

To what extent does sex appeal in advertising influence female consumers' attitudes and final purchasing intentions? A cross-cultural investigation.

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to examine the role culture plays in determining whether sex appeal in advertising affects female consumers' attitudes and final purchase decisions. The role of celebrity endorsers combined with sex appeal in adverts was also examined. Online and offline questionnaires were used to collect data from females of different cultural groups using two different advertisements. Findings suggest that some aspects of female attitudes towards sex appeal in advertising are dependent on whether they are from high or low context cultures. The influence of ethicality, likeability, and sex appeal of the model/celebrity on female consumers' attitudes and buying intent have also been examined.

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Introduction

The average consumer in the Western world is exposed to approximately 5000 advertisements every day (Johnson, 2009) which drives marketers to take different approaches in their marketing campaigns in order to attract consumers' attention and remain competitive. One of those approaches is sex appeal.

Reichert (2003) has noted that the notion of sex has been used in advertising as far back as the 1800s to attract, shock and eventually influence consumers to purchase their products. This advertising strategy raises many questions relative to its effects on target audiences, including whether it enhances ad memorisation or adversely affects brand image (Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes, 2006).

Sexual stimuli in advertising can have a positive or negative effect on consumer behaviour (Teng *et al.*, 2007) which will likewise be determined by other influential factors such as culture, gender and age. The acceptance of sexual stimuli in advertising varies significantly across cultures as "cultures differ markedly in their attitudes to sex and nudity in general, and also to its use in media and advertising" (Millward Brown, 2008). This implies that the use of sexuality in a marketing campaign can be a risky strategy.

Besides culture, the gender of the target market is an important aspect to take into consideration as previous research suggests that men and women react differently to these type of adverts (Price, 2002). Generally, sex in advertisements represents the nudity of women and very rarely that of men. De Pelsmacker and Geuens (1998 – cited in Dianoux and Linhart, 2010) expand on this idea stating that men react more favourably than women to the presence of nude women in adverts. Another important issue is the gender role stereotype used in advertising (Wolin, 2003). Women tend to be more sensitive as they do not believe that they are depicted rationally in advertising which might lead to negative attitudes (Theodoridis *et al.*, 2013).

Based on the above, attitudes towards sexual stimuli in advertising appear to vary across different countries, while dissimilarities in perceptions also exist between genders and among age-groups (Theodoridis *et al.*, 2013).

It can be clearly seen that there is much research about gender reactions to sex appeal and gender portrayal in advertising; however, there is a lack of research in regard to attitudinal and behavioural female responses to sexual stimuli in advertising.

Furthermore, the majority of the studies have used adverts with female models to analyse the impact of sex appeal on the viewers whereas little research has been conducted on responses to sex appeal adverts showing models of both genders in order to evaluate similitudes and dissimilarities. In addition, the use of celebrity endorsement could be another aspect to take into consideration as it may have an impact on customers' attitude and buying behaviour (Roy *et al.*, 2013).

The aim of this study is therefore to determine to what extent sex appeal in advertising affects female consumers' attitude and final purchase decisions.

The supporting objectives are as follows:

- a) To analyse female attitudinal responses to sex appeal in advertising depending on cultural background.
- b) To identify the influence of celebrity endorsement in sex appeal advertising.

Literature Review

Literature relating to sex appeal in advertising, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, attitudes and celebrity endorsement has been explored in this paper.

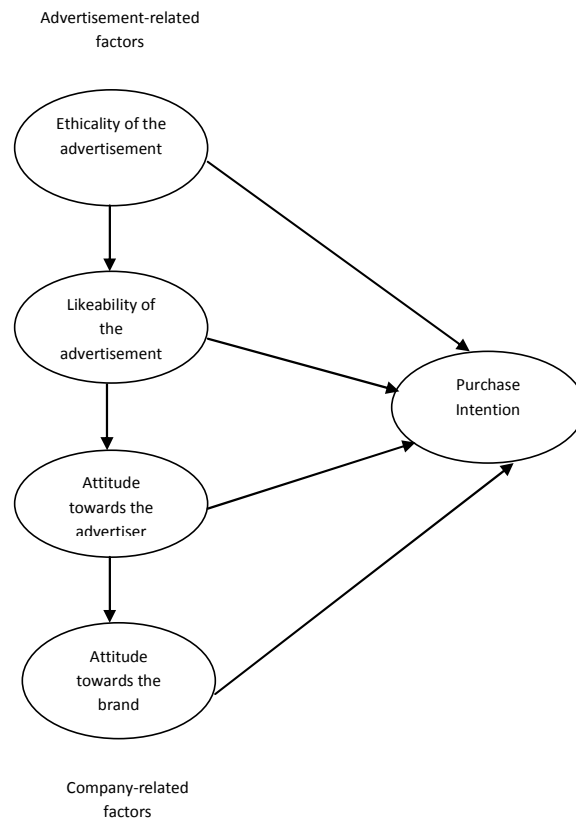
Attitude

Sex appeal in advertising can make a positive or negative change in consumer buying behaviour; however, the responses to this stimulus will be likewise influenced by other factors like attitude (Black *et al.*, 2010). In addition, sexual content in advertising might evoke sexual feelings among the audience which may lead to favourable attitude towards the brand (Reichert *et al.* 2001).

Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975, 1980) general attitude theory and Theory of Reasoned Action have been used broadly in studies of attitudes towards advertising (Massey *et al.*, 2013). These theories emphasize the relationship between beliefs, attitudes, intent and behaviour, which also forms the basis of persuasive hierarchy models. The latter proposes a consistent process from cognitive responses to affective responses and final behavioural responses such as ultimate purchase (Massey *et al.*, 2013).

Figure 1 depicts Massey *et al.*'s model (2013) which treats the ethicality of the advert as a cognitive variable, the likeability of an advert as an affective variable, and purchase intent as a behavioural variable, although other important factors such as customers' attitudes towards the advertiser and the brand are also included.

Figure 1



Culture

“National culture has long been considered as an important aspect that determines consumer behaviour in different countries” (Liu et al, 2009). Furthermore, culture is considered a crucial factor that affects consumer responses to sex appeal adverts (Boddewyn and Kunz, 1991-cited in Liu *et al.*, 2009).

Societies have the freedom of “accepting or rejecting any product within its social context”. If a product or its advert “disturbs the social, moral or religious fabric of a society”, it is considered controversial (De Run *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, the use of high levels of erotic content in advertising may not be perceived as morally right or culturally acceptable to the viewers of such adverts (Henthorne and LaTour, 1995). As an example, societies that practice a patriarchal orientation or those that have a high level of “feminist consciousness” may interpret adverts with sexual content as offensive (Cui and Yang, 2009). In essence, the acceptance or rejection of sex-related products and advertisements might differ across and within cultures.

In order to understand different societies when using sex appeal content, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions have been used in previous studies (Hofstede, 1991, 2001). Taylor *et al.* (1994- cited in Liu *et al.*, 2009) highlight that the two dimensions that seem to be the most important in explaining cultural differences are individualism/collectivism and low/high context. Similarly, Liu (2014) cites Herrmann and Heitmann (2006) who found that consumers in an individualistic society favour stimulation more than consumers in a collectivistic society.

When it comes to a high-context culture, implicit communication is preferred rather than explicit communication (Liu *et al.*, 2009). Sex appeal in advertising is becoming increasingly more explicit (Severn *et al.*, 1990); therefore “consumers in a low-context culture may have a more favourable attitudes towards a sex appeal advertisement than consumers in a high-context culture” (Liu *et al.*, 2009).

Garcia and Yang (2006) have stated that in a low-uncertainty avoidance culture, consumers seem to respond similarly to sex appeal adverts while responses differ significantly in a high-uncertainty avoidance culture. Responses to sexual stimuli in advertising vary depending on the continent, the religion and the country. In fact, most studies use country categories to divide their sample instead of ethnicity (Garcia and Yang, 2006; Liu *et al.*, 2009).

Consequently, the first two hypotheses of this study are:

H₁- Attitude towards sex appeal in advertising depends on whether female consumers’ are from a high or low context culture.

H₂- Attitude towards sex appeal in advertising depends whether female consumers’ are from an individualistic or collectivist culture.

Celebrity Endorsement

Celebrity endorsement in advertising has become quite ubiquitous. Approximately “one in five marketing programs in the UK featured some type of celebrity endorser with the number closer to one in four programs in the USA” (Erdogan, 1999 cited in Seno & Lukas, 2007). This number is even higher in Asian countries with 62% TV adverts containing celebrity endorsers (Saxena, 2008- cited in Roy *et al.*, 2013).

When creating an advertising campaign, a company needs to decide the meaning that should be suggested in presenting it to a target (Canning and West, 2006). In order to do that, a firm might use a celebrity to endorse a product, their effectiveness being partly determined by the meaning that the selected spokesperson brings to the endorsement process (McCraken, 1989- cited in Canning and West, 2006).

Research has also found that celebrities are more effective than other types of endorsers, such as “the professional expert”, “the company manager”, or “the typical consumer” (Seno and Lukas, 2007). Advertisers believe that the positive representation of the celebrity will be passed on to the product associated with the celebrity. Therefore, celebrities can increase brand recognition, improve the recall of the message, develop positive attitude towards the brand and give a unique identity to the endorsed brand (Roy *et al.*, 2013). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of a celebrity endorser may also differ from consumer to consumer as different consumers have different attitudinal dispositions (Roy *et al.*, 2013) and earlier studies have identified the impact of celebrity endorsement on consumers’ attitudes (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2000).

Celebrity endorsement research can be divided in three different areas: source credibility, congruence and meaning transfer. In the same way source credibility is made up of the elements which are source expertise, source trustworthiness and source attractiveness (Roy *et al.*, 2013).

In his study, McGuire (1969- cited in Roy *et al.*, 2013) identifies that source attractiveness (similarity, likeability and familiarity of the endorser) directly influences the effectiveness of the communication message as consumers accept the information given by an attractive source because they aspire to be identified with the source. “An attractive celebrity is likely to be an especially potent source of brand image because of the dual benefit of their celebrity status and attractiveness” (Kamins, 1990- cited in Seno and Lukas, 2007). Similarly, the purchase intention of the consumers is also affected when the source was found to be attractive (Erdogan, 1999 cited in Seno and Lukas, 2007).

In this study, an advert portraying an attractive and sexy celebrity was used to identify if female consumers buying behaviour is affected by the presence of a celebrity or by the sexual stimuli instead. Based on the latter, the final hypothesis is as follows:

H₃: Final purchase is dependent on female consumers’ attitude towards sex appeal of celebrity endorsement in advertising.

Methodology

Primary data was gathered via online and offline questionnaire delivered to the respondents through social media channels, emails and post. These were made of two different adverts and nine closed questions about personal information, perceptions and attitudinal responses to these ads.

Two adverts – AD 1 and AD 2 (Appendix) – were shown in the questionnaire, becoming the main focus point for respondents to answer the questions. AD 1 showed a female model, who also happens to be the popular and successful celebrity Charlize Theron, in a sexy pose advertising a well-known designer brand perfume Dior's J'adore . AD 2 displayed an unknown male model barely clothed also in a sexy pose promoting a salad dressing by a well known brand Kraft. Each question was designed to assign one answer per advert, with a requirement being to submit one answer per advert in order to proceed to the next question.

Findings and Discussion

A total of 164 responses were collected through off and online questionnaires. A total of 28 countries were mentioned in the surveys with a majority of respondents from Spain (67%). These 28 nationalities were divided into 4 different categories following the dimension structure proposed by Hofstede (2001) with a majority being Collectivists and from a High Context culture as seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Dimension	High Context	Low Context
	91%	9%
Dimension	Individualist	Collectivist
	14%	86%

In order to test H_1 and H_2 , the six main questions regarding each advert were compared across the above cultural dimensions to determine if attitude towards sex appeal in advertising is indeed dependent on female consumers' cultural background.

Overall, differences were found when comparing findings of both ads. When analysing responses to AD 1, four relationships were identified while none were found in the case of AD 2 as seen below in Table 2.

Table 2

Chi square	Ethicality	Country acceptance	Sexism	Appealing/ Relevance	Purchase influence	Celebrity influence
High/low context AD 1	p= 0,31	p= 0,70	p= 0,02	p= 0,003	p= 0,36	p= 0,02
Indiv./collect. AD 1	p= 0,33	p= 0,60	p= 0,18	p= 0,00001	p= 0,29	p= 0,24
High/low context AD 2	p= 0,41	p= 0,09	p= 0,08	p= 0,78	p= 0,79	
Indiv./collect. AD 2	p= 0,18	p= 0,08	p= 0,32	p= 0,57	p= 0,69	

Chi Square p values

The “p” values show that the following relationships between variables exist:

- There is a significant relationship between the respondents belonging to a high or low context culture and whether they find AD 1 sexist or not.
- There is a significant relationship between the respondents belonging to a high or low context culture and whether they find the sexual stimuli in AD 1 appealing and relevant to the product or not.
- There is a significant relationship between the respondents belonging to a high or low context and whether they feel influenced by the celebrity endorser in AD 1 or not.
- There is a significant relationship between the respondents belonging to an individualistic or collectivist country and whether they find the sexual stimuli in AD 1 appealing and relevant to the product or not.

With regard to the first relationship, the majority of respondents did not find AD 1 sexist or offensive. However, the proportion of respondents who didn't find AD 1 sexist is greater for low context countries such as Australia or the USA. Pope *et al.* (2004) also came to this conclusion as their study implies that Australian consumer responses to sex appeal ads are generally more favourable than for non-sex appeal ads.

In terms of favouring the sexual stimuli or not in AD 1, low-context societies tended to find it more appealing (57%) compared to high context societies (45%). This finding is in concordance with Henthorne and LaTour (1995) who suggest that high levels of sex appeal content in advertising may not be perceived as morally right or culturally acceptable to the viewers of such ads. These findings also agree with Liu *et*

al (2009), which indicate that consumers in a low-context culture may have more favourable attitude towards a sex appeal advert than consumers in a high-context culture.

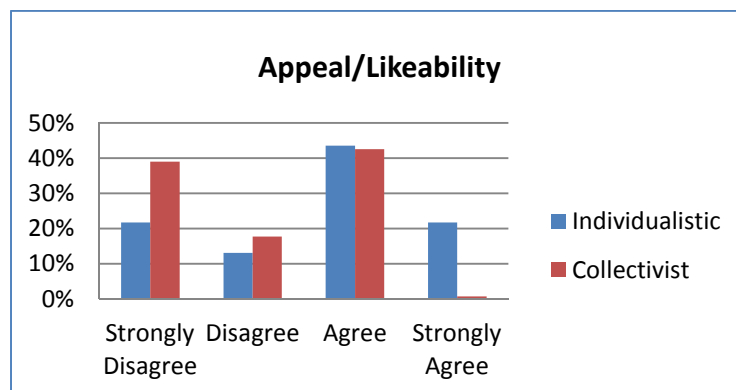
When comparing the number of respondents who favoured AD 1(implicit sexual stimuli) with AD 2 (explicit sexual stimuli), the outcome suggests that consumers from a high-context culture have a tendency to prefer explicit communication rather than implicit communication. The latter contradicts Liu *et al*'s (2009) findings which suggest the opposite.

When it comes to celebrity endorsement, consumers of both dimensions did not feel their buying behaviour was influenced by it. However, the variance between “agree” (14%) to “disagree” (86%) was stronger in the case of low-context societies. These results disagree with McCracken’s study (1989- cited in Canning and West, 2006). Respondents might not have found similarity between the chosen elements of the celebrity’s image and product featured in the advert, which did not influence them to buy it.

Based on the above survey findings, the researcher accepts H₁ which implies that attitude towards sex appeal in advertising depends on whether female consumers’ are from a high or low context culture. However, caution must be applied as this relationship was observed in AD1 which could imply that the celebrity endorsement in that advert may have played a mediating role.

Relating to respondents from an individualistic or collectivist country favouring the sexual stimuli in AD 1, it was observed that respondents from an individualistic country did find it appealing while the opposite happened in collectivist countries. The number of responses favouring the sexual stimuli in individualist countries almost doubled the ones who didn’t. This is in line with Herrmann and Heitmann’s (2006) findings of consumers in an individualistic society favouring stimulation more than consumers in a collectivistic society. Furthermore, figure 2 implies that respondents from collectivist societies did not find the sexual stimuli in AD 1 appealing as per Millward Brown’s (2008) research because this type of culture favours sexual content in advertising only when it supports wider views on love, marriage and career.

Figure 2



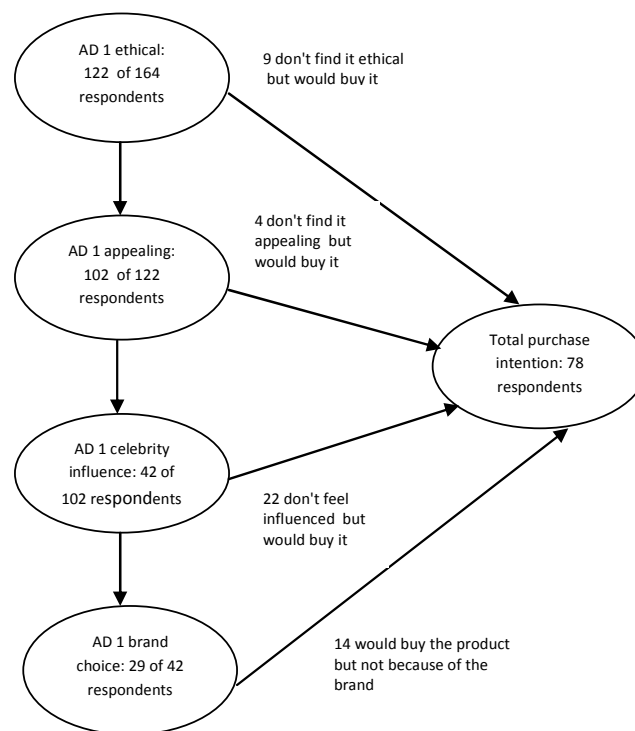
A comparison of responses for AD 1 based on cultural dimension

With regard to H₂, there wasn't sufficient evidence to suggest a relationship between the cultural background and consumers' attitude towards sex appeal in advertising. This hypothesis is therefore rejected.

The Theory of Reasoned Action has been used as a foundation to build the survey questions. As the researchers aim to determine if sexual stimuli in advertising leads to purchasing decisions, the data collected will be presented following Massey *et al.*'s (2013) version of the aforementioned theory. This will be used to decide whether H₃ (Final purchase is dependent on female consumers' attitude towards sex appeal/celebrity endorsement in advertising) is accepted.

Figure 3 represents the process from cognitive responses to affective responses and final behavioural responses (ultimate purchase) based on the results of AD 1.

Figure 3



Based on Massey *et al.*'s (2013) model of Theory of Reasoned Action: AD 1

Figure 3 demonstrates that 122 out of 164 survey respondents (74%) considered AD 1 ethical by themselves as well as by their families. Considering that most respondents were from High Context and Collectivist societies, this finding differs from De Run *et al.* (2010) who state that sex appeal ads are considered controversial as they disturb the social, moral or religious fabric of a society.

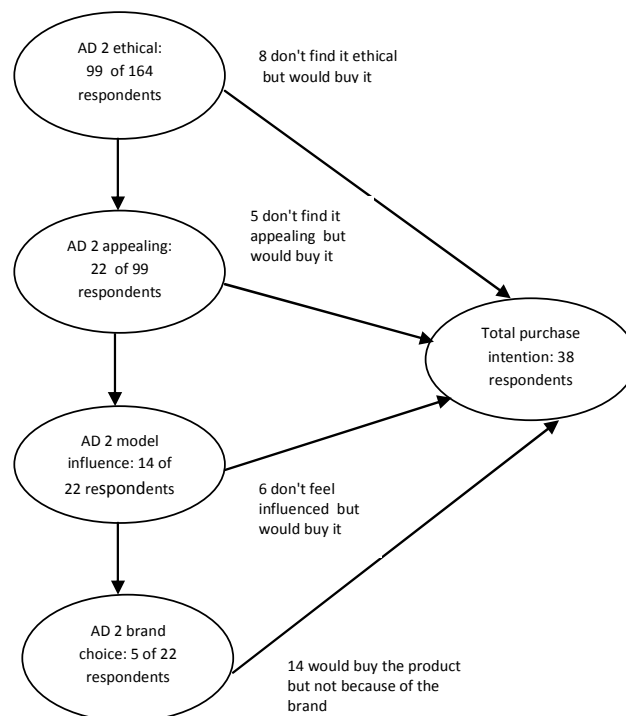
It can be seen in the next stage that 102 out of those 122 respondents (84%) also considered the advert appealing whether they found the sex appeal in it relevant or not to the product. From those 102, only 42 (41%) felt influenced by the celebrity endorser to buy the product and 29 out of those 42 (69%) would have bought the product because of the brand as well. This leads to a total of 78 (47%) potential sales.

Other respondents' buying behaviour did not follow the process proposed in the reasoned action theory but they would have bought the perfume mostly because of the likeability of the ad and the brand.

If not considering the celebrity endorser, the number of potential final purchases following the theory of reasoned action would potentially increase by 42 (25% of the total respondents) as the main buying behaviour driver would be the sex appeal and not the celebrity endorsement. In this case, the results are not consistent with McGuire (1969- cited in Roy *et al.*, 2013) who states that the likeability of the endorser directly influences effectiveness of the message as consumers accept the information given by an attractive source because they aspire to be identified with the source.

Figure 4 represents the process from cognitive responses to affective responses and final behavioural responses such as ultimate purchase based on the results of AD 2.

Figure 4



Based on Massey *et al.*'s (2013) model of Theory of Reasoned Action: AD 2

Figure 4 displays that 99 out of 164 survey respondents (60%) considered AD 2 ethical for themselves as well as for their families. However, only 22 respondents out of those 99 (22%) also considered the ad appealing whether they found the sex appeal in it relevant or not to the product.

Compared to AD 1, there is no celebrity endorser in AD 2 and therefore the influence of the male model would not be based on his image (as he is unknown) but on his attractiveness. That being said, from those 22 respondents, 14 of them (64%) felt influenced by the model to buy the salad dressing and 5 (23%) respondents would have bought the product because of previous experiences with the brand.

So 38 (23%) potential sales could have been made in total, or 52 if counting the number of respondents whose buying behaviour did not follow the process proposed in the reasoned action theory but would have bought the salad dressing mostly because of the likeability of the model or the brand without taking into consideration other variables such as the ethicality or likeability of the ad.

In both cases, having previous positive experiences with the brand has been a salient purchase driver, especially in the case of AD 1 where a majority of respondents would have bought the perfume for this reason. Nevertheless, the attractiveness of the source has been a significant purchasing influence in the case of AD 2 as a large number of respondents found it appealing whether they considered it ethical or not. This is consistent with Reichert *et al.* (2001) and Simpson *et al.* (1996) who stated that sexual stimuli in ads might evoke sexual feelings among the audience which may lead to a favourable attitude towards the brand but mostly if there is relevance of the sex appeal to the advertised product. In fact, 40% respondents found the sex appeal in AD 1 relevant to the perfume and the brand while only 19% shared the same opinion in the case of AD 2. The latter could be one of the reasons why this campaign by Kraft Foods was not very successful and rejected by most consumers (Kraft, 2013).

Based on the above discussion, the authors would suggest that H_3 is accepted which implies that final purchase is dependent on female consumers' attitudes towards sex appeal of celebrity endorsement in advertising. It must be noted that this is more likely to occur in high context and collectivist societies as noted in earlier tests for H_1 .

Conclusion & Recommendations

The main findings highlight the important role that culture plays when using sex appeal in advertising targeting female consumers. Overall the analysis reveals that there is a relationship between beliefs, attitudes, intent and behaviour. In other words, a positive cognitive response favouring sex appeal in advertising, which also leads to a positive affective response, has a higher chance to develop into a positive attitude towards the product/brand and therefore generate purchase intent.

The findings of this research suggest that sex appeal in advertising can affect female consumers' attitudes but mostly final purchasing decisions. When it comes to the relevance of the sex appeal to the product featured, the sample appeared to find a higher level of relevance in the case of the perfume in AD 1, which happens to be a luxury product as well. This means that even though the sample did not find the sex appeal in AD 2 relevant to the salad dressing, it may have an impact when it comes to purchase influence as per higher levels of brand recognition and recall.

The main purpose of using an attractive and sexy celebrity endorser was to identify if female consumers' buying behaviour was affected by the presence of a celebrity or by the sexual stimuli instead. Although the findings suggest that celebrity endorsement doesn't necessarily make a difference during the decision making process that could lead to a potential sale, a relationship was found between respondents belonging to a high context culture and whether they found the celebrity influential in their purchase decision. In this case, findings imply that female consumers from high context cultures are more influenced by the celebrity in AD 1 to make the purchase.

Female consumers' attitude towards sex appeal in advertising depends on their cultural background as differences in responses can be found depending on the cultural dimension analysed and the individual country. For this reason, if marketers want to target female consumers, their cultural background needs to be considered when creating the campaign as this can determine the likeability of the ad and the consequent attitudinal response towards the brand and the purchase intention.

The level of sexual stimuli in the ad can be higher if targeting women from a low-context culture as they tend to have more favourable attitudes towards a sex appeal advert than women from a high-context culture. Conversely, women prefer explicit communication when belonging to a high-context culture, this being one of the main purchase motives. The issue is still to find the limit in regard to the level of sexual content as some female consumers may refuse to buy the product if this level is considered excessive.

In terms of celebrity endorsement, it is favourable to use a celebrity as his/her status and image will get transferred to the brand and product represented in the advert. However if the campaign is able to engage women favouring the sexual content of the ad, the level of purchase intention tends to be higher if the model is attractive, who doesn't necessarily need to be popular. While the use of a celebrity endorser provides advantages such as higher levels of brand recognition, trustworthiness and meaning transfer, the brand will not be badly affected by any unethical behaviour if this endorser is an unknown model while the opposite is probable in the case of a celebrity.

There are some limitations and recommendations for further research related to this paper. Firstly, it appears that the use of sex appeal in advertising may depend on the product category as this technique is expected to be used in the case of luxury products to make them more attractive. But it seems to be also useful for basic products in an attempt to grab attention and increase brand recall levels. This is an aspect of this research that can be studied further.

Secondly, although the study compiled data from women of different cultural backgrounds, the figures were not even when classified into cultural dimensions. Female consumers' responses from 28 nationalities were gathered, however, 67% of these consumers were Spanish which also means that 67% of them belonged to a very similar high-context and collectivist society. This might have affected the ultimate results of the research. For instance, the fact that Spain was considered a collectivist country might have disguised any possible differences with other extremely collectivist countries like China in terms of country acceptance and sexism.

Finally, although the Theory of Reasoned Action was used to evaluate the likelihood and impact of celebrity endorsement on overall female consumers' attitudes and purchase intent, there is a need to determine whether the different cultural dimensions play a role in this matter.

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Appendix

