BOOK REVIEW

Sex in Consumer Culture: the Erotic Content of Media and Marketing

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Freud might have overstated the case in claiming that everything people do can be linked to sex, but his ideas have had a deep impact on the development of theories and research models about sex and consumption patterns. Sexuality is a fundamental characteristic of people that influences their thoughts and behaviors, their orientation toward others, and life in general. Sex sells. It always has, beyond that cliché's inevitable appearance in media and marketing conversations. Despite the presence of sexual information in mainstream advertising, either in the form of sexual behavior, nudity, scantily-clad models, fetishism, or promises of sexual fulfillment and intimacy, few sources are available to those interested in studying this multifaceted phenomenon. Although sexual appeals are used to sell more products—and to boost popularity of media products such as television programming, films, magazines, music, and web sites—many scholars and consumers are still unable to describe "if" and "how" sex sells. *Sex in Consumer Culture: the Erotic Content of Media and Marketing* addresses these concerns by bringing together writers, thinkers, and researchers from several areas to examine what sex "is" in marketing, how it works, and how it may affect consumers and society.

Parents, pressure groups, and lawmakers soundly criticize the advertising industry for its portrayal of sex. Yet the outlets for and diversity of sexual fare continue to grow along with the toleration of sexual imagery. "We love our media sex, and we hate it too". (Sapolsky, 2003, p.296). Sex may thrive in popular culture and in

promotional activities precisely because it has been sanitized from many political, educational, and religious discourses. Negation of sexual content in some spheres of life probably ensures that it will remain an active presence in others, and in our own time, this content is carried out by mass media in its many forms. The collection of chapters in this book weighs in on the cultural duplicity noted by Saplosky, by documenting and describing the nature of sexual content in America's public media and promotional spaces. That sex is ubiquitous is no surprise. Far from heralding the obvious, however, the media and marketing scholars whose essays and research reports comprise this book paint an intriguing and eroticized vision of a mediated landscape. In so doing, they review pertinent research and break new ground in their analyses of a sexualized media, advertising content, and promotional culture.

Most social science work that studies mediated sexuality in mainstream America falls within two related but distinct areas. One of them may be characterized as traditional content and effects investigations conducted by mass communication scholars. Typical fare includes content analyses of television programming (e.g. prime time, soaps), music videos, magazines (e.g. editorial content, covers), books, films, and video games. The second research area is commonly referred to as sex in advertising research. Research in this domain is concerned with the use of sex for promotional uses – to sell products and to influence how consumers think and feel about certain products and brands. Like media research, sexual content in ads also varies between and among media (Reichert, 2002). Although a metaphorical boundary exists between editorial content and advertising/marketing, both are concerned with similar sexual content, and more importantly, both have similar goals in relation to consumers. Sex is added to programming to attract viewers about the subject, just as sexual appeals are added to advertising to attract consumers. For example, in media literature there is little discussion of how sex operates or functions in the mainstream media beyond the implicit assumption that sex is used to attract the attention of certain audiences who find sexual information pleasurable and arousing. In this sense, network "promos" or movie trailers can sprinkle in quick cuts of passionate scenes, erotic encounters, or feature disrobing implicitly promising that more is in store. The same is true of magazine covers featuring partially clad women confirming the belief that: "The cover of any successful magazine is a shrewd advertisement for what lies inside" (Handy, 1999, p.75). In In such eases, readers make little distinction between sex-tinged editorial content and the sexually-oriented advertising that pays for content, and thus, these magazines become a "seamless feast of eroticized eye candy" (Reichert, 2002). Sex can influence audiences in other ways as well. For example, the hedonic value of

sex can make the viewing experience more pleasurable; in other words viewers stay tuned longer either in anticipation of the erotic scenes or because what they are viewing is pleasurable. Consider the placement of cheerleaders and female sportscasters within sports coverage. This way media content can certainly be considered a "product" as it is either bought or paid for directly (i.e., consumers who buy magazines, films, music) or indirectly (i.e., firms that pay networks for access to viewers and advertising).

Although discussions of both 'sexualized' promotional products and mass media products are included within the covers of this book, it is difficult to construct a single definition that fits this global approach. Here, it is encompassed thus: "sexuality in the form of nudity, sexual imagery, innuendo, and double entendre employed as an advertising tool in the marketing culture and mass media" (Reichert *et al,* 2006). Scholars from different research traditions vary in terms of the levels of meaning they analyze and the concerns they address with regard to sex in advertising. For example, marketers are primarily concerned with micro-level effects; they want to know how sexual information evokes reactions within viewers, and how those reactions influence consumer behavior. Important variables include attention, feelings about the ad and about the brand, memory, and intentions to purchase the advertised product. Humanities researchers see sexual stimuli from wholly different perspectives, usually at the macro level. These scholars are interested in what sex-tinged advertising says about cultural myths, power, iconographies, relationships, development of gender identities and stereotypes, people's fantasies, ethics, and shared grammars of the body as commodity. In this book, several authors approach their topics by writing histories of cultural movements and using these histories as places from which to address sexual appeals. Although scholars from both the sciences and humanities usually discuss sexual appeals inside disciplinary boundaries, this collection allows dialogue to occur across those boundaries to create synergy among these varied perspectives. In addition, because sex is wrapped up in issues of power, sexuality, gender, and culture, the waters of this collection believes that it is important to talk about these appeals from multiple perspectives.

Exploring how sex is used to eroticize media, chapters in the first section titled "Sexualizing Media" of the collection describe the nature of sexual content in mainstream media forms, including films, music videos, video games, magazines and sports programming. For example, Mary Beth Oliver and Sriram Kalyanaraman in "Using Sex to Sell Movies: A Content Analysis of Movie Trailers" report the results of sexual content analysis in movie trailers. The authors indicate

that in addition to public relations efforts, and the creation of "buzz" effects, trailers are a primary form of movie promotion, and sexual content is present in a sizeable portion of movie trailers. In a related piece, Julie Andsager in "Seduction, Shock, and Sales" provides a concise review of sex in music video research, and argues that women such as Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Madonna or Shania Twain, brand themselves sexually and often rebrand themselves thus depending on the status and goals of their music careers. Again, in "Voluptuous Vixens and Macho Males: A Look at the Portrayal of Gender and Sexuality in Video Games", Stacy L. Smith and Emily Moyer-Guse shows how sex also finds expression in video game culture, stimulating not only "incalculable sales" of the game but also producing a lucrative cult following. They draw on examples like Lara Croft, the animated and "freakishly curvaceous" heroine of the popular Tomb Raider video game, who inspired two subsequent films featuring Angelina Jolie. In "Sex and the Marketing of Contemporary Consumer Magazines", Jacqueline Lambiase and Tom Reichert trace the history of masculinity in its various forms into the present-day sexualized images of men in "men's magazines". They juxtapose "masculinism" with "feminism", and provide a foundation for understanding the increased prevalence of men as objects of sex in consumer culture. On a similar note, Jamie Skerski attacks the pseudo-sexuality sold in contemporary sports channels in "From Sideline to Centerfold: The Sexual Commodification of Female Sportscasters".

The first two chapters of the second section ("Sexualizing Products") provide valuable overviews of the types and levels of sexual content directed toward two audiences: adolescents and internet users. Other chapters in this section examine erotic advertising content in specific product categories such as fashion, digital cameras, and beer. Carol Pardun and Kathy Forde examine "mediated sex" in their chapter "Sexual Content of Television Commercials Watched by Early Adolescents", and find that sexual content directed to these vulnerable audiences varies by audience race and gender. For example, one disturbing finding is that most sexual interactions in ads occur between unmarried, and potentially uncommitted, characters. Moving from traditional media to new media, in one of the very few systematic analyses of "mainstream" sexual content on the internet, Art Ramirez describes through a thorough content analysis the prevalence of sex in ads appearing on popular news, sports, and entertainment sites. Ramirez's sampling technique, involving randomized capturing of screen grabs, provides an excellent example of sampling web content so it can be subject to traditional content analysis methods. Moving from aggregate to the specific, the next chapter explores how alcoholic beverages and sexual themes are intimately entwined in American advertising. Although Jason Chambers is a historian, he situates the three rather

contemporary and controversial beer campaigns as ways in which marketers attempt to sexually brand their products while appealing to young males, and provides interpretation and context about why two of these campaigns were more effective than the third. In "From Polo to Provocateur: (Re) Branding Polo/Ralph Lauren with Sex in Advertising", Tom Reichert and Tray LaCaze carefully navigate their way through the use of sex in the fashion industry. The authors speculate on how and why a successful fashion brand such as Polo/Ralph Lauren can successfully sexualize its image. Fashion advertising also serves as the subject of Debra Merskin's work ("Where are the Clothes? The Pornographic Gaze in Mainstream American Fashion Advertising") on pornographic conventions used by women's clothing makers in advertising. She uses film, communication, and fashion theories to weave together the sexually-oriented narratives that emerge from fashion advertising. While these pornographic codes may serve as subtext within such advertising, they work to normalize objectification of women and girls as sexually available. Because female viewers of all ages are the intended consumers of such advertising from fashion magazines, women's conditioning by these pornographic conventions deserve our attention. Theorizing about the "logic of pornography", Jonathan Schroeder and Pierre McDonagh scrutinize digital camera advertising, and explore how it works by creating desire both for products and for flesh through a kind of sanctioned voyeurism. These circulating images of eroticized women in digital camera advertising, found in print and on the Web, trivialize sexuality, place female "objects" under surveillance, and again normalize pornographic conventions in mainstream culture.

"Sexualizing People", the final section of the book, focuses on people themselves as participants in erotic branding, as stereotypes, and as consumers of eroticized media. Corporate America often uses female workers to sexually brand products and services in live promotional activities. Using in-depth narrative interviewing of female employees, Jacqueline Lambiase chronicles and interprets these activities through semiotic analysis. Expected by their employers to generate "cocktail-party and call-girl vibes", these female employees use physical attractiveness, eroticized clothing, and well-known sexual scripts to sell products and attract attention. The study's findings confirm "sexual-scripting theory as well as document implicit employer demands for sexual behavior patterns well beyond the boundaries of explicit marketing policies". Using examples of people featured in the "Style" section of the *New York Times Magazine,* Stephen Gould shows how types of people become sexualized. He extends his theory of advertising lovemaps to explain how people and their contexts may become "fetishized" within fashion photography. Audience research on effects and preferences is also encouraged by

Dana Mastro and Susannah Stern, who study race and gender as critical factors regarding sexualized images in prime-time television advertising. The strength of this chapter is its summation of racial eroticization. Dovetailing with this study of racial depictions, is Diane Grimes' "Getting a Bit of the Other: Sexualized Stereotypes of Asian and Black Women in Planned Parenthood"; she undertakes a different methodology to describe sex and minority representation. Armed with a critical-cultural interpretivist framework she argues that the ads-intentionally or not-reinforce certain perceptions when paired with images of white men in a sexual health context. Gary Soldow uses historical methods to demonstrate the wily way that marketers target gay audience with homoerotic imagery. Focusing on the ultimate embodiment of "sexualizing people", a study by Larry Lance explores how people sell themselves when looking for romantic partners in personal ads. His analysis convincingly demonstrates that product manufacturers and media promoters are not the only ones who use sex to attract audiences, brand products, and sell goods.

A benefit of this book is that it does not focus on only quantitative or qualitative research, but encompasses both approaches. It includes chapters across disciplines from scholars who explore erotic appeals through a range of methods including empiricism, theory, interpretive analysis, and some of what lies among these perspectives. The more quantitative perspectives include studies of audience effects and individual difference variables, integrative reviews of past research, and new studies that build on past research using theories not yet applied to understanding the effects of these appeals. Definitional issues are addressed, and directions for future research are noted. Qualitative perspectives include studies by scholars working in visual persuasion, rhetoric, cultural studies, media studies, gender studies, and others. Although the different contributors vary in their approaches, each of them examines how sexual appeals function in today's consumer culture environment. At its heart, the book is envisioned by the editors as a source book on sex in consumerism that spans qualitative and quantitative perspectives, documents past research, reports new research, and provides clear directions for future research.

Even living in Bangladesh, we can not stay too far away from the western trends of "sexualized persuasion" in advertising. Western visual "sex noise" surrounds us through films, music videos, television programming, web content, magazine and book covers, and beyond. Indeed over the years, little in our "Bengali" culture has been left untouched by the cycles of economic boom and bust, by sweeping cultural realignments, and by the social fads including the youth craze, clothes,

leisure, and sexuality. These practices have opened up the boundaries of sexual behavior and effected marketing communications norms in Bangladesh, and are, thus, making inroads into our mainstream culture. There is, therefore, a substantial need for addressing the issue of sex in advertising with insightful research and constructive debate even in bangladesh. To this end, *Sex in Consumer Culture: the Erotic Content of Media and Marketing* can help those interested in the nature, nuances and evolution of erotic appeals in Bangladeshi consumer culture to navigate the disparate information available within disciplinary boundaries.

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