

Women Find Sexually Explicit Ads Unappealing — Unless the Price Is Right

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Sexual imagery is often used in magazine and TV ads, presumably to help entice buyers to purchase a new product. But new research suggests that women tend to find ads with sexual imagery off-putting, unless the advertised item is priced high enough.

The findings, published in [*Psychological Science*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), reveal that women's otherwise negative attitudes about sexual imagery can be softened when the images are paired with a product that connotes high worth.

“Women generally show spontaneous negative attitudes toward sexual images,” write psychological scientist Kathleen Vohs, a researcher at the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota, and colleagues. “Sexual economics theory offers a reason why: The use of sexual imagery is inimical to women's vested interest in sex being portrayed as infrequent, special, and rare.”

Vohs and colleagues predicted that women's negative attitudes toward sexual imagery might soften if sex is depicted in a way that is consistent with the values of sex being seen as highly valued and of great worth. Sexual imagery may be less off-putting to women, for example, if it is paired with high-priced consumer goods, which can convey exclusivity and high value.

To test this prediction, Vohs and colleagues Jaideep Sengupta and Darren Dahl had male and female participants come to the lab and view advertisements for women's watches. In some of the advertisements, the watch was presented with a sexually explicit image, whereas in others the watch was pictured with a majestic mountain range. Importantly, some of the ads priced the watch at \$10 and others at \$1,250.

To measure the participants' gut reactions toward the ads, the researchers had them memorize a 10-digit code before viewing the ads, a cognitive distraction designed to prevent them from thinking too deeply about the ads. Then, after reciting the code, participants were asked about their attitudes and emotional reactions toward the ads.

Overall, women who saw the sexual imagery with the cheap watch rated the ad more negatively in comparison to women who saw the sexual imagery with the pricey watch. These negative ratings seem to be driven by women's negative emotions — feeling upset, disgusted, unpleasantly surprised, or angry — in response to the ad that paired sexual imagery with the cheap watch.

Men, on the other hand, reported similar reactions to the sex-based ads, regardless of the advertised price of the watch.

The researchers note that price only made a difference for women in regards to the ads that included

sexual imagery. Female participants showed no differences in ratings for the cheap and expensive watches when they were paired with the mountain range.

A second study replicated these results and ruled out the possibility that men's ratings didn't differ because they deemed the women's watches to be irrelevant: Men gave similar ratings to sexually explicit ads that included men's watches, regardless of how the watches were priced.

While the findings are in line with the predictions generated by sexual economics theory, Vohs and colleagues were surprised nonetheless:

“We were able to get these effects even when participants weren't actually in a purchasing scenario,” she says. “Just a quick exposure to an ad was enough for theories of sexual economics to kick in,” Vohs explains. “This suggests that the process happens at a deep, intuitive level.”