2015; Reichert & Lambiase, 2003). Images and text are crucial daily information sources, and visual stimuli from videos and graphics fully mobilize emotions (Anabila et al., 2015; Fossen & Schweidel, 2019; Lawrence et al., 2021), increasing advertisement persuasiveness (Das et al., 2015). For instance, Victoria' s Secret' s annual fashion show vividly expresses sexiness through video; perfume advertisements often combine sexy images with suggestive text. Luxury perfume brand Tom Ford' s breast-rubbing advertisement attracted high attention from both genders, while LOEWE even named products "Morning After." Evidence proves that sexual imagery and text strategies successfully attract product interest and increase purchase intention.

Direct expression forms are common in traditional sexual advertisements (Huang & Lowry, 2012). However, due to legal and moral constraints and increasing respect for women, such advertisements cannot fully convey brand attitudes and connotations (Anabila et al., 2015) and risk touching gender discrimination and legal boundaries. Consequently, scholars and manufacturers increasingly focus on indirect expression forms.

2.1.2 Classification by Indirect Expression Indirect expression generally refers to models stimulating sexual associations through facial expressions, language, and actions rather than explicit displays (Lull & Bushman, 2015; Wirtz et al., 2018). Two main types exist: suggestive behavior and sexual information embedding.

First, suggestive behavior is an important indirect pathway (Anabila et al., 2015; Reichert & Lambiase, 2003). It uses sounds, language, images, or actions without direct sexual connection to indirectly convey sexual information, including triggering sexual associations and arousal, requiring consumers to perceive sexual messages to be considered sexual advertisements (Wirtz et al., 2018). For

example, Durex's 2018 International Mother Language Day advertisement used the communication language "Shh, don't scream"; live streaming platform Hualiao's slogan "Want to get to know her more deeply?"; YSL's 2017 advertisement showing a model bent over a chair; and Honor of Kings "female heroes" with weak or charming voices—all use suggestive language, text, and easily-associable postures to stimulate sexual interest (Wirtz et al., 2018).

Second, sexual information embedding is another important indirect pathway. It involves incorporating elements related to private or gender-specific body parts (Jiang et al., 2010; Anabila et al., 2015; Schick et al., 2013), intending consumers to inadvertently perceive sexiness. For example, constructing intended words through object arrangements, assembling products into sexual shapes (Wirtz et al., 2018), or graphically constructing male genitalia (Schick et al., 2013). A Durex poster used two ladybugs on a tree trunk shaped like male genitalia to implicitly convey sexual information.

Compared to direct expression, indirect sexual advertisements with suggestiveness and connotation are more acceptable to consumers. However, since sexual innuendo may not always be perceived, the degree of indirect expression is difficult to control, and its effects are more ambiguous (Black & Morton, 2015). Consequently, researchers have shifted focus to other expression forms like social relationship expression.

2.1.3 Classification by Social Relationship Expression Social relationship expression refers to brands building emotional connections with consumers through social relationship construction and social emotion expression to achieve marketing goals. Two main pathways exist: social relationship construction and social emotion expression.

First, social relationship construction. Individual social relationships can be divided into commitment relationships and casual relationships (Mark et al., 2015). Commitment relationships involve high-commitment monogamous partnerships, while casual relationships refer to temporary, no-commitment relationships (e.g., one-night stands) or ongoing relationships without defined status (e.g., sexual partners) (Collins & Horn, 2018). Combining these relationship types with brand roles (Wittenbraker et al., 2015), commitment relationships' attributes can be expressed through partnership, while casual relationships emphasize sexual relationships beyond commitment, expressed through lover relationships. When consumers perceive advertisements/brands as having commitment or 约定 relationships, feeling like partners, these are partnership sexual advertisements, such as Jo Malone Blue Wind Bell's "From the moment I smelled her perfume, I had already lived a lifetime with her in my mind." When consumers experience "sexual impulses" or "sexual stimulation" beyond commitment, feeling advertisements/brands are like lovers, these are lover sexual advertisements, such as Givenchy's "No taboos, indulge alone."

Second, social emotion expression. Emotions can be divided into social and

non-social emotions based on their guidance and regulation of social behavior (Deng et al., 2018). Social emotions arise from social interaction, focusing on individuals' mutual interactions in social contexts and their reactions to others (Silvers et al., 2012). Social interactions in relationships trigger different emotional responses, which are important reasons for consumers' emotional attitudes toward sexual advertisements (Gjelsvik, 2020; Martins et al., 2020). People perceive different emotions in social interactions, such as passion or coolness (Xie & Zhao, 2017; Norcia et al., 2015). When individuals feel passionate emotions, they become more passionate toward people or things; conversely, when feeling cool emotions, they become more calm and rational (Martins et al., 2020). Therefore, consumers generate different emotions when viewing different sexual advertisements. Based on consumer reactions, sexual advertisements can be divided into passionate and cool categories. Passionate sexual advertisements stimulate consumers' passion and "hot-emotional skills" expression (Gjelsvik, 2020). For example, Durex's 2018 World Cup slogan "Score goals, enjoy to the fullest," accompanied by passionate physical contact and eye contact between sexy male and female models, made consumers emotional and excited, stimulating sexual thoughts. Cool sexual advertisements stimulate consumers' "cool-cognitive skills" and "cool-executive skills" expression (Martins et al., 2020). For example, Emporio Armani's 2020 advertisement used models' cool expressions and actions to showcase appearance advantages and clothing's cool elegance; Honor of Kings "female heroes" used sharp eyes and cool skills to convey cool emotions, stimulating consumer responses.

In summary, overly direct sexual advertisements are perceived as immoral (Choi et al., 2016), while overly subtle indirect advertisements may be imperceptible. Social relationship expression forms better convey intended relationships and emotions through sexual elements and are more acceptable and perceptible than direct or indirect forms, becoming increasingly common.

2.2 Effects of Sexual Advertisements

Sexual advertisements are powerful but double-edged weapons in marketing, affecting consumer attention, attitudes, and purchase intentions (Buss & Duntley, 2014). Research suggests the human brain comprises "smart brain" and "lizard brain." The smart brain evolves through learning, distinguishing humans from other creatures, while the lizard brain represents instinct, remaining largely unchanged throughout evolution, focusing only on food, danger, and sex (Reichert et al., 2012). When sexual cues appear, the lizard brain instinctively mobilizes attention, making people more susceptible to sexual advertisements (Fidelis et al., 2017; Reichert et al., 2012; Wyllie et al., 2014). As more enterprises incorporate sexual elements (Reichert & Lambiase, 2003), two opposing views have emerged—positive and negative evaluations. This study systematically organizes and discusses both positive and negative effects.

2.2.1 Positive Effects of Sexual Advertisements First, sexual advertisements effectively enhance recognition and attention. For direct expression forms, sexual elements increase advertisement recognition (Putrevu, 2008; Weinberger & Gulas, 2019). From the consumer perspective, direct sexual advertisements create “excitatory” arousal (Leka et al., 2013). When consumers view such advertisements, hormones increase, emotions surge rapidly, and they experience tension-releasing pleasure during arousal decline. In other words, direct sexual advertisements arouse primitive physiological instincts—sexual impulses (Dahl et al., 2009), deepening attention and interest in advertisements and products (Cummins et al., 2021), generating positive effects (Putrevu, 2008; Reichert & Lambiase, 2003).

Second, sexual advertisements create deeper memories. For direct sexual advertisements, attending to sex-related information is instinctive (Dahl et al., 2009), creating strong visual impact, stronger attention, and memory points (Leka et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2019). For indirect sexual advertisements, sexual information embedding enhances recall and recognition (Anabila et al., 2015). Indirect advertisements require further information processing, increasing consumer engagement and memory. Additionally, indirect advertisements often use puns, making them more humorous and increasing transmission willingness (Mayer et al., 2019).

Third, sexual advertisements strengthen consumer-brand relationships and loyalty. For social relationship sexual advertisements, they evoke emotional experiences (Zhang et al., 2016), enhancing social relationships and brand attractiveness (Puzakova & Aggarwal, 2018). They also arouse sexual perception (Wirtz et al., 2018). When advertisements incorporate different sexual elements, triggering perceptions of long-term/stable vs. short-term/casual relationships or partnership vs. lover relationships, brands more easily establish corresponding social relationships with consumers. When product types match social sexual relationship types, brand loyalty and evaluations improve.

Finally, sexual advertisements satisfy special emotional needs. Despite negative effects mentioned below, the forbidden fruit effect means consumers may experience pleasant, satisfying positive emotions from violating taboos (Binder et al., 2020; Sabri & Obermiller, 2012). Purchasing products advertised with socially norm-violating sexual content makes consumers feel excited about breaking taboos, enhancing internal sense of power (Piha et al., 2018), generating higher purchase motivation. Because sexual advertisements inherently carry “taboo” in people’s stereotypes, consumers in sexually repressed and closed cultural environments may need sexual advertisements to satisfy “breakthrough” needs (Veer & Golf-Papez, 2018).

2.2.2 Negative Effects of Sexual Advertisements Although humans naturally attend to sex (Buss & Duntley, 2014) and sexual thoughts triggered by sexual advertisements, this does not guarantee positive attitudes (Lull & Bushman, 2015).

First, from the degree of sexiness, overly high or low levels produce negative effects. Overly direct sexual displays make advertisements seem vulgar (Peng, 2011; Lull & Bushman, 2015), causing consumers to focus on sexual information (Lawrence et al., 2021) and weakening product/brand memory (Das et al., 2015). Conversely, overly subtle advertisements may be imperceptible, failing to achieve promotional goals and causing ambiguity. In current marketing environments, gentle colors, exquisite designs, and 含蓄 copy more easily win consumer favor than direct, exposed displays (Anabila et al., 2015).

Second, from the consumer perspective, sexual advertisements easily feel discriminatory toward specific groups. Evolutionary psychology suggests survival and reproduction costs create physiological differences between sexes. Through long-term evolution, “lecherous” men who prioritized female physical features (e.g., prominent breasts and full buttocks) gained more reproductive opportunities (Buss, 2016). Therefore, men are generally considered more lecherous, and sexual advertisements often use female displays to attract male customers (Buss & Foley, 2020). When brands use directly exposed or biased sexual advertisements, consumers more easily feel offended and disrespected (Wyllie et al., 2014), generating negative evaluations and even collective boycotts (Goenka & van Osselaer, 2023; Lull & Bushman, 2015). However, Wyllie et al. (2014) note that specific marketing effects vary by consumer, suggesting future research should clarify boundary conditions for different consumer groups.

Finally, from social norms, direct sexual stimuli and excessive innuendo are easily considered immoral and vulgar (Latour & Henthorne, 2013; Liu et al., 2009). Especially in Asian countries including China, influenced by conservative Eastern culture (Peng, 2011), sexiness is often considered a taboo that cannot be publicly mentioned (Sabri et al., 2010; Sabri & Obermiller, 2012). Therefore, exposed sexual advertisements run counter to social norms. Constrained by social norms, consumers believe viewing sexual advertisements or purchasing related products may bring negative impacts (Sznycer et al., 2016), reducing purchase intentions (Piha et al., 2018). Thus, brands must pay special attention to ethical judgments and moral controversies when using sexual elements (Latour & Henthorne, 2013).

3. Mechanisms of Sexual Advertisements

To comprehensively clarify different sexual advertisements’ marketing effects, this paper further organizes underlying mechanisms and influencing factors, exploring mediating mechanisms from consumer cognition, physiological motivation, sexual self-schema, and social presence perspectives, and examining moderating factors like product type, advertising context, and individual traits.

3.1 Mediating Mechanisms of Sexual Advertisements

Sexual advertisements affect consumer perception through different approaches, but different mediating mechanisms yield different marketing effects. With

changing times, explanatory mechanisms have shifted from traditional consumer cognition and physiological sexual impulses to satisfying consumers' social needs, reflecting increasingly complex attitudes toward sexual advertisements. Modern consumers' cognition and reactions are no longer simple physiological responses but consider whether conveyed information matches social expectations and values. This section discusses mediating mechanisms from four perspectives.

3.1.1 Consumer Cognition Consumers' external cognition levels affect their reactions to external stimuli (Sternadori & Abitbol, 2019). Consumer cognition includes emotional levels, memory capacity, and moral cognition.

First, from the emotional perspective, sexual advertisements improve consumer emotional states (Sparks & Lang, 2015). Sexual advertisements create "excitatory" arousal (Leka et al., 2013). When viewing them, hormones increase, emotions surge, and consumers experience tension-releasing pleasure during arousal decline. Different sexual advertisement types also evoke different desire levels, making consumers prefer or dislike products (Felser, 2016) or perceive different degrees of sexual attractiveness, affecting brand preference (Ma & Gal, 2016).

Second, from the memory perspective, sexual advertisements as direct sensory stimuli significantly increase arousal (Leka et al., 2013), allocating more attention (Sparks & Lang, 2015; Reichert, 2002). Aroused, focused consumers better understand and absorb advertisement information (Leka et al., 2013). Due to evolutionary tendencies, individuals especially attend to evolution-relevant information like violence and sex (Lawrence et al., 2021). Thus, appropriate sexual elements effectively attract attention (Wong et al., 2019), improving advertisement scene memory (Wirtz et al., 2018).

Third, from the moral cognition perspective, consumers make moral judgments when viewing sexual advertisements, generating positive or negative brand evaluations (Choi et al., 2016). Different sexual advertisement types also affect consumer attitudes through trust (Su et al., 2021). Due to individual attention to sex, obvious sexual displays generate different trust levels, affecting purchase intentions.

Additionally, consumer cognition relates to knowledge levels, genetics, growth environments, and national culture (Matthes & Prieler, 2020). Future research can explore these aspects and examine effects of social distance and cognition levels.

3.1.2 Consumer Physiological Motivation First, regarding brain processing of external stimuli, sexual advertisements stimulate sexual zones like eyes and ears (Ågmo & Laan, 2022), keeping the brain highly activated (Li et al., 2020), increasing pituitary and adrenal hormones (Ågmo & Laan, 2022), and allocating more cognitive resources to sexual advertisements (Pawłowska et al., 2021). After stimulation stops, the DLPFC (dorsolateral prefrontal cortex), crucial for cognitive control, continues maintaining sexual stimulus representations

(Leon-Carrion et al., 2007), enabling further processing and evaluation.

Second, regarding subconscious needs, subconscious sexual instinct demands exist. Sexual stimuli in advertisements satisfy these subconscious appeals, which follow the “pleasure principle”—once satisfied, they generate pleasure. Thus, sexual advertisements receive positive evaluations, and advertisement liking spreads to products, improving product evaluations (Jiang et al., 2010).

Different sexual advertisement types also evoke different self-desire levels, making consumers prefer or dislike products (Felser, 2016) or perceive different sexual attractiveness levels, affecting brand preference (Ma & Gal, 2016). Additionally, different sexual advertisement types affect consumer attitudes through trust (Su et al., 2021).

In summary, the physiological motivation perspective examines sexual advertisements’ marketing effects based on sex’ s influence. However, individual sexual motivation extends beyond sexual impulses. Future research can explore consumers’ acceptance levels and other aspects.

3.1.3 Sexual Self-Schema Sexual self-schema refers to individuals’ cognitive summaries about their own sexuality, derived from past experiences, potentially affecting processing of sex-related information and guiding sexual behavior (Pulverman et al., 2017; Sweeney et al., 2015). Specifically, it concerns cognition and feelings about one’ s body, sexual attractiveness, sexual expression, and sexual roles, built through early experiences and growth, influenced by culture, society, family, and personal factors (Pulverman et al., 2017). Sexual advertisements affect individuals’ processing of received sex-related information through sexual self-schema, guiding consumer reactions (Mayer & Peev, 2017; Pulverman et al., 2017). Different sexual self-schemas produce different sexual preferences and evaluations (Choi et al., 2022). Existing research examines mediating mechanisms from two perspectives: accepting sexual information and sexual display attitudes.

First, from accepting sexual information, sexual self-schema affects consumers’ liberal or avoidant attitudes toward “sexual behavior,” influencing brand attitudes (Reichert, 2007). Individuals with higher sexual self-schema hold positive attitudes toward sexual behavior, stimulation, and topics, more readily accepting sexual element advertisements. Conversely, those with lower sexual self-schema hold avoidant attitudes, with sexual advertisements triggering negative emotions (Mayer & Peev, 2017). From the sexual display perspective, different sexual advertisements affect consumers’ own sexual display attitudes, making them more accepting or rejecting (Jiang et al., 2010).

Sexual self-schema also affects attention to advertisement-product fit. High fit enables effective marketing (Putrevu, 2008). For individuals with higher sexual self-schema, positive attitudes toward sex-related content lead to more effort in processing sexual advertisement information, enabling deeper evaluation of fit and increasing high-fit perception likelihood (Mayer & Peev, 2017). Conversely,

for those with lower sexual self-schema, viewing sexual advertisements leads to rapid negative evaluations regardless of fit (Mayer & Peev, 2017).

Overall, sexual self-schema is a mature perspective in sexual psychology with comprehensive summaries of individual sex information processing (Pulverman et al., 2017). Marketing scholars also use this perspective to deeply explore mediating mechanisms of sexual advertisements' consumer impact.

3.1.4 Social Presence Social presence includes perceived connection with others and the degree to which individuals are perceived as “real people” in media environments (Xie et al., 2021; Grewal et al., 2020), representing important user psychological experiences affecting human-computer interaction (Lin et al., 2021).

First, others' presence significantly affects purchasing behavior for sexual (advertisement) products. Brands often use direct sexual exposure to quickly attract attention. However, due to ethics and social norms, such advertisements and products are considered sensitive. Therefore, when purchasing sensitive products, if others (real or imagined) witness the purchase, consumers feel embarrassed, generating avoidance tendencies or more cautious shopping behavior (Ziegler et al., 2022). If consumers anticipate this purchase embarrassment, they typically buy other products to reduce embarrassment and minimize purchasing sexual (advertisement) products (Blair & Roese, 2013).

Second, different relationship types' presence affects purchasing differently. Compared with acquaintances, strangers' presence leads to more diverse seeking behavior (Wang et al., 2021), such as trying novel, stimulating sexual (advertisement) products. When strong-tie others (friends or family) are present, people feel freer and more relaxed, reducing embarrassment and concerns, enabling more comfortable choices. With unfamiliar friends, people self-monitor to maintain positive self-presentation (Ran et al., 2022), rejecting products with negative market evaluations (Philp & Nepomuceno, 2020). With distant acquaintances, people maintain positive images by avoiding risks, preferring familiar, conservative products (Ran et al., 2022) over novel sexual (advertisement) products.

Finally, technological progress innovates marketing methods. VR, AR, and other human-computer interaction technologies are gradually applied to advertisements. Combining sexual elements, consumers feel more immersed, with higher arousal, stronger interactive experiences, and positive marketing effects, where social presence plays an important role (Cabibihan et al., 2014; Grewal et al., 2020). For example, in the previously mentioned AR girlfriend game, players overlay images on reality via apps, seeing their “girlfriend” s' flushed face, feeling her breathing and heartbeat, creating immersive experiences. Frequent interaction with the “girlfriend” evokes the inner self, creating strong social presence, generating identification and even dependence on the game.

Overall, social presence directly or indirectly positively affects consumer trust

(Ogonowski et al., 2014; Ye et al., 2019), attitudes (Cabibihan et al., 2014), and purchase intentions (Lu et al., 2016; Ye et al., 2019). However, current social presence research mostly focuses on social media, with few scholars examining its application in sexual advertisements.

3.2 Boundary Conditions of Sexual Advertisements

Sexual advertisements arouse sexual thoughts, changing consumer attitudes toward advertised brands. However, their effects vary across contexts. This section explores boundary conditions from product type, advertising context, and individual traits.

3.2.1 Product Type Factors Product type is a common research topic in marketing. Although advertisement types may be identical, effects differ across product types. Research focuses on how sexual elements affect different product types differently.

First, product-advertisement consistency importantly affects consumer attitudes (Lee et al., 2020). When products and advertisements fit well (Mayer & Peev, 2017; Putrevu, 2008), consumers more likely perceive intended product features, generating positive attitudes. Sexual elements are typically limited to sexually positioned brands (Choi et al., 2022), such as perfume, underwear, cosmetics, and alcohol/tobacco, which naturally evoke sexual associations (Anabila et al., 2015; Reichert et al., 2012). Adding sexual elements to these products better arouses sexual impulses and attention. Conversely, unrelated products reduce consumer liking (Reichert et al., 2011).

Second, product involvement importantly affects advertising effectiveness (Zhou & Jin, 2009). High-involvement products are expensive or self-important (Heng et al., 2019), leading consumers to process deeply during selection and evaluation, weakening sexual elements' effects. Thus, sexual advertisements' marketing effects are not significant. Low-involvement products are inexpensive and low-risk (Fazli-Salehi et al., 2022), with shallow processing, making arousing sexual advertisements significantly effective (Jiang et al., 2010). However, Gong et al. (2021) note that sexual advertisements more easily create distraction effects under low product involvement—sexual elements increase visual attention to sexual information, reducing attention to non-sexual product information (Fazli-Salehi et al., 2022), interfering with low-involvement product advertisement information processing.

Finally, differences between hedonic and utilitarian products greatly affect sexual advertisements (Putrevu, 2008). Consumers compare expected product benefits with purchase-related embarrassment costs. Hedonic product consumption may prompt consumers to endure embarrassment for satisfactory experiences (Piha et al., 2018)—product hedonic attributes can reduce negative impacts on social morality and behavioral norms. Additionally, since sex brings pleasure and satisfaction (Chang et al., 2020; Das et al., 2015), appropriate combina-

tion of hedonic products and sex makes consumers perceive higher pleasure, enhancing positive attitudes (Mayer & Peev, 2017). For example, in the rapidly developing internet environment, online games are increasingly popular, with consumers expecting pleasure and satisfaction. Popular games like *League of Legends* and *Honor of Kings* feature sexy female characters—*League of Legends* “Sheriff of Piltover” with a hot body, *Honor of Kings* “Mai Shiranui” sexy and enchanting, and “Daji” charming and cute, widely praised by consumers. In contrast, utilitarian products emphasize functional attributes; forcibly combining functional attributes with sex makes consumers feel uncomfortable and confused, generating negative attitudes (Mayer & Peev, 2017). For example, Yeshe Coconut Juice, marketed as nutritious and healthy, used the slogan “One cup daily, curves moving, white and plump,” making consumers feel uncomfortable and vulgar.

With richer popular culture, product types continuously expand. Besides existing perspectives on product fit or functional positioning, future research can explore deeper aspects like product gender characteristics and emotional features.

3.2.2 Advertising Context Factors Context is an “information system” created under media technology without physical environmental constraints (Han et al., 2020). Advertising context affects behavior, with consumers evaluating sexual advertisements differently across contexts. Different placement channels and presentation methods affect final marketing effectiveness.

First, regarding placement channels, online has advantages over offline. Since sexual advertisements are often viewed as exposed, vulgar, or socially immoral (Latour & Henthorne, 2013), viewing or purchasing may cause embarrassment. Londono et al. (2017) note that offline purchase contexts cannot be fully controlled by consumers (e.g., others present), while online shopping privacy reduces embarrassment. Thus, online sexual advertisements may generate more positive effects and evaluations.

Second, regarding presentation methods, AR sexual advertisements have informational, novel, interesting, interactive, and effective characteristics compared to traditional print advertisements, more likely gaining positive evaluations (Hilken et al., 2017). Since AR technology first appeared in media in 2009, AR marketing and other new forms have gradually become mainstream. AR sexual advertisements increase curiosity and attention, achieving expected marketing effects (Yang, Carlson, & Chen, 2020). Specifically, AR advertisements quickly evoke sensory perception, bringing novel stimulation, arousing perceptual curiosity, increasing attention (Hill et al., 2016), and stimulating desire to understand and experience products. Additionally, AR sexual advertisements provide more interactive consumption experiences (Yang, Carlson, & Chen, 2020) and smoother product information processing (Pozharliev et al., 2017), generating more positive product attitudes (Park & Yoo, 2020) and brand attitudes (van Esch et al., 2019). For example, simple AR scan advertisements incorporating

promotions, discounts, and rewards increase user open rates and sales conversion. AR's interactive properties with sexy virtual spokespersons greatly enrich user experiences. Frequent interaction with virtual images subconsciously generates identification and even dependence, forming stable emotional connections—effects difficult for traditional print advertisements to achieve. As technology thresholds and costs decrease, new technology advertisements' advantages become more apparent.

Advertising contexts are complex and diverse, with each specific context creating different effects. However, current research on contextual moderation mostly focuses on advertisement content itself, though media also affect thinking and habits. Future research can examine different media forms' effects, such as whether sexual advertisements in mass media versus online media have consistent consumer impacts, exploring marketing effects in more contexts.

3.2.3 Individual Trait Factors Different consumer traits lead to different sexual advertisement perceptions. Many scholars examine mechanisms from consumer trait perspectives.

First, different individual cognition levels produce different effects. From consumer involvement perspective—consumers' passive reception capacity—sexual advertisements are more effective for low-involvement consumers because they leave deeper impressions and stronger cognitive reactions, achieving better marketing effects (Putrevu, 2008).

Second, gender differences are a key research focus. Early research indicates men and women differ in sexual motivation and desire (Stimpson et al., 1992). From human nature perspective, men typically show more positive responses to sexual stimuli than women (Dahl et al., 2009; Liang et al., 2023). Therefore, sexual advertisements produce different marketing effects by gender. Generally, sexual advertisements generate higher brand attitudes and purchase intentions among male consumers, while females give lower evaluations (Putrevu, 2008). Compared to sexual information, female consumers focus more on advertisement-content and product relevance, so mismatched sexual content triggers negative emotions (Black & Morton, 2015). From spokesperson gender perspective, when consumers see same-gender models in sexual advertisements, familiarity reduces attention (Dianoux & Linhart, 2010; Reichert et al., 2012). Although men attend to sex more than women, they also evaluate same-gender spokesperson sexual advertisements lower (Black & Morton, 2015). Evolutionary psychology suggests gender differences affect post-viewing reactions. Men in mating motivation states show more positive attitudes toward sexual advertisements than non-mating motivation states, while mating motivation does not significantly affect women's attitudes (Kim & Kim, 2016; Monga & Gürhan-Canli, 2012).

Third, age differences affect sexual advertisements. Consumers aged 18-34 show highest sexual attention (Hamilton, 2021) and stronger sexual impulses, making them more susceptible to sexual advertisements and most suitable for sexual

marketing (Lull & Bushman, 2015).

Finally, education level and social civilization degree affect sexual attitudes. Higher education and civilization levels make individuals more likely to consider sexual advertisements immoral (Anabila et al., 2015).

Consumer attitudes toward sexual advertisements are influenced by individual traits. Besides cognition, gender, age, and education, future research can examine emotional traits and other perspectives.

4. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

The above literature review shows sexual advertisement research has become increasingly refined and deep, expanding from concept and classification exploration to specific influencing factors and consumer behavior cognition. However, due to limited professional perspectives, early research confined concepts to sexual display forms without clear boundaries, leaving many unexplored areas.

To facilitate broader and deeper future exploration, this paper summarizes existing literature from a marketing perspective, organizing research findings into a framework (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]) to provide references for subsequent research and guide brand managers in appropriate sexual advertisement usage for better marketing effects and business development.

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of Sexy Effect

Source: Compiled by authors

This paper identifies future research directions:

4.1 Research on Classification and Effects of Sexual Advertisements

As previously described, we have classified sexual advertisements into direct expression, indirect expression, and social relationship expression based on existing literature. However, these aspects have unavoidable shortcomings. Future research can explore two directions.

First, existing literature mainly focuses on direct expression forms like body exposure (Bailey et al., 2021; Sparks & Lang, 2015), sexual actions (Choi et al., 2022), and sexual imagery/text (Anabila et al., 2015). However, indirect expression forms like sexual innuendo (Wirtz et al., 2018) and sexual embedding (Jiang et al., 2010; Schick et al., 2013) also exist. Because indirect sexual expression degrees are difficult to control and effects are ambiguous (Black & Morton, 2015), researchers prefer direct, exposed sexual advertisements as experimental stimuli, leaving unclear whether conclusions apply to indirect forms. Additionally, under intense market competition, brands increasingly value relationship building and maintenance, making social relationship expression forms more common. However, existing literature only focuses on individual relationships, while social relationships and activities are complex and variable, leaving more

social relationship sexual advertisements' effects, mechanisms, and boundary conditions to be explored.

Second, future research should further examine potential cultural differences. Most existing literature originates from Western countries, with researchers naturally selecting Western subjects. However, influenced by growth environments, social norms, and ethics, Eastern and Western consumers may differ significantly. Future research can consider relatively traditional Eastern subjects to determine whether sexual marketing effects remain significant, or whether gender social tendency differences between cultures challenge existing conclusions. For example, displaying certain body parts may be offensive in some cultures but not others (Matthes & Prieler, 2020). Additionally, existing research often has limited and single-source subjects. Future research can expand sample sizes and sources (Matthes & Prieler, 2020), collecting cross-country data for cross-cultural comparisons to determine whether participants in repressed and liberal social environments react consistently to sexual advertisements (Lawrence et al., 2021).

Future research can also deeply analyze moderating effects of new advertisement presentation methods. As mentioned, AR and VR marketing are becoming mainstream, more likely to gain positive evaluations than traditional print advertisements (Hilken et al., 2017). However, individuals' negative attitudes toward new technology and technical defects may affect evaluations. For example, consumers may experience discomfort (e.g., dizziness, nausea) from AR sexual advertisements (van Esch et al., 2019), and experiences with AR applications' controllability, responsiveness, and interest may vary (Park & Yoo, 2020). AR and VR sexual advertisements' effects also differ across product types and audience traits.

Additionally, future research can examine interactive effects of colors and color saturation in sexual advertisements. Sexual advertisements create "excitatory" arousal (Leka et al., 2013), with emotions surging and tension-releasing pleasure during decline. High-saturation colors connect with passion and excitement, quickly stimulating senses and arousing excitement (Huang et al., 2010; Labrecque et al., 2013). Brands often use high-saturation makeup (e.g., red lipstick, peach eyeshadow) to highlight models' sexy beauty. However, low-saturation colors (e.g., Morandi 色系) bring relaxation and pleasure, making consumers more interested in browsing and purchasing, reducing purchase delay (Liu & Liang, 2015; Yang, Li, & Zhang, 2020), and improving perceived product quality (Huang et al., 2010). Appropriate color use in different sexual advertisement types can effectively improve evaluations and purchase intentions.

Furthermore, future research can explore marketing effects of anime, 二次元, and virtual world contexts. The market shows a trend from female objectification to sexual empowerment (Kordrostami & Lacznia, 2022), with sexual objectification reducing advertisement attractiveness and triggering negative attitudes (Elika & Melika, 2020). However, some bold, exposed 二次元 characters have gained consumer love and pursuit. Why does over-sexualization or objectifica-

tion of female characters achieve positive marketing effects in virtual worlds unlike reality? Future in-depth exploration will provide beneficial theoretical guidance for cross-dimensional marketing activities.

Finally, future research can explore de-sexualization effects and applicable contexts. As mentioned, to avoid deepening negative perceptions and better protect consumer privacy, increasingly many sexual products are “de-sexualizing,” using artistic, healthy, and cute styles. The huge contrast between 简约 neutral packaging, 含蓄 fresh copy, and products’ sexual properties—does this 反差 enable more ideal marketing effects? Does de-sexualization marketing suit all sexually positioned brands? What are the mechanisms and boundary conditions? These questions warrant further exploration.

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