

DOES SEX STILL SELL? HOW PERCEPTION OF SEXUALIZED ADVERTISEMENTS
INFLUENCES BUYING BEHAVIORS

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
with a Major in Psychological Research
May 2023

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my committee chairs and members. Your direction and feedback were extremely valuable to the success of this project, especially regarding the design & analytic approach. Thank you for your flexibility when the project ran into obstacles.

Additionally I would like to thank the wonderful research assistants who helped collect data: Madison Zurovec, Cas Walker, Xander Shannon, Adara Walker, Grace Allbritton, Yamileth de Leon, and Claire Sander. They gave valuable insights that helped guide the creation of the project in addition to the work they did for data collection.

I would like to thank my friends and cohort for helping me with any questions I had regarding not only our coursework, but also my thesis, research ideas, and deadlines. And finally, I would like to thank my parents for their continued support of my education and career.

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ABSTRACT

Past research has shown mixed effects of sexualized advertising on purchasing behaviors, with some studies showing that sexualized advertising increases sales and others showing that intentions to buy products are not influenced by sexualized versus non-sexualized advertising. Previous research has also shown a potential gender difference in reception of sexualized advertising. Despite Generation Z becoming a large portion of the economy, there is little research on their buying behaviors, and no research regarding sexualized advertising. To address this gap, this thesis investigated how sexualized advertising influenced the buying behavior of Generation Z.

This study employed a series of surveys to investigate how Generation Z interacts with products included in sexualized advertising compared to products that did not have sexualized advertising. We found that Generation Z was less likely to choose products from sexualized advertisements compared to non-sexualized advertisements. This study did not find a significant difference between men and women for buying behaviors. Exploratory analyses found that sexualized advertisements made participants uncomfortable, that people in relationships were less likely to choose sexualized advertisements, and that women, compared to men, found both sexualized and non-sexualized advertisements to be more representative and sexualized advertisements to be more empowering.

The practical implications of this study show that the standard practice of using sexualized advertising to market products may not be the best route when marketing products to Generation Z.

I. INTRODUCTION

Sexualized Advertising

The world of advertising has a long history of using sexualized images to sell consumer products. The term ‘sex sells’ is common vernacular to describe this marketing strategy, and it is applied to many industries including entertainment, clothing, health, and even medicine (Reichert et al., 2012). In America, sexualized advertisements have been part of our economic culture since the early 1800s with circuses and medicinal companies using scantily clad women to advertise (Reichert, 2014). Though there have been time frames of conservatism in reference to sexual morality (e.g., the Victorian Era), companies always went back to using sexualized imagery for advertising (Reichert, 2014) and it is now a staple of American marketing. The reason that sexualized imagery is so often used in advertising is that, historically, there has been a relationship between when sexualized advertisements are released and an increase in sales after publication of those advertisements (Reichert, 2014).

Much research has investigated whether sexualized advertisements, compared to non-sexualized advertisements, are associated with better memory of and greater intentions to buy the product or brand. Such an increase in memory is important to marketers because it shows signs that the advertisements are increasing awareness of the product or brand being advertised (Janiszewski et al., 2012), which may later impact purchasing behavior. Although some studies have found sexualized imagery to increase memory of the advertised product or brand (King et al., 2015), meta-analyses reveal that the memory of and intentions to buy the product or brand are not affected by the sexualized versus non-sexualized content of the advertisements (Lull & Bushman, 2015; Wirtz et al., 2018). Thus, sexualized advertising may not be as effective as many advertisers believe it to be.

In addition, gender is an important factor to consider. For instance, women are less likely to recall the sexualized advertisements compared to men (Lawrence et al., 2021; Parker & Furnham, 2007). This gender difference poses a question of whether it is the sex that really sells, or if there are more social aspects impacting the influence of sexualized advertisements. A study on sexualized advertising in various contexts found that women rated sexualized advertisements more negatively than men rated the advertisements, regardless of the advertisement context or sex of the model featured (Lanseng, 2016). Another study also looked at purchasing intentions in addition to ratings and found that there was a difference in both perception of sexualized advertising—with women giving more negative ratings—and purchasing intentions between genders—with women being less likely to purchase a product (Gramazio, 2021).

An important note to make when discussing the gender differences in reception of sexualized advertisements is that female models are twice as likely to be depicted in sexualized advertisements compared to male models (Giaccardi et al., 2019). In addition, across all advertising involving female models, studies show that up to half of the models are depicted as sexual objects (Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008). Overrepresentation of female models in sexualized advertisements leads to the controversy that has inevitably surrounded the use of sexualized imagery to sell products. The leading concern for researchers for decades is that, due to the oversaturation of sexual imagery in our culture's advertising and entertainment, these sexualized advertisements and objects will interfere with personal relationships by affecting the emotional level of relationships (Baudrillard, 1998).

Another concern for psychologists is that sexualized advertising and products can have a negative impact on self-perception, especially for women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). With the social concerns of sexualized advertising and the decrease in effectiveness of these

advertisements for female consumers, the future of advertising may not necessarily need to focus on sexual imagery as a way to sell products.

Generation Z's Values and Advertising

According to Forbes, as of 2021, Generation Z's (individuals born 1997-2012) estimated purchasing power reached \$142 billion (Raynor, 2021). With this impact of young buyers in mind, companies should start shifting their ad campaigns to target this younger generation and adapt to their values. Current patterns of American politics are showing an increase in liberal ideology with each generation (Fisher, 2020), but this increase does not necessarily mean that younger generations are more sexually liberal. Studies have shown that Generation Z adults are having less sex than previous generations at the same age, have fewer sexual partners (Twenge et al., 2017), and are also less interested in casual sex (South & Lei, 2021).

This lack of interest does not mean that sexuality is not important to Generation Z, though. In fact, Generation Z has a more positive view of diverse sexualities (Bitterman & Hess, 2021), and conservative estimates show that at least 16% of Generation Z identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or other sexual minority (LGBT+) compared to only 9% of millennials (The Gallup Organization, 2020). Generation Z is also more likely to ask for enthusiastic consent and is comfortable having nuanced conversations surrounding sexuality (Whittington, 2021). Along with this openness to discussion of sexuality, Generation Z also has lower rates of sexual assault (Rue, 2018). Although there is no research showing the reception of sexualized advertisements specifically for Generation Z, their other opinions on important brand values can give insight into their core values. According to a 2021 consumer insights study conducted by Quantilope, diversity and inclusion top the list of what is most important to

Generation Z consumers. Studies also show that Generation Z appreciates ad campaigns focused on social justice issues such as the #MeToo movement (Bonaparte & Reeves, 2020) and want brands to hold employees accountable. Along with these expectations for brands, Generation Z has also been coined the digital generation, meaning that digital marketing is key in reaching this generation. Another Forbes article notes that 97% of Generation Z consumers are influenced by social media when it comes to their buying behaviors (Kastenholz, 2021).

Eye Tracking in Advertising Research

The goal for advertising is to be eye-catching and memorable. One of the best ways to measure the effectiveness of advertisements is to use eye-tracking to assess what grabs the consumer's attention (Wawrzyniak & Wasikowska, 2016) and to help objectively understand consumer behavior (Khachatryan & Rihn, 2014). Not only can eye tracking assess which advertisements are most effective, it can also pinpoint the design elements of the advertisements that were most impactful (Champlin et al., 2014) with more complex, creative design elements garnering more attention (Pieters et al., 2010). Eye-tracking is commonly used to measure the effectiveness of digital advertisement, notably social media advertisements (Wang & Hung, 2019) and website banner advertisements (Liu, Liang, & Liu, 2019). Not only has eye tracking helped marketers determine if advertisements were being given significant visual attention, but studies have also shown that there is a positive relationship between visual attention given to a product and positive attitude toward that product (Hwang & Lee, 2018).

With the recent meta-analytic studies suggesting that sexualized advertising may not be effective (Lull & Bushman, 2015; Wirtz et al., 2018), researchers have started using eye tracking to analyze the impact of this method of advertising on attention. Eye-tracking systems can measure different aspects of visual attention given to stimuli; aspects relevant to this study are

gaze time and fixations. A study looking at attention in regard to different aspects of an advertisement—including model, logo, copy, and product—found that advertisements that featured sexualized models caused consumers to devote more attention to the model and less attention to the product, brand, and copy (Cummins et al., 2021). A separate study by two of the previous researchers found that less attention was given to the product only when the sexualized advertisement had low product involvement (i.e., a motivational state that determines how consumers perceive the importance of a product based on their own needs and values (Youn & Kim, 2018), while sexualized advertisements with high product involvement increased the attention given to the product (Gong et al., 2021). Another study found that faces of the sexualized models were given more attention than the body of the model and the product being advertised, despite the prediction that the sexualized body would be the main focus of consumers (Hwang et al., 2020). Furthermore, although these studies show that sexualized advertisements are given more attention, additional research shows that sexualized advertising does not result in better recall of the product or brand (Fidelis et al., 2017; Lull & Bushman, 2015; Wirtz et al., 2018). This research on memory brings up a point of concern for how effective sexualized advertising really is when it does not increase the memory of the product or brand, while also potentially decreasing the attention given to the product or brand. If the goal for marketers is to sell the product, sexualized imagery might not be the best route to achieve that based on eye tracking research.

Conclusion and Gaps in the Research

Advertising using sexualized imagery has a rich and complex history. While past sales have shown that sex does in fact sell (Reichert, 2014), there is now doubt of that statement as our culture and values shift (Lawrence, 2021), and based on meta-analyses revealing that sexualized

advertising does not affect consumers' memory of the brand or product being advertised, or their intentions to buy it (Lull & Bushman, 2015; Wirtz et al., 2018). A major influence on cultural changes is the rise of Generation Z as they age into adulthood and comprise a large portion of the consumer population (Rue, 2018). Compared to older generations, this generation values diversity, inclusion, accountability, and transparency more (Kastenholz, 2021), and values sex less (South, 2021; Twenge, 2017). To the best of the present author's knowledge, there is no published research showing Generation Z's reception of sexualized advertising. Moreover, while there is eye tracking research regarding sexualized advertising (Cumming et al., 2021; Gong et al., 2021; Hwang et al., 2020), no studies inquired about the actual purchasing intentions of the participants involved in those studies. Even if the eye tracking data suggests that more attention is given to sexualized imagery (Cumming et al., 2021), it does not necessarily mean that consumers will end up purchasing the product being advertised, particularly if the attention to the sexualized imagery results in less attention given to the product or brand.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study investigates the following research questions: 1) Are sexualized advertisements more effective than non-sexualized advertisements at getting people to purchase products? 2) Do men and women respond differently to sexualized advertisements? To answer these questions participants were shown sexualized and non-sexualized advertisements and they were given surveys to examine buying behaviors and attitudes toward the advertisements. The goal of this study was to provide behavioral data about well-matched stimuli sets that can eventually be used to inform the design of eye-tracking studies.

It is predicted that when choosing between products that are advertised using sex appeal and products that are not advertised using sex appeal, participants will be less likely to buy the

product from the sexualized ad. Previous research also shows that there are gender differences that influence reception of sexualized ads, which leads to the prediction that women will choose to buy products from sexualized ads fewer times compared to men. In addition to these primary analyses, exploratory analyses will be conducted to look at how sexual orientation and relationship status influence buying behaviors.

II. METHODS

Participants

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board on August 24, 2022. Using an a priori power analysis, we calculated that 82 subjects (42 per group) would be required in order to have 95% power to detect a large gender difference ($d = .8$). To ensure sufficient data, we tested 94 participants who were recruited from Texas State University through SONA. The gender breakdown of this final sample, however, was not even (68 female, 25 male, 1 did not report gender), resulting in slightly lower power (92%) to detect a large effect size. All participants were part of Generation Z and between the ages of 18 and 25. For analyses that included gender, the participant that did not report their gender was excluded. Participants also reported their sexual orientation (60 heterosexual, 34 not-heterosexual), relationship status (48 single, 46 in a relationship), and race and ethnicity (45 Hispanic, 31 White, 11 Black, 5 Asian, 1 Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 1 did not report).

Measures and Procedures

Before participating in this study, informed consent was obtained from participants. Next, participants began the experimental portion of this study. During this portion, they were presented with 15 pairs of advertisements. Each pairing advertised similar products (e.g., clothing, foods, hygiene products, etc.) One of the advertisements in the pairing was sexualized while the other was not sexualized (see Appendix A). Models in the paired ads were matched to be as similar to each other as possible (including having similar hair color, skin tone, body type, and ethnicity) to control for potential biases. There were 10 advertisements that featured only women; thus two-thirds of both sexualized and non-sexualized ads did not depict men. The

advertisements were also all converted to black and white images to control for potential influence of colors used in the ads, and the two advertisements of each pair were the same dimensions. Each pairing was shown for 15 second followed by a question regarding which product they would be more likely to purchase (“Which product would you be more likely to purchase for yourself or as a gift for your partner, A or B?”) The side (left or right) in which the sexualized and non-sexualized ads were presented alternated randomly for each slide.

As data were being collected, it was decided to additionally include a 5-point Likert scale to allow participants to rate how each ad influenced their buying behavior (-2 = significantly less likely to purchase, 0 = neutral, 2 = significantly more likely to purchase). In total, 23 participants (16 female, 7 male) completed the additional questions.

After seeing all the stimuli, participants completed the final portion of the study which included an exit survey and a debriefing statement. While looking at a handout that included all ad images, participants answered the following questions:

- a. Which advertisements were most memorable?
- b. Did any advertisement make you feel uncomfortable or uneasy in anyway? If so, which advertisements?
- c. Did you feel represented by any of the advertisements? If so, which advertisements?
- d. Did you feel empowered by any of the advertisements? If so, which advertisements?

These questions were free response to allow participants to elaborate on their perceptions of the advertisements as well as provide reasoning for their buying behaviors.

Finally, at the end of the survey, we collected general demographic information (age, race, sex) as well as information regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, and relationship status. Participants also completed an additional questionnaire about political beliefs that was outside the scope of the planned analyses.

After the survey was over, a debriefing statement informed the participants of the general goal of the study and provided contact information and resources for questions and concerns. Participants in this study had the opportunity to end the study at any point if they no longer wished to participate. All surveys in this study were administered using Qualtrics.

III. RESULTS

Primary Analyses

A single-sample t-test that included the total sample ($N = 94$) was used to test if the proportion of sexualized advertisements chosen was different from 50% (i.e., what would be expected by chance). It was found that the sexualized advertisements were chosen significantly less than 50% of the time, $M = 37.16\%$, $SD = 14.58\%$, $t(93) = -8.54$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 2.54$. Follow-up analyses found that both men and women chose sexualized advertisements less than 50% of the time ($ps < .01$; Figure 1), and there was no significant difference based on gender (men $M_{\text{sexualized}} = 39.20\%$, $SD = 16.81\%$; women $M_{\text{sexualized}} = 36.47\%$, $SD = 13.84\%$, $t(91) = .79$, $p = .43$).

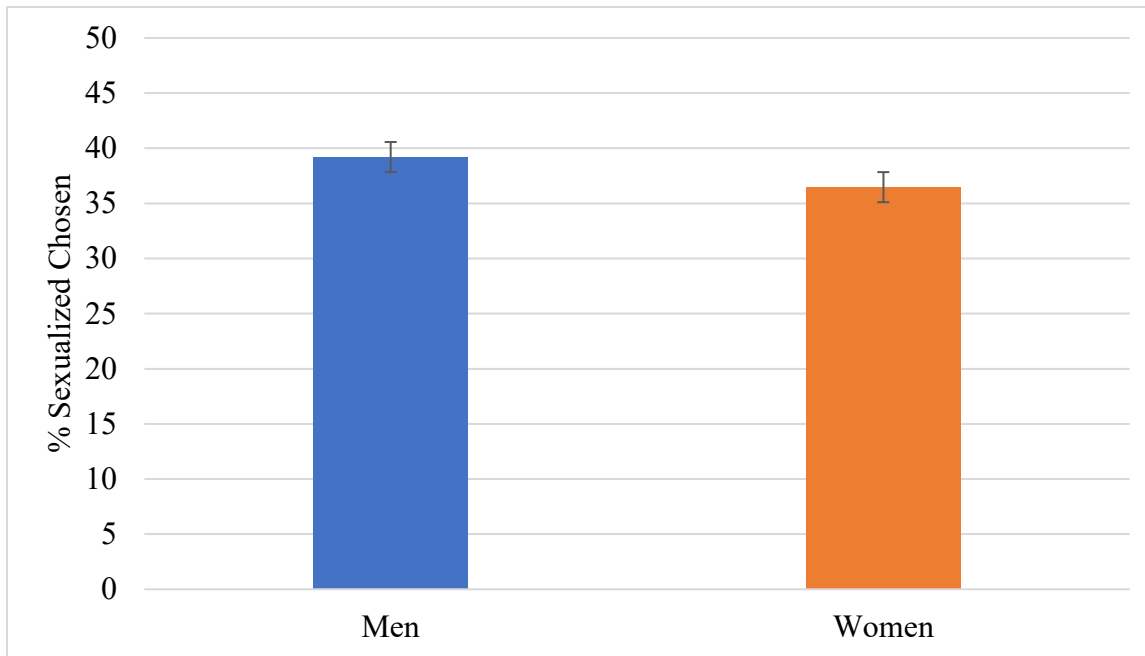


Figure 1. Sexualized Advertisements Chosen by Gender; *Note.* Error bars = 95% CI

Exploratory Analyses

Independent samples t-tests were used to investigate if participant sexual orientation or relationship status influenced their preference in advertisements. Participants who were not in romantic relationships chose sexualized advertisements more often than participants in romantic relationships, $t(92) = 1.76, p = .04$, Cohen's $d = .36$ (Figure 2). Sexual orientation (heterosexual, not heterosexual) did not significantly influence ad preferences, $t(92) = 0.84, p = .41$, Cohen's $d = .18$.

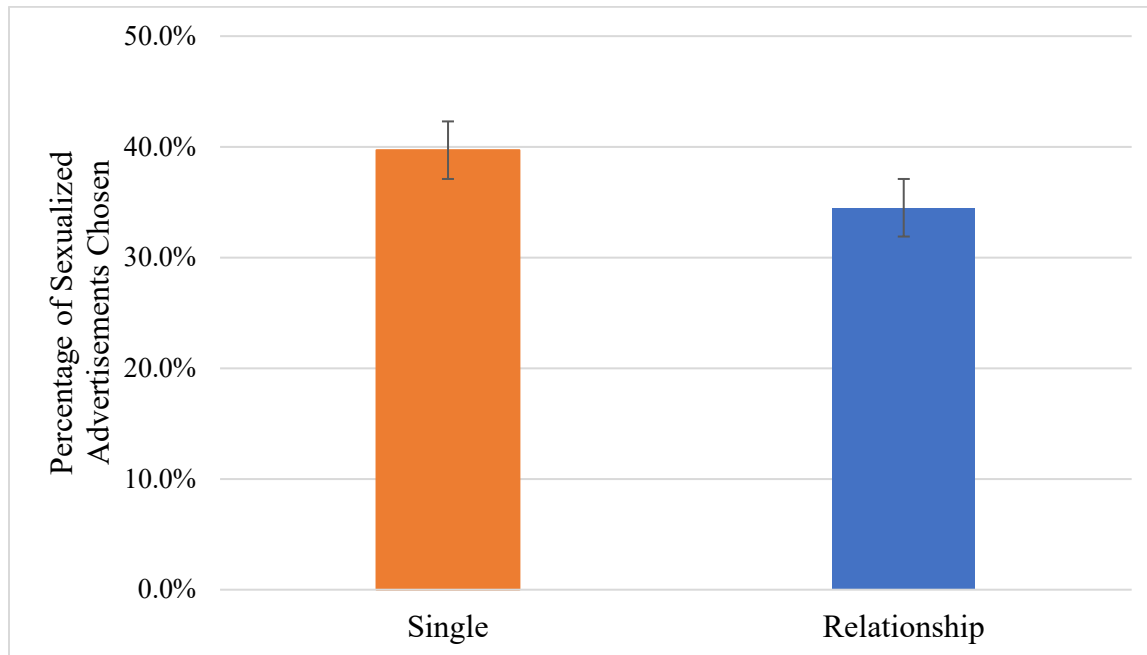


Figure 2. *Sexualized Advertisements Chosen as a Factor of Relationship Status*; Note. Error bars = 95% CI

After examining this forced choice data, the next analysis examined the subsample of participants ($n = 23$) who rated each individual ad's effectiveness on a scale ranging from -2 (significantly less likely to purchase) to 2 (significantly more likely to purchase). A 2 x 2 mixed-design ANOVA with the between-subjects factor being gender (women, men) and the within-

subjects factor being the ratings of advertisement type (sexualized, non-sexualized) was used to analyze the main effects of the advertisement factor as well as the main effects of how gender affected buying behaviors (Figure 3). There was a significant main effect of advertisement type, $F(1,21) = 31.416, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.41$, with non-sexualized ads being rated as more influential on the likelihood to purchase a product than sexualized ads. There was no significant effect of gender ($F(1,21) = .13, p = .73$) nor was there an interaction between gender and ad type ($F(1,21) = 1.01, p = .33$).

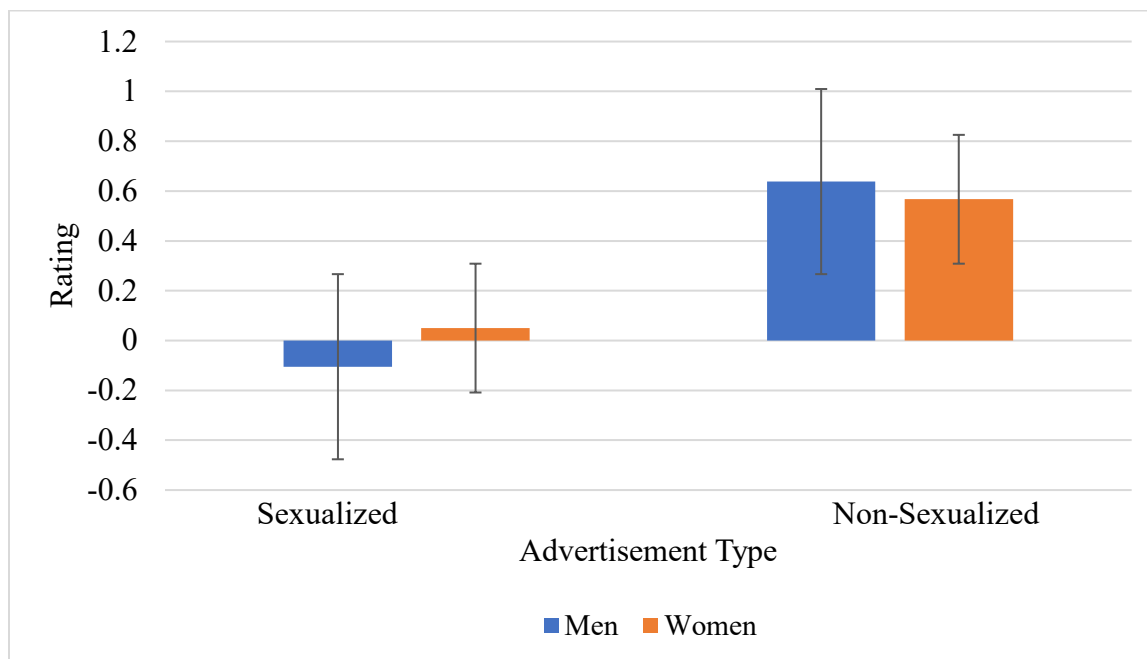


Figure 3. Influence of Advertising Type on Intention to Purchase Product; *Note.* Error Bars: 95% CI. A score of zero indicates no effect on planned purchasing behavior with positive scores indicating an increased desire to purchase and negative scores indicating a diminished interest in purchasing.

The final analyses examined participants' reports of which advertisements were most memorable, discomforting, representative, and empowering. With the number of ads listed as a dependent measure, we conducted a repeated measures ANOVA with ad type (sexualized vs.

non-sexualized) and impression type (memorable, discomforting, representative, and empowering) as within-participant factors and gender as a between-participant factor (Figure 4). There was no main effect of gender, such that men and women did not list significantly different number of advertisements overall ($F(1,91) = 3.23, p = .24$). There was a main effect of ad type, such that sexualized ads were more likely to be listed than non-sexualized ads ($F(1,273) = 12.94, p < .001$). There was also a main effect of impression type ($F(3,273) = 39.06, p < .001$) and a significant interaction between ad type and impression type ($F(3, 273) = 13.76, p < .001$), driven by larger differences between sexualized and non-sexualized ads on discomfort and representation than other attributes. Specifically, participants reported a greater number of sexualized advertisements made them feel uncomfortable compared to non-sexualized advertisements, $t(93) = 8.17, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .84$ and reported feeling represented by a greater number of non-sexualized advertisements than sexualized advertisements, $t(93) = -2.01, p = .024$, Cohen's $d = -0.21$. There was no difference between sexualized and non-sexualized advertisements regarding memorability, $t(93) = 1.12, p = .265$, Cohen's $d = .11$. or empowerment, $t(93) = 1.04, p = .302$, Cohen's $d = .11$.

There was also a significant interaction between gender and impression type ($F(1, 273) = 8.06, p < .001$). Post-hoc paired t tests indicated that women reported a larger number of sexualized, $M = .52, t(91) = 2.38, p = .019$, Cohen's $d = .55$, and non-sexualized advertisements, $M = .81, t(91) = 2.77, p = .007$, Cohen's $d = .65$, that made them feel represented than men did ($M_{\text{sexualized}} = .12; M_{\text{non-sexualized}} = .20$). Women also reported a greater number of sexualized advertisements, $M = .94, t(91) = 2.95, p = .004$, Cohen's $d = .69$, that made them feel empowered than men did ($M = .24$). There was no significant difference between genders for numbers of

advertisements that were memorable, $t(91) = -1.11, p = .269$, or discomforting, $t(91) = -3.62, p = .718$.

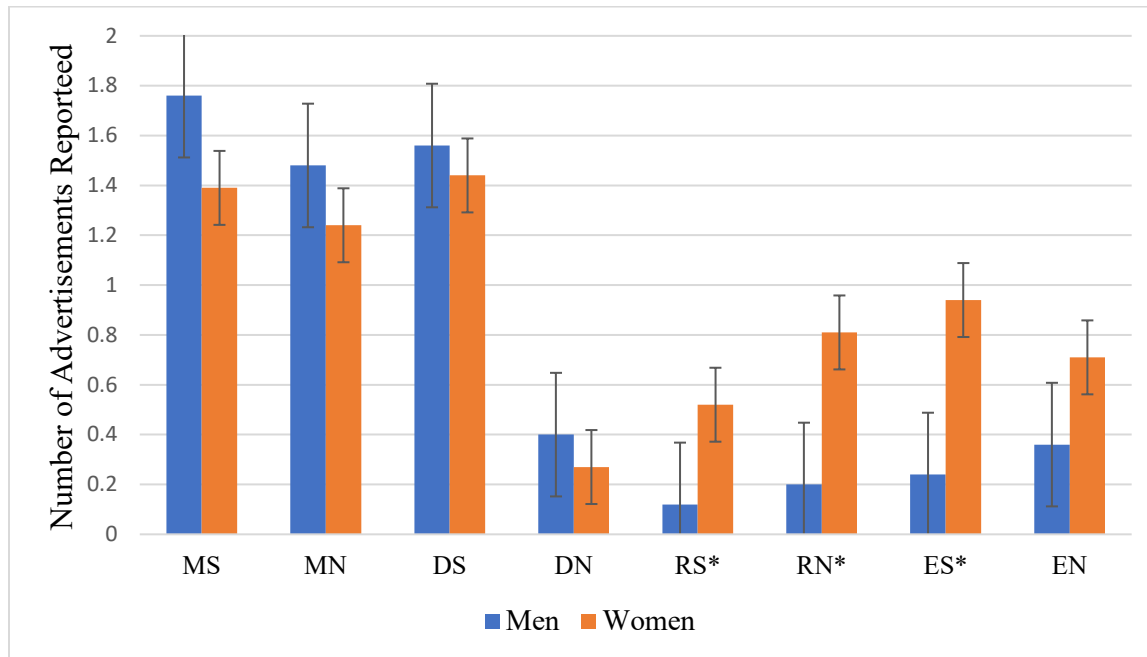


Figure 4. Number of Advertisements Reported Based on Gender Identity; *Note.* * Gender difference significant at $< .05$. MS = Memorability Sexualized, MN = Memorability Non-sexualized, DS = Discomfort Sexualized, DN = Discomfort Non-sexualized, RS = Represented Sexualized, RN = Represented Non-sexualized, ES = Empowered Sexualized, EN = Empowered Non-sexualized.

IV. DISCUSSION

General Discussion

The main hypothesis that Generation Z would be more likely to choose to purchase products featured in non-sexualized advertising was supported. This finding supports previous research that suggests that sexualized advertising does not influence intention to purchase products (Lull & Bushman, 2015; Wirtz et al., 2018) and suggests that Generation Z differs from populations that participated in the subset of previous research studies which did show that sexualized advertising increased sales (Reichert, 2014). Rather, Generations Z shows a preference for non-sexualized advertisements.

While the hypothesis that men would purchase more products from sexualized advertisements than women was not supported, it is still an interesting finding that men and women did not differ in buying behaviors as was expected. This contrasts previous research that suggests that sexualized advertisements are perceived differently depending on gender (Gramazio, 2021). Although buying behaviors did not differ, the reception of the advertisements as empowering and representative did differ as a factor of gender identity. Specifically, women reported a greater number of both sexualized advertisements and non-sexualized advertisements that made them feel represented. One explanation may be that there were more advertisements shown that featured female-presenting models. Women also reported feeling empowered by a greater number of sexualized advertisements than men reported. This could be influenced by the gender composition of the ads, but also indicates that women may be viewing the sexualized advertisements as depicting sexual agency rather than as sexual objectification, a trend that has been seen increasingly since the turn of the millennia (Gill, 2008).

Additionally, when investigating advertisement reception, it was found that participants perceived a greater number of sexualized ads as discomforting compared to non-sexualized ads. In addition to listing which ads made them feel discomforted, participants were also able to explain their answers. Participants mentioned reasons such as partial nudity making them uneasy, feeling as though they are violating the privacy of the models, advertisements using sexuality for “no reason”, being reminded of personal experiences of being sexualized, and feelings of objectification. It was also found that participants felt represented by a greater number of non-sexualized advertisements compared to sexualized advertisements. Participants reported feeling represented by the models who had similar body types, the models who had natural hair styles, advertisements that featured gender fluidity, and advertisements that featured models smiling and laughing.

Another interesting finding was that participants who were currently in romantic relationships were less likely to endorse purchasing products from sexualized advertisements. This finding parallels other research findings that people who prefer to engage in long-term romantic relationships are less likely to consume sexual material and media (Vendemia & Coduto, 2022). Lower consumption of sexualized content has also been shown as being a contributing factor in success and satisfaction of romantic relationships (Morgan, 2011).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has some limitations. The original intent was for this study to collect eye-tracking data. Due to technical issues with the eye tracking equipment available, it was not possible to collect that information as part of the present research. Future research should include the addition of eye tracking to investigate if visual attention given to the advertisements aligns with the buying behaviors of the participants.

The sample also showed some limitations. Continuous rankings of the advertisements, as opposed to a binary forced choice, were only added toward the end of data collection. It would have been beneficial to have this variable present for all participants. Additionally, there was an overrepresentation of women in the sample, consistent with the gender breakdown of the participant pool. It would have been ideal to have equal sample sizes of men and women considering that gender was an important variable being investigated. In particular, the sample of men providing continuous ratings was underpowered. Finally, all the participants were currently enrolled in college, even though many members of Generation Z are not in college. It would be interesting to compare the responses of age-matched members of Generation Z who are in different workplace and educational settings.

It would also be beneficial to compare static images versus video advertisements, as many advertisements online and on television are in video form. Research shows that video advertising has greater consumer recall and positive perception compared to static image advertisements (Deshpande, 2015), so adding this component when looking at perception of sexualized advertising may have an influence on the results found. With the increased usage of video-based social media platforms such as TikTok and Reels in the past 5 years (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Menon, 2022), the influence of sexualized imagery in video-based advertising may be more important for both advertisers and consumers compared to static image advertising. It is especially important for this avenue to be studied specifically for Generation Z, seeing as studies have shown that more than 70% of Generation Z use social media more than 4 hours per day (Mude & Undale, 2023) compared to the 27% of their Millennial counterparts. Similarly, while this study was presented in black and white to control for colors influencing attention, color is shown to have possible influence on consumer attitudes toward products (Cho, 2022; Lim,

2020). Presenting dynamic, colorful stimuli may lead to different perceptions of sexualized versus non-sexualized images.

The stimuli used also overrepresented female presenting models and contained limited diversity in race, ethnicity, and body type. Although the advertisements selected reflect general biases in print-based ads, future studies should include more diverse advertisements. Free responses from participants mentioned that they would have felt more represented if more Asian and Latinx models were shown, as well as if there were less heteronormative relationships in the advertisements. Investigating how representations interacts with sexualization when predicting buying behaviors is an interesting future direction.

Another limitation of the current study is that the surveys assessed participants' hypothetical buying behaviors, rather than their actual purchasing habits. Previous research does indicate that survey responses show relatively high concordance with real-world purchases (Grebitus et al., 2015), but this study did not specifically look at ratings of sexualized advertisements. If participants felt some social pressure to respond in specific ways, their hypothetical answers may not have matched their real purchases. Investigating whether social desirability influenced answers differently for men versus women is also an interesting future direction.

Conclusion

The present research expands upon the recent findings that sexual imagery may not be as influential in advertising as previously believed, specifically for Generation Z. This finding indicates that common marketing strategies that implement sexualized advertising may not be the best way to influence consumers to purchase products, regardless of gender identity. Future

research should include eye-tracking measures and measures of real-world purchasing behavior in response to a variety of ad modalities, including videos posted to social media. The current study provides important initial insights into understanding the psychology behind Generation Z's consumer behavior.

APPENDICES

Appendix A:



Example for display of advertisement pairings.

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