# DOES SEXUALITY IN ADS WORK FOR EVERYONE: MUSLIM CONSUMERS' REACTIONS TO SEXUALITY IN ADS

Ahmet Bayraktar, Rutgers University

## ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the reactions and responses of Muslim consumers to advertisements that include sexuality. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions: What do Muslim consumers think about the advertisements that include sexuality? How does sexual content of ads influence their behavior? What might be the mechanism that explains the behavioral process? This study utilizes exploratory research methods to answer these questions. It suggests that Muslim consumers tend to develop negative attitude toward the advertisements that include sexuality. They may also develop negative attitude toward the brands in these ads, and toward the firms that own these brands, a process explained by "halo effect." Furthermore, they tend to take some measures in order to prevent both themselves and their children from being exposed to these ads. This paper argues that the concept "personal modesty" explains Muslim consumers' responses to sexuality in ads.*

## INTRODUCTION

The use of sexuality in ads and its effects on consumer behavior have been a matter for discussion among researchers. Some (e.g. Smith et al., 1995; Reichert, 2002; Treise and Weigold, 1994) have found that advertisements which include sexuality may negatively influence consumer behavior; on the other hand, others (e.g. Reichert et al., 2001; Dudley, 1999) have shown that sexuality in ads may positively affect consumer behavior. Research (Reichert, 2002) suggests that religious preference is one of the most important factors that influence individuals' reactions to sexuality in advertisements. Given the importance of conservatism, personal modesty, the value of women and raising moral and righteous children in Muslim community, it emerges as important questions to explore what Muslim consumers think about and how they react to advertisements that contain sexuality. Furthermore, given the significant number of Muslim population in the world, which is gradually increasing, and the widespread use of sexuality in ads, it becomes more important to explore the aforementioned questions.

This study aims at exploring how Muslim consumers react and respond to ads that include sexuality. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions: What might be the outcomes of sexual advertisements, when it comes to Muslim consumers? What might be the mechanism that explains Muslim consumers' reactions to ads that include sexuality? What explains their reactions and responses?

For these purposes, this paper firstly offers a brief review of literature on sexuality in advertisements and personal modesty in Islam. Secondly, it introduces the exploratory research findings along with the proposed mechanism that explains the behavioral process. Finally, it discusses the contributions and future research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexuality in Advertisements

In recent years, there has been an increase in the use of sexuality in advertising. Human body has been abused in advertisements and provocatively used to sell products (Heller, 2000). Sexual appeals in advertisements consist of a variety of elements and are generally presented in visual elements such as attractive models (Gould, 1994). An analysis reveals that common forms of sexual content include the followings: nudity (dress), physical attractiveness, seductive behavior and interaction, innuendo, and other factors such as setting, context and camera effects (Reichert, 2002). Lambiase and Reichert (2003) suggest that there are five types of sexual information in ads: Nudity, sexual behavior, physical attractiveness, sexual referents, and sexual embeds. Ramirez and Reichert (2000) propose that physical characteristics are perceived as the most sexual in an advertisement and the sub-categories of these characteristics are clothing, attractiveness and body.

In many advertisements, women are used as a marketing instrument that exists to satisfy men's sexual desires (Bayraktar, 2011). Baker's study (2005) shows that an average person in the US is exposed to over 3,000 ads each day and in many of these ads, women are portrayed as sex objects (Smith et al., 1995; Boddewyn, 1991; Baker, 2005). Advertisers feature provocative images of sexually attractive women in ads (Reichert, 2002) without considering their negative effects on individuals and society (Bayraktar, 2011).

Many researchers have examined the effectiveness of ads that include sexuality. Most of them (e.g. Steadman, 1969; Alexander and Judd, 1978; Bushman, 2005; Bushman and Bonacci, 2002; Bushman and Phillips, 2001) have found that sexuality in ads negatively influences consumer behavior. One of the most significant negative effects of sexual content is that it reduces consumers' brand recall (Steadman, 1969; Alexander and Judd, 1978; Bushman 2005; Bushman and Bonacci, 2002). Research demonstrates that sexual images have high attention-getting value and that they arouse the immediate attention of both men and women (Baker, 1961). Many individuals pay more attention to sexual media than non-sexual media (Bushman, 2005). Therefore, when an advertisement contains sexuality, many viewers will direct their attention to sexual stimuli, pay less attention to other cues in the advertisement (Steadman, 1969; Alexander and Judd, 1978; Bushman 2005; Bushman and Bonacci, 2002) and have lower motivation to process brand information (Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann 1983). This mechanism negatively affects consumers' brand recall.

A limited number of studies have found that sexuality in ads positively influences consumer behavior. Reichert et al. (2001) argue that advertisements that include sexual images create more positive feelings about the implementation of the ad than do advertisements that do not include sexual images. Besides, researchers (Dudley, 1999; Reichert et al., 2001) suggest that sexual information attracts attention. In addition, findings show that advertisements which include sexuality are more engaging, involving, and interesting than advertisements which do not include sexuality (Reichert and Alvaro, 2001; Reichert, et al., 2001).

The above discussion demonstrates that sexuality in ads does not work as advertisers expect. It lowers consumers' brand recall, which is one the most important goals of advertisements. What would happen, if individuals also have negative attitude toward sexuality in ads? Would the negative outcome still be only reduced brand recall?

Personal Modesty in Muslim Community

Personal modesty is of significant importance in Muslim community (Denny, 2006).  It has a great place in the Our'an, the holy book in Islam, and Hadiths, which are narrations originating from the words and deeds of the Islamic prophet Mohammad.  Modesty in Islam is known as haya, a word that describes shyness, propriety in dress, speech and behavior, and a deeper modesty based on faith (Benlafquih, 2009).  In the Qur'an, God says, "O children of Adam, We have provided you with garments to cover your bodies, as well as to be an adornment to you.  However, the best garment is the garment of righteousness. These are some of God's signs, that they may receive admonition" (Quran, 7: 26).  This verse emphasizes the importance of being righteous or modest.  The Qur'an (24: 30-31) also says: "Say to the believing man that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them; and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do.  And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; and that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands..."  In a Hadith prophet Mohammad says, "If you feel no shame, do as you wish."  In another Hadith, He says, "Modesty is a part of faith," (Nevevi, 2009: 243).  These suggest that modesty in Islam is so important that the absence of it can lead a person to sinful behavior and disbelief (Benlafquih, 2009).

In the writings of the Qur'an and Hadiths, the code of modesty for both men and women includes (1) lowering the gaze and avoiding flirtatious speech and behavior, (2) refraining from close physical contact with unrelated individuals of the opposite sex, (3) avoiding eyes from being exposed to forbidden images, (4) paying attention to wearing modest or Islamic dress and avoiding seductive dresses, (5) refraining from drawing unnecessary attention to oneself, and (6) protecting one's purity (Benlafquih, 2009; Guven, 2010; Colakoglu, 2001; Nevevi, 2009).

In Islam, both men and women are forbidden to look at the nude images of opposite sex.  They are also forbidden to look at some parts of the same sex (Benlafquih, 2009; Guven, 2010).  In a Hadith, it is defined as the adultery of the eye to look at women with desire (Nevevi, 2009: 490).  Looking at unlawful images is regarded by Muslim scholars as a first step that takes one to greater sins such as adultery or other unlawful sexual relations (Guven, 2010).  Thus, individuals are encouraged to avoid being exposed to sexual images.  In addition, it is the parents' responsibility to protect their children from being exposed to illicit images or scenes.  Islam pays much attention to raising righteous and moral children.  Therefore, it is one of the main duties of parents to bring up modest children (Guven, 2010; Colakoglu, 2001).

Adultery appears explicitly in the Qur'an as "Nor come nigh to adultery: for it is a shameful deed and an evil, opening the road to other evils" (Bennett, 2007).  Qur'an does not say "Do not commit adultery," instead, it says "Do not approach to adultery."  This means, one should avoid from the ways or situations that may take him or her to adultery.  Therefore, most Muslim individuals pay great attention to refraining from looking at sexual images or scenes (Guven, 2010).  In Muslim community, prohibiting looking at unlawful images and adultery is thought to prevent emotional injury, and to result in greater familial stability and social harmony (Bennett, 2007, Guven, 2010).  In addition, it is believed in Muslim community that looking at sexual or unlawful images or watching illicit scenes weakens individuals' memory and leads to amnesia (Guven, 2010).

Women have distinctive value in Muslim community.  There is a chapter in the Qur'an named Nisa, which means women.  In this chapter, the Qur'an enjoins fairness toward women.  It says, "Live with them with kindness."  In addition, we can find the same kind of distinctive value given to women in Hadiths.  Prophet Mohammad says, "Act kindly towards women…"  (Nevevi, 2009: 112)  In another Hadith, He says, "The whole world is a provision, and the best object of the benefit of the world is the

pious woman," (Rahim, 2000). In Muslim families, the man is responsible for his wife and girls' purity, and his honor is directly connected with the purity of the women in his family (MacNeill, 2009). Qur'an warns those who propagate shameful things among believers. It says, "Verily those who love that indecency should spread among the believers deserve a painful chastisement in the world and in the Hereafter. Allah knows, but you do not know," (Quran, 24: 19). In all Muslim countries, all kinds of body displays and sexual references are considered indecent (Boddewyn, 1991).

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted exploratory research method in order to obtain in-depth understanding of Muslim consumers' reactions to sexual advertisements and the mechanism of the process. It utilized observations of Muslim individuals and families, and interviews with them. The observations were conducted between February 2010 and December 2010 in New Jersey. Interviews with 18 Muslim individuals residing in New Jersey were conducted in summer 2010, during home and workplace visits. Convenience sampling method was used to recruit the interviewees. Since the subject matter is a sensitive issue in Muslim community and most Muslim individuals know the socially desirable answers to the interview questions, the interviews were conducted in friendly and informal atmospheres. The analysis of observations and interviews sought to identify Muslim consumers' general approach and reactions to sexuality in ads, their attitude toward the brands whose ads include sexuality and toward the firms that own these brands and the motivations behind their behavior.

## RESULTS

The findings suggest that Muslim individuals tend to believe that today's advertisements include too much sexuality. Furthermore, irrespective of their gender, they have negative attitude toward the use of sexuality in advertisements and express their discomfort with it. In addition, they tend to avoid looking at or seeing advertisements that contain sexuality. The extent to which they take some measures to avoid being exposed to these ads varies. They tend to believe that most advertisements abuse females' body, degrading women's value in the community, and deteriorating social values. They are mostly troubled with the sexual ads on billboards, newspapers and TV channels. Moreover, some are irritated by the advertisements including sexuality. A great majority of women find some advertisements disgusting and insulting. Their discomfort tends to increase when the ads also include the images of sexual males. On the contrary, some Muslims do not have any negative attitude toward sexuality in ads and avoid seeing these ads. Moreover, they regard it as a legal strategy to attract consumers' attention. This research argues that religiosity level, in particular personal modesty, determines the extent to which a Muslim person has negative attitude toward sexuality in ads. Therefore, it hypothesizes that those who are more religious and have high level of personal modesty have more negative attitude toward sexuality in ads than those who are less religious and have low level of personal modesty.

At this point, significant questions arise: Does Muslim consumers' negative attitudes toward sexual ads influence their evaluations of brands in these ads? Do they develop negative attitude toward the brands and firms that own these brands? In other words, does "halo effect" occur? If yes, how is the evaluation process influenced? What extraneous variables affect the evaluation process? The exploratory research findings suggest that Muslim consumers may develop negative attitude toward the brands whose ads accompany sexuality, toward the firms that own these brands, and toward the advertisers who use sexuality in the advertisements that they make. Some informants make very harsh criticism against these firms and advertisers. One interviewee draws attention to a very interesting point, when criticizing firms' use of sexuality in the ads. He says,

> "Why do they use this strategy to attract my attention or why do they try to attract my attention by using sexuality? I feel insulted whenever I see an advertisement which includes sexual women."

He further claims that advertisers who use sexual women in ads are insulting men. Although not common, Muslims may even boycott the products whose advertisements include sexual images. They try to avoid buying them even if the products are desirable. One participant gives a very interesting example, saying that he has not bought a biscuit with a particular brand since he saw its advertisement. He says,

> "Almost 10 years ago, I watched the advertisement on TV, in which there were huge sexual woman lips that covered the whole screen, which had nothing to do with the product. It was disgusting…"

One claims that those who make sexual ads on billboards limit his freedom.

> "I can avoid those in newspapers by not buying the newspapers or those in TV channels by not watching the channels; however, it is difficult to avoid those on billboards."

The extent to which Muslim consumers' negative attitude toward sexual ads influences their decision making process needs further attention and examination of large samples by including other variables into the study such as price, brand name, product quality and product category. However, this research explores that sexual ads significantly influence their decision making when it comes to newspapers, magazines and TV channels. Muslim individuals tend not to buy any magazine or newspaper that contains advertisements including sexual images and watch TV channels that broadcast advertisements including sexuality. This tendency may also be related to other contents of these newspapers, magazines and TV channels. In addition, word-of-mouth effect may play role in the decision process. Those who know that a newspaper includes sexual images denigrate this newspaper and share their thoughts with others, trying to prevent their purchase. Therefore, we can claim that even if one does not know that a newspaper includes sexual ads, he or she may develop negative attitude toward the newspaper and avoid buying it through word-of-mouth communication.

Observations suggest that Muslim consumers tend to be stricter when it comes to their children. They tend to believe that advertisements that include sexuality deteriorate the culture and negatively affect children and adolescents. They consider that these advertisements arouse sexual thoughts in children and adolescents' mind, increasing their inclination to sexual behaviors. Some parents believe that it becomes more difficult for children who are frequently exposed to sexuality to focus on their education. Those who have children tend to prevent their kids from being exposed to these kinds of ads. Observations show that parents who are religious and who want their kids to become religious take more drastic measures. They tend not to let their kids to buy magazines or newspapers that contain sexuality and to watch TV channels that broadcast sexual images. In addition, those who do not have children consider that they would do almost the same thing if they had kids. It is interesting to note that those who do not criticize sexuality in ads are relatively sensitive when it comes to their kids. Based on the above findings, Figure 1 demonstrates the proposed mechanism that explains Muslim consumers' reactions to sexual advertisements.

Figure 1: Proposed Path Model of Muslim Consumers' Responses to Sexual Ads
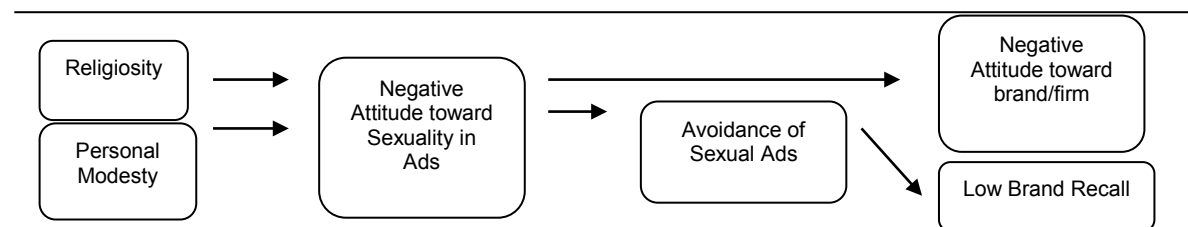


*This figures shows the proposed path model of the Muslim consumers' responses to advertisements that include sexuality. The expected relationships are developed based on the research findings.*

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The effectiveness of advertisements that contain sexuality has been a matter for discussion among researchers. Many of them have found that sexuality negatively influences the effectiveness of ads, due to its high attention-getting value and attractiveness. Their argument is that sexuality attracts more attention than other cues in the ads, resulting in lower brand recall. However, when it comes to Muslim consumers, further negative effects occur. This paper aimed at exploring the responses and reactions of Muslim consumers to advertisements that contain sexuality. The findings reveal that irrespective of their age, gender and marital status, Muslim consumers tend to have negative attitude toward the use of sexuality in ads. The extent to which sexual ads influence their brand evaluation and purchase decision appears as an important research question. Furthermore, the antecedents of this negative effect and the moderators involved in the process require further attention.

Emotional perspective primarily considers the affective aspects of consumer decision process and accounts for the feelings of individuals as a complement to cognitive processes dominant in the value perspective (Auger, et al., 2010). According to emotional perspective, both positive and negative feelings can significantly influence purchase intentions (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). In addition, it can be inferred from the "halo effect" that the first impression of a brand may influence the future evaluations of the brand. Therefore, those who have negative attitude toward sexuality in ads may negatively evaluate the traits of the brand, when its ads include sexuality. In addition, their negative feelings can significantly influence their purchase intentions.

This study argues that Muslim consumers tend to avoid looking at or seeing ads that contain sexuality and try to prevent their kids from being exposed to these ads. This tendency is expected to lead Muslim consumers to have low recall of brands whose ads accompany sexuality. Furthermore, they tend not to buy newspapers or magazines that include sexual images and watch television ads that contain sexuality. This study suggests that "personal modesty," a concept that describes shyness, propriety in dress, speech and behavior, and a deeper modesty based on faith (Benlafquih, 2009), explains Muslim consumers' reactions to sexuality in ads. Therefore, it hypothesizes that advertisements that contain sexual stimuli will negatively influence consumers with high level of personal modesty.

This paper recommends that those who wish to appeal successfully to Muslim consumers should take into consideration the requirements of personal modesty. Specifically, they should avoid using sexuality in their marketing campaigns. The advertisers should refrain from using women with seductive dresses. They should also refrain from using flirtatious behaviors and speeches in television ads. Furthermore, the newspapers, magazines and TV channels targeting Muslim consumers should pay attention to the requirements of personal modesty and avoid sexual advertisements. In addition, since Muslim parents pay much attention to raising righteous and modest children and want them to stay away from sexuality, the marketers should not use any kind of sexual image in their marketing campaigns that target Muslim children. Moreover, they should not use any kind of sexual image on the products with which they target Muslim children. Briefly, firms that want to be successful in Muslim markets and appeal effectively to the consumers in these markets should use in their marketing campaigns the images and materials that comply with the requirements of personal modesty.

The findings of this study points to several future research areas. First, more research is needed to better understand how Muslim consumers respond to advertisements that include sexuality. Due to its exploratory nature, this paper offers an initial understanding of the subject matter. Future research needs to examine the issue with a large sample size and investigate some covariates such as age, gender, marital status, country of origin and educational background more in depth. Second, future studies need to pay attention to personal modesty in order to understand this phenomenon and its effects on consumer behavior. The development of "personal modesty scale" can help better understand Muslim consumers'

behavior and contribute to consumer behavior literature. Finally, it is likely that cross-cultural investigations will offer new insights and a better understanding of the subject matter.

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**BIOGRAPHY**

Ahmet Bayraktar is a PhD student in the marketing department at Rutgers University Business School. His research interests are related to consumer behavior, brand management and marketing ethics. He can be contacted at Rutgers Business School, 1 Washington Park, Newark, NJ 07102. Email: ahmetbay@pegasus.rutgers.edu.