

# An Ethical Debate on Sex Appeal in Marketing



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# Introduction

Sex appeal is defined as using sexualised visuals or textual components in advertising messages (Tom Reichert, 2006). The use of this appeal can either be overt - using provocative images or videos, or covert – using subtle or minute messaging. Sex appeal is widely used in many industries such as fashion, alcohol, cosmetics, food, travel among others. The adage that ‘sex sells’ has sparked ethical debates for generation which has left researchers, advocacy groups and consumers embroiled in a web of conflict concerning the appropriateness of sex appeal in marketing and advertising and its impact of society. This paper seeks to objectively review arguments from both proposers and opposers to the use of sex appeal in advertising to reach an informed opinion on the ethical issues surrounding this subject.

## Proposing Arguments for Sex Appeal in Marketing

Proponents for the use sexual appeal in advertising argue that this persuasive tool is positive for business and society by marketing products directly related to sex, encouraging the celebration of female sexuality, acting as a force for racial inclusion and diversity in media, protecting creative expression and allowing brands to cut through advertising clutter.

### Products with a Direct Correlation to Sex



Figure 1, Victoria's Secret 'The Closeup' (2013), [www.ispot.tv](http://www.ispot.tv), <https://www.ispot.tv/ad/721L/victorias-secret-the-closeup-featuring-candice-swaneepoel>

Many in favour of sex appeal in marketing argue that it is appropriate due to the nature of a product's direct correlation to sex. Sex appeal is useful in marketing lingerie, perfumes, cosmetics and sex enhancement medications. Since the purpose of these items are to assist consumers in their goal of enhancing personal sex appeal or attracting potential mates, it is expected that brands would need to use sex in these marketing campaigns. It is unlikely that the target audience would find the content inappropriate or offensive (Mardenfeld, 2022). Lingerie brand Victoria's Secret is no stranger to using sex appeal to entice audiences to purchase their garments as a means for enhancing confidence when about to engage in sexual activity.

## Female Sexual Empowerment

Sexual content in the music industry has led to increased attention to female artists. Music videos are a means of advertisement for artists who are competing for viewership and airplay in a saturated market. Over the years the nature of sexuality in music videos has evolved with the goal of seducing and shocking listeners to gain top of mind awareness and share of voice, (Tom Reichert, 2006). Female artists who have been portrayed in sexually explicit videos often package their message as a form of female empowerment - a celebration of female sexuality and a rebellion against misogyny. Viewed as a tool for selling courage and self-esteem, (Jernigan, 2021). Beyonce is one such example of an artiste being celebrated for using sex appeal in her videos to foster a large and loyal fanbase and to generate sales.



Figure 2, *Crowning Glory* (2014), Beyonce in the video for *Haunted*, [www.express.co.uk](http://www.express.co.uk), <https://www.express.co.uk/entertainment/music/543160/Beyonce-Haunted-sexy-behind-the-scenes-video>

## Increased Representation of Non-Eurocentric Sex Appeal



Figure 3, *Carbon Magazine* (2020), Victoria's Secret 'Body by Victoria' Spring Campaign, <https://www.carbonmagazine.co.uk/features/whats-the-future-of-victorias-secret/>

Other arguments in favour of the use of sex appeal in media propose that it has been effective in diversifying ethnic sexuality and beauty standards for minorities such as Black and Asian. As such, the media is viewed as being more inclusive and thoughtful in displaying other standards of beauty aside from White Eurocentric ideals which has been the pattern for decades. In this way, businesses experienced increased success from widening their target market. The audiences in question also benefit from this representation by feeling vindicated in the celebration of non-white features which were previously deemed to be unattractive. For example, fuller lips, slanted eyes, wide hips etc. In Spring 2020, Victoria's Secret launched its 'Body by Victoria' campaign which was aimed largely at promoting diversity, with the hope that as more girls and women engaged with their brand the more likely it is that they will apply it in their lives showing off different forms of sex appeal, (Carbon: The Magazine for Young Creatives, 2020).



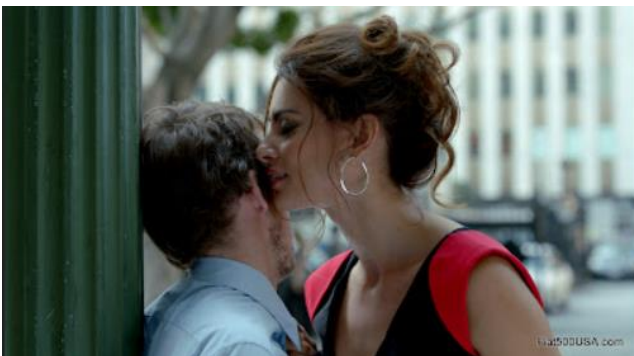
## Creative Expression

Sex appeal has been used for centuries to attract and influence audiences. The human form has been a muse in art and culture which has helped to shape the fabric of societies. In galleries, museums and the very halls of justice and governance are paintings, portraits, murals, statues and tapestries which display varying forms of human sex appeal across centuries. These relics, with varying degrees of explicitness, are celebrated as historic, inspiring, ground-breaking, ahead of its time and emotionally moving. In modern times, sex is once again used as a means to inspire creative conceptualization for the purpose of consumerism. In essence, it is nothing new.



Figure 4, Venus Callipyge at the National Archaeological Museum, Naples,  
<https://joyofmuseums.com/museums/europe/italy-museums/naples-museums/national-archaeological-museum-naples/venus-callipyge/>

## Yes! Sex Still Sells...



People respond strongly to sexual ads. Sexual appeal is a persuasive tool in advertising that grabs the attention of both men and women which is the main purpose of advertising; to cut through the clutter and keep the audiences' attention. Sex appeal from a marketing perspective is advantageous to businesses because it preys on the innate biological instinct of humans' desire for sex. Such content evokes several emotions, of which arousal is the strongest due to its psychological and physiological effects - leaving a lasting impression on the minds of consumers (LaTour, 1990). Sexual appeal in ads increases intrigue and interest around a brand which allows it to stand out more when compared to non-sexual ads. For example, in 2012 The Fiat 500 Abarth "Seduction" Super Bowl Ad caused a 10,000 visit pageview spike on the FIAT500.usa.com webpage just one hour after the ad aired. The car went on to set record sales in the U.S. with the brand celebrating a 128% increase in profit (Pimpo, 2012).

Figure 5 Fiat 500 Abarth Super Bowl (2012), fiat500usa.com,  
<http://www.fiat500usa.com/2012/02/fiat-500-abarth-super-bowl-ad-draws.html>

# Opposing Arguments for Sex Appeal in Marketing

Opposers to the use of sex appeal in marketing and advertising often cite the objectification of women and imbalance of power in media and entertainment, the bombardment of undesired sexual content experienced by uninterested audiences, the increased risk of media induced sexual harassment, the psychological impacts on women and the sexualization of children in media as reasons. These issues have caused individuals and advocacy groups to cry foul on the use of sexual appeal due to its increased provocative nature and negative impacts on vulnerable groups and the wider society.

## Objectification & Exploitation of Women

As music, movies and other forms of media have become increasingly sexualized in recent time, researchers have continued to question the balance of power within the entertainment industry. The female form has become an assembly of body-parts - assets used to sell goods and services for the benefit of organizations, (Tom Reichert, 2006). Particularly in the music industry, lyrics and the portrayal of sex appeal in videos have often adopted the theme of female fetishization for the benefit of the male gaze and fantasy. The content is often influenced and produced by male executives. Well known executives such as Colin Tilley and Jonas Akerlund are known video executives who have “ramped up the raunch” (KYRIAZIS, 2014) for artists such as Cardi B, Beyonce, Rihanna, Madonna and Britney Spears in past years.



Figure 6, YouTube (2020), Cardi B in the video WAP featuring Megan Thee Stallion, [www.youtube.com, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsm4poTWjMs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsm4poTWjMs)

## Alienation of Unintended Audiences



Figure 7, Halifax Harbour Bridges, Safe Driving Awareness Campaign

As brands and advertisers take create license in using sex appeal to attract their target consumers, there are cases in which sex does not sell. Mass media has ensured the bombardment of consumers with ad content, content for which a great number of people are not the intended audience. In culturally diverse countries such as Canada, the effects of using sex appeal when marketing certain products can have a negative impact on a brand when viewed by culturally or religiously conservative groups. In such cases, the brand will have a negative affiliation in the minds of consumers due to its associations with unwanted and unexpected sexual stimuli. This could negatively impact the brand in the long run as potential consumers remove such products from their scope of consideration when evaluating products, (Mardenfeld, 2022).

According to a marketing professor at Dalhousie University, “There’s a fine line between creating chatter and alienating an audience”, (The Record, 2020). The launch of a

safety awareness campaign by Halifax Harbour Bridges left some individuals feeling offended by the sexual innuendos in the content.

## Media Induced Harassment



Figure 8, Dolce & Gabbana (2015), Metro, <https://metro.co.uk/2015/03/18/dolce-gabbana-in-hot-water-again-after-gang-rape-ad-campaign-resurfaces-just-days-after-ivf-furore-5108624/>

The article entitled ‘*The Media-Induced Sexual Harassment*’ indicated linkages between the portrayal of sexual appeal and sexual readiness in media with sexual harassment. The study proposes that the cultural acceptance of sexualized images in media creates a normalization and cultural acceptance of sexual innuendos which creates a tolerant environment for sexual harassment (Guizzo, 2020). The study found that constant exposure to sexualized media content through ads, movies and video games, caused men to display a greater propensity for engaging in harassing behaviours such as lewd jokes and questions, invasion of personal space and sexual coercion. Italian fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana came under harsh scrutiny in 2015 for what the public referred to as a ‘gang bang ad’ that displayed a woman pinned to the ground by a man surrounded by men, (Duncan, 2015). Such displays, they argue, are harmful to the physical safety and wellbeing of women in society.

## Psychological Impact of Sexual Ads on Aging Women

A 2011 study of Australian women aged 60 and over, found that repeated exposure to images of sexualized young women in media, negatively impacted the self-image and mental health of aging women (Hine, 2011). The value western media places on young women as being more desirable and in their sexual prime contributed to feeling of being marginalised and ignored in older women. As a result, these women felt depressed and suffered from lower self-esteem due to the prevalence of sexualized young women in media. Madonna, age 64, is one of a few public figures in media and entertainment who have spoken openly about the scorn levied upon aging women in media who celebrate their sexuality.



Figure 9, Madonna Ciccone (2022), Facebook Photos



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*Not only do we suffer from racism and sexism, but we also suffer from ageism. And that is that once you reach a certain age, you're not allowed to be adventurous, you're not allowed to be sexual, and I think that's rather hideous. [...] I mean, is there a rule? Are you just supposed to die when you're 40?*



~ Madonna Ciccone, (IMDB, 1992)

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A study tracking the visual representation of gender and age in advertisements found that only 4% of talent used in ads were women aged 60 plus and the content was heavily skewed towards promoting medications and medical equipment.

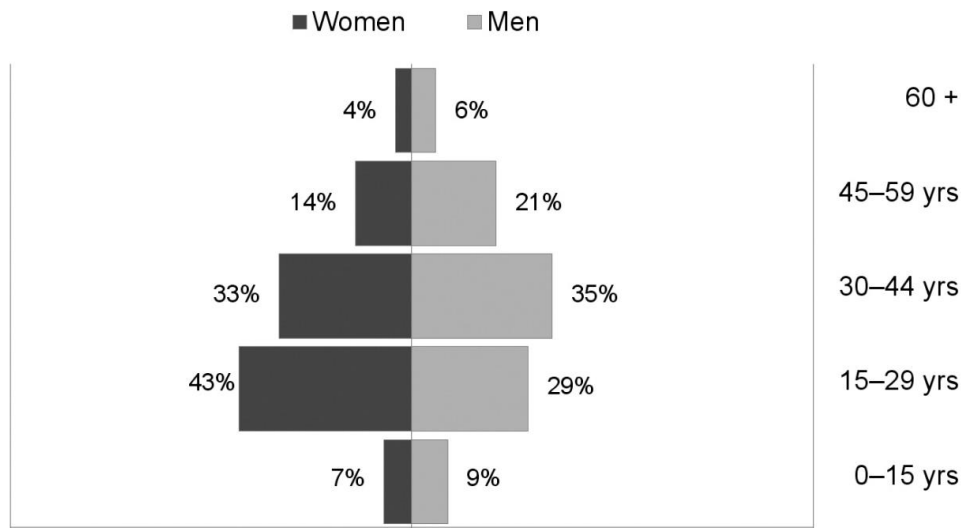


Figure 10, The gender and age ladder of the media buzz 2014. Visibility patterns of gendered ageism in the media buzz: A study of the representation of gender and age over three decades, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/figure/10.1080/14680777.2018.1409989?scroll=>

## Sexualization of Children in Media

As advertising becomes increasingly provocative, parents and child advocacy groups have become concerned with the representation of children in media. The issue at hand is cultural acceptance of the sexualization of children in western media. In these instances, specifically young prepubescent and adolescent girls are garbed in revealing clothing while suggestively posed in ads aimed at other children and adults. It raises the concern that this teaches young girls that it is normal and acceptable to be dressed and photographed in this manner to gain attention. Additionally, there is a wider societal risk of normalising the portrayal of children in sensual and suggestive content which can encourage predatory behaviour in adults (Monforte, 2020). A more extreme case occurred in November 2022, when fashion brand Balenciaga introduced its holiday campaign featuring teddy bears in sexual bondage gear alongside young children which many argued was a form of sexualization.



Figure 11, Photo-Illustration: by The Cut (2022); Photos: Balenciaga, Source: <https://www.thecut.com/2022/12/what-to-know-about-the-balenciaga-ad-scandal.html>

# Conclusion

From an ethical standpoint, marketers must be cognizant of the psychological impact of the content they produce, particularly its effects on vulnerable groups such as children, women and the elderly. I believe businesses have a responsibility to acknowledge this impact and take into consideration how it affects society as a whole.

However, the fact remains that sex has been used for centuries to inspire art, life and culture. Because sex appeal has been attached to the sale of goods and services should not limit a brand or creative team from using sex to conceptualise and bring to life an idea through the use of human sexuality, a subject with which people have always been fascinated. Sex appeal and sexuality is a fact of life, and this has always been the case.

As such, my final take on the issue is that operating a business in a society in strife and disrepute due to mental illness and sexual harassment is bad for business growth and development as social issues eventually begin to impact a company's bottom line. Companies who use sex appeal as a marketing strategy have an ethical duty to the countries and communities in which they operate to maintain a level of decorum in their messaging and desist from producing content that risks endangerment to vulnerable members of the populace.

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