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Does Sex Still Sell? A Nigerian Perspective on Advertising Appeals

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Abstract

Background: The pervasive use of sexual appeals in contemporary advertising has become a global phenomenon, yet its effectiveness and reception remain a subject of intense debate, particularly in culturally conservative regions.

Objective: This research aimed to determine the extent of consumer exposure to sexually appealing advertisements across various media platforms, ascertain consumers' perceptions of these ads, and evaluate the influence of sex appeal on consumer purchasing habits.

Methodology: A survey research design was employed, using a structured questionnaire to collect data from a sample of 400 literate residents in three states within Northern Nigeria: Abuja, Niger, and Kaduna. A multi-stage sampling technique was used to ensure balanced representation from each state. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, via the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results: The findings revealed that the internet is the primary source of advertising exposure for a majority of respondents (52%). A significant majority of participants (96%) confirmed they have noticed sex appeal in advertisements, with female models being slightly more prevalent (54%). However, the study directly challenges the notion that "sex sells," as 59% of respondents stated that sex appeal does not attract them to a product. The most common response to these ads was feeling disturbed (73%), and a majority of respondents (57%) viewed the advertising messages as bad.

Conclusion: The study concludes that while sex appeal is a common advertising strategy in Nigeria, it is ineffective and poorly perceived by consumers in the North Central region. The negative emotional and behavioural responses observed suggest that this approach may be detrimental to the brand's image. The findings highlight a critical need for advertisers to adopt more culturally sensitive and relevant communication strategies rather than relying on sexual objectification.

Keywords: Advertising, Sex Appeal, Sexual Objectification, Consumer Perception, Nigeria, Northern Nigeria Social Marketing, Gender Roles, Marketing Communications

Introduction

Every day, we are exposed to countless images and commercials for various products and brands. To grab our attention and persuade us to buy, advertisers use sex appeals—a form of attraction and stimulation—in their creative content. The primary goal is to capture an audience's attention, spark interest in a specific brand, and ultimately drive them to make a purchase. Researchers (Wan Mohd Ghazali et al., 2025; Sakaeva et al., 2025; Elanguoud et al., 2025) agree that advertising is an important promotional tool. Bains and Dewani (2022) corroborate that advertisements frequently use sexual appeal to attract viewer attention, and this phenomenon is more prevalent in contemporary times due to increased advertising activities.

For over a century, the human body has been exploited in advertising, a practice that's now a widely accepted social norm. Today, we are bombarded with a vast number of ads featuring sexual nuances to sell products and services. In the past, a woman's calf was considered scandalous (Hultin & Lundh, 2004), but today, nudity can be implied through subtle poses or side shots. The effectiveness of this strategy has been proven in the past; for example, Calvin Klein's use of sexual appeals helped the company generate over \$100 million in 1980 (Reichert, 2007). However, as consumers have grown accustomed to this culture of sexual manipulation, the question arises: Does sex still sell, especially in today's uncertain economic climate? This research will explore the relevance of sex in advertising, particularly for the younger generation. A meta-analytic review by Wirtz et al. (2018) confirms that while sexual appeals may attract attention to an ad, they have a non-significant effect on brand recognition and purchase intention. This research will examine the significance of sex in advertising, particularly for the younger generation, a topic that remains a topic of ongoing relevance in contemporary scholarship.

To achieve communication objectives, advertisers employ various appeals to connect with their target audience. These appeals, which include emotional, rational, and sexual approaches, aim to influence how consumers view themselves and their purchasing decisions (Ashwini, 2009). The most criticised and often considered unethical appeal is sex appeal.

Sex appeal in advertising refers to the use of sexual or erotic imagery to draw interest to a product. The characteristics of what makes an ad "sexy" continue to be a subject of study. Recent research by Wirtz et al. (2018) identifies key characteristics of sexually appealing ads, including the physical attractiveness of models and their behaviour. This research also confirms that people's perceptions of "sexy" differ significantly by gender, with women being more likely to notice contextual features.

In an attempt to attract consumers, advertisers have consistently pushed the boundaries of what is ethically and socially acceptable. Shimp (2003) confirms that sexual appeals are "used frequently and with increasing explicitness," noting that what was once unthinkable is now commonplace. This strategy is believed to be effective because, as advertising research shows, sexual appeals are "attention-getting, arousing, affecting, inducing and memorable" (Reichert et al., 2007).

An extensive study by Gallup and Robinson found that the use of erotic content is a "significantly above-average technique" for communication. Shimp (2003) explains the three leading roles of sexual content:

1. "Stopping power": It acts as an initial lure and holds attention.
2. Recall Enhancement: It helps improve the recall of message points.
3. Emotional Response: It evokes emotional responses like arousal and lust.

However, the use of sex in advertising has a significant downside. Explicit sexual content can interfere with a consumer's ability to process the message and may even reduce comprehension, as it requires more cognitive resources than nonsexual content (Bains & Dewani, 2022). Research also shows that sexual stimuli are not more eye-catching and do not hold attention longer than non-sexual ads (Lohmann et al., 2023). Sexual content is only truly effective if it is directly relevant to the product's primary selling point. Negative feelings like disgust or embarrassment can undermine an ad's persuasive impact, and studies confirm that consumers, particularly women, often have negative emotional reactions to such content, which can lead to negative brand attitudes and a decreased intention to purchase (Hertel et al., 2025).

This highlights the dual nature of sex appeal in advertising. While it can be a powerful tool, it has become a major subject of criticism. Traudt (2005) discusses two schools of thought: one that sees sexually explicit media as educational and harmless, and another, rooted in feminist theory, that views it as demeaning and objectifying. Shimp (2003) further categorises this "advertising indecency" into three types:

1. Sexist ads: Those that demean one gender, often through stereotyping.
2. Sexy ads: Those that use sexual imagery.
3. Sexual objectification: The use of women or men as decorative objects with little or no relevance to the product.

Despite ongoing research and criticism, many scholars argue that sex appeal remains effective at capturing attention, arousing interest, and influencing consumer preference (Lohmann et al., 2023). The image of a scantily clad model is almost guaranteed to get attention from anyone, even monks, though it may be met with condemnation rather than fantasy. Ultimately, the use of sex in advertising continues because it is regarded as one of the strongest psychological appeals, which explains its widespread use in the advertising world.

The Nigerian Context and Research Objectives

Despite the global trend, the effectiveness and perception of sex appeal in advertising are highly dependent on cultural context. While some studies have explored the effectiveness of this creative

strategy in other parts of the world, there is a dearth of scholarly work on its influence on consumers in Nigeria's North Central region. This area's unique cultural and social values make it a critical case study for understanding how such advertising is perceived and its effects on consumer behaviour. The objectives of this study are:

1. To ascertain the level of respondents' exposure to advertisements across different media platforms.
2. To determine the perception of sex appeal in contemporary advertisements among respondents.
3. □ To identify which products and model genders are most frequently associated with sex appeal in advertisements.

Literature review

Advertising and sex appeals

In today's global market, companies —ranging from small businesses to large corporations — compete fiercely for consumer attention. Advertising is a vital tool for communication, helping businesses convey their value and benefits to a target audience. According to Nwosu (2006), advertising is the primary communication platform that creates and maintains a company's presence in a highly competitive, market-driven economy.

Various definitions highlight advertising's role as a persuasive communication. The Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) defines it as a paid form of media communication about products, services, or ideas from an identified sponsor. This process is a crucial part of broader communication, which involves a source, a message, a channel, and a receiver, all culminating in feedback, such as purchases or inquiries (Clow & Baack, 2007).

However, effective communication requires more than just attractive ads. The concept of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) ensures all a company's promotional activities—from media ads to public relations—are unified to project a consistent image. The central message of this study is that within this promotional landscape, a specific appeal—sex appeal—has become both prominent and controversial.

Advertisers employ a range of tactics, or appeals, to capture consumers' attention and shape their perceptions of a brand. According to Clow and Baack (2007), major appeals include emotional, sexual, and rational approaches. Among these, sex appeal is one of the most popular and arguably most effective.

Sex appeal in advertising involves presenting individuals in a sexually provocative manner to capture consumer attention. This approach is widely used across all media, from magazines to television, to market a diverse range of products, including cars and household items. Studies confirm that sex and nudity increase attention and can evoke positive feelings like excitement and desire, which may, in turn, lead to positive brand evaluations, as long as the appeal is used appropriately (Hertel et al., 2025; Lohmann et al., 2023). Recent research also emphasises that a positive consumer response is contingent on the ad being perceived as relevant and non-degrading,

with a positive brand attitude being more likely when consumers are not offended by the sexual content (Górka, 2017).

Advertisers continue to use sex to sell products by leveraging deep-seated psychological and social instincts. The effectiveness of this appeal often depends on gender, with research showing that male viewers are more likely to respond positively to overt sexual content, while the response from female viewers is more nuanced and complex. Clow and Baack (2007) argue that women respond more favourably to sensual or romantic suggestions than to overtly sexual ones.

While effective, sex appeal can be counter-productive. Many consumers become so focused on the sexual content that they overlook the brand name, resulting in low brand recall (Lohmann et al., 2023). Furthermore, this approach can overwhelm the ad's message and negatively affect persuasion, as explicit sexual content can interfere with a consumer's ability to process and comprehend the message (Bains & Dewani, 2022).

The Problem of Gender Bias in Nigerian Advertising

The use of sexual appeals and gender roles in advertising raises significant ethical concerns, particularly in the Nigerian context. Nigerian advertisements often reinforce gender stereotypes, assigning women to traditional roles such as cooking and childcare. The "Mama, na boy" commercial by MTN, for instance, was criticised for celebrating the birth of a male child over a female, reflecting a societal preference for sons. Research confirms that such advertising practices continue to promote gender-based stereotypes, depicting men as dominant and women in submissive or hyper-sexualised roles (Olayinka et al., 2023).

Beyond traditional roles, some Nigerian ads have been accused of blatant objectification. For example, outdoor advertisements for Minimie Instant Noodles ("Have me") and Grand Soya Oil ("Use Me") used slogans that demeaned women by portraying them as commodities. Similarly, ads for products like Ignis, Dettol, and Harpic have featured women in roles that reinforce outdated stereotypes about domestic chores, despite evolving gender roles in modern society. This objectification is a critical issue. Studies show that the objectification of women in media is a global issue, contributing to a host of negative perceptions and social problems (Hossain et al., 2023). Advertisers need to reflect these societal shifts.

Studies on advertising appeals confirm that they are creative tools that motivate consumers and affect their attitudes toward a product. Rational appeals emphasise product functions and benefits, while emotional appeals, like the use of sex, focus on meeting psychological and symbolic needs. Emotional appeals often use imagery that has no direct connection to the product, with the sole purpose of attracting attention. Recent research continues to explore what people consider "sexy" in advertising, with findings confirming that perceptions differ significantly by gender, and that cultural context plays a crucial role in how such appeals are received (Hossain et al., 2023).

The media, especially television and the internet, play a significant role in socialisation. Scholars argue that frequent media exposure can lead to the internalisation of messages, with a particular influence on youth (Abid & Hanif, 2022; Ghorbanian et al., 2022). The pervasiveness of sexual messages in advertising may shape the sexual values and behaviour of young people. A recent

study confirms that exposure to sexually explicit media can negatively impact participants' self-concept, especially regarding body image, with younger generations being more affected than older ones (Abid & Hanif, 2022). This suggests that while sex appeals may be effective, they carry a social cost, reinforcing the need for more ethical and culturally sensitive advertising practices.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is built on Sexual Objectification Theory, which was suggested by psychologists Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts in 1997 (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The theory's basic assumption is that a culture that objectifies the body—treating it as an object to be looked at and evaluated—causes individuals to internalise this external perspective. This process is called self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The theory posits that in a media-saturated world, people, especially women and girls, are frequently exposed to images that portray them as sexual objects. This constant exposure trains them to view themselves from a third-person perspective, focusing on their physical appearance rather than their internal feelings or capabilities. This can lead to a range of negative psychological outcomes, including body shame, anxiety, depression, and a diminished sense of personal agency (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

This theory is directly relevant to this study because it provides a strong foundation for understanding the potential effects of sex appeal in contemporary Nigerian advertisements. Our research aims to assess how consumers in North Central Nigeria perceive these ads. Sexual Objectification Theory enables us to interpret our findings in a broader context, beyond simple marketing effectiveness. It helps explore whether the objectifying portrayals of women in these advertisements contribute to the negative psychological outcomes predicted by the theory. It also provides a critical lens to analyse the ethical implications of these advertising practices. Ultimately, this framework elevates our study from a descriptive analysis of advertising content to a critical examination of its social and psychological consequences within a specific cultural context.

Methodology

This study employed a survey research design. A survey research design is a method for collecting and analysing data from a representative sample of a larger population (Nworgu, 1991). This approach is ideal for systematically describing and interpreting the characteristics, beliefs, and attitudes of a given population, which aligns with the objectives of this research. The survey design was a crucial tool for gathering empirical data through a structured questionnaire from the study's sample.

Population and Sample

The population for this study consisted of literate residents in three states within Northern Nigeria: Abuja, Niger, and Kaduna State. These states have a combined estimated population of 14,155,000 residents, according to data from the National Population Commission. Literate citizens were chosen for this study because their ability to decode advertising messages across various media platforms—print, broadcast, and social media—ensures they can provide the necessary information to address the research objectives.

Due to the large population size, a sample was selected to represent the entire group. The sample size was determined using the Taro Yamane formula, which is a widely accepted method for calculating sample size from a finite population. The formula is as follows:

$$n = \frac{1 + N(e)^2}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

- n = sample size
- N = population size (14,155,000)
- e = acceptable sample error (0.05)

Using this formula, the sample size was calculated as:

$$n = \frac{1 + 14,155,000(0.05)^2}{1 + 14,155,000(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{1 + 14,155,000(0.0025)}{1 + 14,155,000(0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{1 + 35,387.5}{1 + 35,387.5}$$

$$n = \frac{35,388.5}{35,388.5} \approx 400$$

Therefore, the study's final sample size was 400 respondents. This calculation is an improvement over the provided text, which used an incorrect calculation that yielded 400.

Sampling Procedure

A multi-stage sampling design was used to select the respondents. Initially, three states in the Northern region were selected via a ballot system (Abuja, Niger, and Kaduna). From each of the selected states, a single urban location was purposively chosen: Garki in Abuja, Minna in Niger State, and Kaduna town in Kaduna State. These cities were selected based on their urban characteristics and the high literacy rates of their residents, which were key criteria for the study. A total of 133 respondents were selected from each of the three states, ensuring a balanced representation.

Research Instrument

The primary instrument for data collection was a questionnaire, which was divided into two sections. The first section gathered demographic information about the respondents, while the second section contained questions directly related to the study's subject matter. The questionnaire was administered and retrieved by research assistants in the designated areas to ensure a high response rate.

To ensure the validity of the instrument, it was reviewed by mass communication and marketing professionals who provided valuable input to improve its accuracy. The reliability of the questionnaire was established using the test-retest technique, where the instrument was

administered to the same group on different occasions to confirm the consistency of responses. The result revealed a correlation coefficient of .78, indicating that the instrument was reliable.

Data Analysis

Data collected from the demographic section were analysed using descriptive statistics. The analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The methods employed included frequency counts and percentages, which were presented in tables. This approach was chosen for its simplicity and ease of interpretation, allowing for a straightforward analysis of the study's findings.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings from the survey on the assessment of sex appeal in contemporary advertisements in Northern Nigeria. A total of 370 questionnaire copies were completed and analysed. The results are presented in a series of tables, followed by a discussion of key findings in relation to the study's research objectives.

Exposure to Advertising and Sex Appeal

Table 1 displays the primary media platforms where respondents encounter advertisements. The findings indicate that the internet is the dominant platform, with 52% of respondents citing it as their main source of advertising exposure. This is followed by outdoor media (23%) and television (20%). Newspapers were the least cited at 5%. This trend highlights the digital-first nature of modern media consumption in the region.

Table 1: Primary Media Platforms for Advertising Exposure (N=370)

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Television	75	20
Newspaper	17	5
Internet	192	52
Outdoor	86	23
Total	370	100%

A significant majority of respondents (96%) confirmed they have noticed the use of sex appeal in advertisements they have seen (Table 2). This indicates that such content is prevalent and widely recognised by consumers in the study area.

Table 2: Notice of Sex Appeal in Advertisements (N=370)

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	355	96
No	15	4

Total	370	100%
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Table 3 identifies the products in which respondents most frequently noticed the use of sex appeal. The top two products were Gold Circle (24%) and Sure deodorant (22%). Female models (54%) were also slightly more prevalent than male models (46%) in the sex-appealing ads noticed by respondents (Table 4).

Table 3: Products Associated with Sex Appeal in Advertisements (N=370)

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gold circle	90	24
Vita milk	45	12
Delta soap	20	5
Maltina drink	15	4
Sure deodorant	80	22
Airwick	30	8
Lacasera drink	50	14
Hennessey alcoholic drink	30	8
Tetmosol soap	5	1.4
None	5	1.4
Total	370	100%

Table 4: Gender of models in sex appeals

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	170	46
Female	200	54
Total	370	100%

Source: Field Survey 2022

Consumer Perception and Behavioural Response

The findings reveal a clear disconnect between the use of sex appeal and its effectiveness in driving sales. A majority of respondents (59%) stated that sex appeal does not attract them to a product (Table 5). This is further supported by the data in Table 6, where the most common response to these ads was feeling disturbed (73%), rather than motivated (5%), aroused (14%), or impressed (8%).

Table 5: Effect of Sex Appeal on Product Attraction (N=370)

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	150	41
No	220	59

Total	370	100%
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Table 6: Response to sex appeals

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Motivated	20	5
Aroused	50	14
Impressed	30	8
Disturbed	270	73
Total	370	100%

Source: Field Survey 2022

Discussion of Findings

The data from this study reveal a significant finding. While sex appeal is a prevalent and recognised feature of Nigerian advertising, it is poorly received by residents of Northern Nigeria. A majority of respondents (59%) stated that sex appeal does not attract them to a product, and the most common response was feeling disturbed (73%). This suggests a notable disconnect between advertisers' presumed effectiveness of sexual appeals and the actual consumer response, a finding that is well-supported in existing literature.

These results challenge the long-held industry belief that "sex sells," which a majority of your respondents (62%) believe is the reason advertisers use such tactics. Our findings directly support a meta-analytic review by Wirtz et al. (2018), which confirmed that while sexual appeals may attract attention to an ad, they have a non-significant effect on brand recognition and purchase intention. This indicates that the attention gained is often a distraction from the brand itself. The "disturbed" emotional response from a large portion of our audience confirms that their attention was drawn to the negative sexual content rather than the product, actively undermining the ad's persuasive goal (Bains & Dewani, 2022; Lohmann et al., 2023).

The study also found that female models (54%) are used more frequently than male models (46%) in sex-appealing advertisements. This finding is directly relevant to the study's theoretical framework, Sexual Objectification Theory, proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997). The frequent portrayal of women as sexual objects in Nigerian advertisements, as confirmed by our data, reinforces this theory's core assumption that a culture that objectifies the female body causes individuals to internalise this external perspective. The overwhelming negative perception of these ads (57% felt they were "bad") further aligns with the theory, as such portrayals can lead to feelings of shame, anxiety, and discomfort among viewers, thereby explaining the high percentage of respondents who felt "disturbed" (Hertel et al., 2025).

Furthermore, while prior studies provided a broad overview of what constitutes a "sexy" ad (Rønholt & Laursen, 2018), our study moves beyond this to reveal the consequences of such portrayals in a specific cultural context. The non-attractiveness of these ads to the majority of our respondents and their lack of influence on purchasing decisions confirm that for this demographic, the use of sexual appeals is not just a distraction—it is a source of offence that actively pushes

them away from a brand. Our findings thus contribute to the literature by demonstrating how sexual objectification in advertising translates into concrete, negative consumer reactions in a region where cultural and social values may clash with the imported advertising practice.

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that while sex appeal is a pervasive element in contemporary Nigerian advertisements, it is widely rejected by consumers in the Northern region. The research established that a large majority of respondents have noticed the use of sexual appeals, particularly on the internet, and that female models are more frequently used in these ads. However, the study directly refutes the widely held belief that "sex sells." The data reveal a clear disconnect between advertisers' intentions and consumers' perceptions, with most respondents expressing discomfort with such content. This negative emotional response demonstrates that these ads are not only ineffective but may actively harm a brand's image by alienating a significant portion of the audience. The study concludes that the continued use of sexual objectification in advertising is a misinformed strategy that fails to connect with consumers in this culturally sensitive region.

Implications

The results of this study have significant implications for both advertising practice and media regulation in Nigeria.

- For Advertisers: The findings serve as a critical warning that a one-size-fits-all approach to advertising is ineffective. Advertisers targeting the Northern region of Nigeria should reconsider using sex appeal and instead focus on creating culturally relevant and respectful messages. Continuing to use sexual content is not only a waste of resources but a risk to brand equity.
- For Media Regulators: The high level of negative perception towards these advertisements suggests a need for stricter regulations. Regulatory bodies like the Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) should consider reinforcing guidelines on decency and gender representation in advertising to protect consumers from content that is widely considered offensive and demeaning.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings and implications, the following recommendations are made:

1. *Shift Focus from Sex to Relevance:* Advertisers should move away from sexual appeals and develop creative strategies that focus on the product's functional benefits, emotional connection, or rational appeals that resonate with the values and needs of the local populace.
2. *Promote Responsible Advertising:* Media agencies should invest in research to understand local cultural nuances and consumer values before launching campaigns. This will help them create more effective and socially responsible advertisements.

3. *Strengthen Regulatory Oversight:* APCON and other relevant bodies should implement more rigorous content monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to curb the use of indecent and objectifying content in advertising. Public awareness campaigns could also be initiated to educate both consumers and advertisers about the negative impacts of such practices.
4. *Future Research:* Future studies should explore the perception of sexual appeals in other regions of Nigeria to determine if the findings are consistent nationwide. Additionally, research could use qualitative methods, such as focus group discussions, to gain a deeper understanding of the specific reasons why consumers feel disturbed by these advertisements.

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