

# **Women on Top...in Advertising? An Exploration of Female Responses to Different Sexual Position Portrayals in Sexually-Themed Advertising**

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*In this paper, we explore American females' reactions to sex in advertising featuring different sexual positions between a heterosexual male and female model. We conduct an experiment and find that, overall (as perhaps expected) a moderate-sex advertisement is generally preferred and produces superior advertising outcomes to high-sex advertising. However, some of these differences are erased when the high-sex advertisement features a female-control sexual position (women on top) versus the missionary position. We offer this as an exploratory investigation into the attitudinal and emotional responses to these different positions, and suggest areas for further research in order to potentially better allow advertisers to use this executional element in effectively advertising to female consumers.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Nancy Friday titled one of her groundbreaking books documenting women's sexual fantasies *Women on Top*, featuring a double-entendre for both the position itself and the importance of women acknowledging the worth of their sexual needs and fantasies. Each chapter features collections of fantasies under a common theme, and in her chapter "The Great Seductress: The Power of the Pleasure Giver" she writes:

Ah, the joy of seduction! To take a man, lay him down, and you on top, orchestrate his sounds of slow surrender with the shifting of your weight, the forbidden dirty words whispered in your female/mother voice, watch his gradual loss of control—no, control his loss of control—until ultimately, with the pressure and release of delicate vaginal muscles on his swollen penis, he comes. (1991, 67).

For many years, the assumption has been that sex in advertising is more appropriate for a male audience versus a female one—however, most of that content has been created with a male audience in mind. In this paper, we examine whether featuring different sexual positions—namely one where a male has more control

(male-on-top) versus one featuring a female with more control (female-on-top)—in advertising produce different effects in resultant female audience attitudes, emotions, and overall efficacy. We also contrast this imagery with the stereotypically more female-accepted lower level of sex in advertising (e.g., a couple kissing passionately on a couch). We draw from both the advertising and human sexuality literatures and then conduct an experiment in order to take a first step at understanding whether different sexual dyadic position portrayals produce differing advertising results. Specifically, in this experiment, we investigate whether or not there is a difference in how women interpret high-level sex appeals when the woman is in control of the sexual encounter. With the prevalence of sex in the media, can (and should) sex appeals be reframed to give women a greater feeling of empowerment while still effectively achieving advertising goals? We begin with an exploration of sexual advertising, especially vis-à-vis a female target audience.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Does “Sex Sell” to Women?

Advertisers have long used visual sex-appeal, i.e. “provocative images of well-defined women (and men) in revealing outfits and postures” (Reichert, 2002, p. 242) and textual/audial sex appeals (Kilbourne, 2014) in advertisements to sell a variety of goods including, “clothing, alcohol, beauty products, and fragrances... [in addition to] mainstream products not traditionally associated with sex” (Reichert, 2002, p. 242). Sexually-themed advertisements have been found to be especially good at gaining an audience’s attention (Dudley 1999; Reichert, Heckler and Jackson, 2001). However, the general rule-of-thumb in advertising is that “sex sells” much better to a male audience than a female one (Reichert, Childers, and Reid 2012; Reichert and Zhou 2007).

One potential reason why this is the case is because most sexual content is created with a male audience in mind versus a female one. Mulvey’s (2001) concept of the “male gaze” suggests that in media, women occupy a more passive role as opposed to the active role that male protagonists often play; for instance, since movies are often shot with the idea of a male audience in mind, female characters are often subjected to the men’s “scopophilic instinct” and become sexual objects under this male gaze (Mulvey, 2001, p. 395). Similar dynamics are found in advertising. Kilbourne (2014) finds that women are often sexually objectified in advertisements by being portrayed in passive, vulnerable, submissive poses, and the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) found not only that this sexualization of women is frequent, but also that these portrayals are more common than men being shown this way. Unsurprisingly, many females do not appreciate this portrayal. Women of high socio-economic status exploring the way they see female portrayals in advertisements found that respondents felt women are sexually objectified and the images often perceived as offensive (Ford, LaTour, and Lundstrom 1991, p. 20). Women tend to give highly sexualized advertisements more negative ratings than men do (Sengupta and Dahl, 2008; LaTour and Henthorne, 1993; LaTour and Henthorne, 1994) and similarly, studies suggest advertising featuring nudity may not be an effective way of advertising products to women as nudity can make consumers think negatively of the advertised product and the related brand and consider the ad “unethical” (Peterson & Kerin, 1977; LaTour and Henthorne, 1994).

However, “sex in advertising” covers a very broad range of possible advertising executions, and not all sexual appeals, of course, are created the same. For instance, in terms of advertising model interactions, Soley and Reid (1988) classify kissing as a “sexual contact” and contrast it versus nonsexual contact like holding hands, but sex in advertising could also involve full nudity, simulated intercourse, or other much more erotic interactions.

Extant research has found that mild sex appeal imagery (e.g., an intimate embrace of a heterosexual couple walking through the woods) was better received by female participants than an alternate ad with high sexual appeal imagery (an unclothed female pressed up against a fence by a man wearing only unzipped jeans) (LaTour and Henthorne, 1994). Even in the case of more explicit sex in advertising, research suggests that individual differences in personality can significantly affect females’ reactions. For instance, sexual self-schemas, or individuals’ sexual self-concept, has been found to be positively associated with the efficacy of sex in advertising (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994; Reichert & Fosu, 2006;

Mayer and Peev, 2017). Sexual self-schema “exhibits a significant influence on affective and attitudinal responses to the opposite-sex and both-sex images” (Reichert, Latour, & Kim 2007, p. 72). However, even this sex-related personality component has been found to have important boundary conditions, as women with higher sexual-schema actually dislike sexual advertising they perceive as having a low fit level with the sponsoring brand, penalizing the brand for using a manipulative tactic (Mayer & Peev 2017). So among women predisposed to favorable reactions, sexual advertising’s use can cause backlash on resultant attitudes.

On a more societal level, the increasing sexualization of the feminine in American culture has been met with strong reactions from females. For instance, Schippers and Sapp (2012) highlighted the tenets of femininity in second wave feminism:

A second wave feminist perspective on femininity is one that assumes that normative features or socially prescribed requirements of femininity are the embodiment of patriarchal domination and oppression. Femininity is defined as a set of embodied characteristics and practices that are imposed on women and result from or signify their subordinate status in relation to men. (p. 28)

In this light, the prevalent sexual roles women found themselves in the media were the result of an oppressive male patriarchy. However, later feminist thought moved more toward female empowerment in embracing female sexuality. Schippers and Sapp (2012) explained how femininity took a different turn in third wave feminism:

By contrast, a third wave feminist definition of femininity can be characterised as one that begins with an assumption that femininity is a set of cultural or social ideals concerning what a girl or woman should be. Femininity is not so much imposed on women or embodied by women as a result of their subordination, but instead, available to and can be embodied by anyone. (p. 29)

This perspective embraced female sexuality and aligned itself with pop culture and “girl power” declaring “females they can be strong and powerful, they can be anything they want to be, and they can look hot doing it” (Zimmerman and Dahlberg 2008, p. 72). Supporting this perspective, females who reported enjoying sexualized male attention experience “higher sexual esteem and lower sexual depression” (Barnett, Maciel and Gerner 2018, p. 682). But even this reclaiming of power has been controversial; Liss, Erchull and Ramsey (2011) sought to determine whether females who reported enjoying sexualized male attention were actually empowered or simply replicating ideals of the male patriarchy, finding connections between female enjoyment of sexualization and negative ideas such as “endorsement of traditional gender norms, endorsement of benevolent sexism, and endorsement of hostile sexism” (p. 64).

### **Sexual Position Portrayal and Control**

Overall, it is likely correct overall to say that while sex in advertising is perhaps more viable as an advertising tactic to target (at least certain groups) of female consumers, it still is not a mainstream, widely-accepted one. However, given the previous discussion of the importance of fit and female empowerment, it would seem a better practice than not to grant women their own agency in sexual advertisements, that is, to communicate that they have power. Historically, in overall advertising, this is often not the case. Goffman (1979) analyzed 500 popularly occurring advertisements in 1979, and discovered that subordination of certain groups, including women, was suggested in the advertisements in a number of overt and covert ways. On a covert level, women were often suggested to be subordinate to men by their lower position in the actual ad image: “In contrived scenes in advertisements, men tend to be located higher than women, thus allowing elevation to be exploited as a delineative resource (p. 43). Goffman (1979) also remarked how the lowing of one’s own body also conveyed deference to the other individuals in the ad; in multiple images women were featured laying down flat on a piece of furniture or the floor, which Goffman felt

represented, “a conventionalized expression of sexual availability” (1979, p. 41). In a more overt portrayal of subordination, Goffman argued in his chapter “Function Rankings” that, “when a man and woman collaborate face-to-face in an undertaking, the man-it would seem- is likely to perform the executive role, providing only that one can be fashioned” (p. 32).

This trend of subordination has continued; more recently, Mager and Helgeson (2011) conducted a review of gender portrayals in seven popular American magazines from 1950 until 2000 to bring Goffman’s study to a current context (p. 243). Overall, the researchers identified that though progress has been made in curtailing portraying females in overtly subordinating ways, covert depictions of subordination abound. Moreover, covert forms of female subordination in advertising may, counterintuitively, be even worse than overt depictions of subordination; for instance, Reichl, Ali, and Uyeda (2018) found that when men were shown latent sexism (as compared to obvious sexism and no sexism) in a series of print ads, they were more tolerant of sexual assault.

In considering this topic in its totality, we wondered if, in sexual advertising, a woman being shown in an ad in a position of sexual power would then be an improvement (likely in a societal sense, but more practically in terms of engendering positive attitudes toward the advertisement and brand) over one shown in a more passive, dominated sexual position. Consider an advertisement featuring a heterosexual sexual coupling: this power (or lack thereof) might manifest in the level of control (or lack thereof) the female model appears to have over the male. One way that this control could likely be communicated is by the choice of portraying the sexual coupling as either male-on-top (missionary position), or female-on-top. In order to examine this dynamic, we turn now to an examination of perspectives on sexual position from experts in the field of sex.

### **Sexual Position—Physical Gratification and Control Perspectives**

Advertising has been conceptualized by some scholars (e.g., Richard Pollay) as providing a mirror of sorts reflecting a distorted view of culture itself. Given that sex in advertising is a tactic that has historically been skewed towards males, it is unsurprising that this reflects a similar perspective on the act of sex itself. Maines (1999) writes that in America, the cultural norm is to perceive sex primarily through an androcentric (male-dominant) lens, and that the very definition of sex as an activity “recognizes three essential steps: preparation for penetration... penetration, and male orgasm” (p. 5). The lack of “female orgasm” as a necessary component in her definition of the activity of sex is intentional; as she writes, “the female is expected to reach orgasm by means of penetration, but if she does not, the legitimacy of the act as “real sex” is not thereby diminished (p. 5). In and of itself, a female orgasm is inherently less obvious a physical reaction than a male one. Masters and Johnson defined female orgasm as:

a highly variable peak sexual experience accompanying involuntary, rhythmic contractions of the outer third of the vagina—and frequently of the uterus, rectal sphincter, and urethral sphincter as well—and the concomitant release of vasocongestion and muscular tension associated with intense sexual arousal” (Masters & Johnson, 1966, in Maines 1999, 48).

However, penetration-based heterosexual intercourse is often not a very effective means of achieving orgasm by the female participant. As Maines writes, “that more than half of all women, possibly more than 70 percent, do not regularly reach orgasm by means of penetration alone has been brought to our attention by researchers such as Alfred Kinsey and Shere Hite, but the fact was known, if not well publicized, in previous centuries” (1999, p. 5). However, this is not to say that females are not able to achieve orgasms as readily as males when other means are employed. While most sexual intercourse does not result in orgasms for females, most females can achieve orgasm through masturbation as quickly and consistently as men (Kinsey 1953, Hite 1976, in Symons 1979). In fact, females’ capacity for orgasm eclipses that of males. Tavis and Wade’s research suggests that “during masturbation, especially with an electric vibrator, some women can have as many as fifty consecutive orgasms” (Tavis and Wade 1984, 92-93).

However, the reality for women in an intercourse-dominated culture, is that “orgasms are natural, but intercourse is not, for many of us, the easiest way to have them” (Kitzenger 1985, p. 79). In fact, the majority

of women have actually “faked” an orgasm in order to please a male partner, while the majority of men believe that no woman has ever done this during sex with them (Maines, 1999). Women may even elevate non-orgasmic reactions to a self-identified “orgasm”; citing the work of researchers such as Jeanne Warner and Joseph Bohlen, Maines (1999) writes that “in the absence of these signs, the emotional and physical enjoyment that women experience in coitus is frequently elevated to the stature of orgasm, both in the women’s own reports and in their medical interpretation” (63) especially since this helps to reinforce partner’s self-esteem and keep to androcentric norms.

This focus on sex as necessarily involving penetration was, according to some researchers, an effort to effect and keep an androcentric norm in Western society (Maines, 1999). For instance, Sigmund Freud and other male authority figures popularized the notion that sexual penetration was the norm, and behaviors such as masturbation were manifestations of abnormal psychology and this belief continued and gained momentum through the mid nineteenth-century (Maines, 1999). In fact, during this period females’ inability to achieve sexual orgasm from sexual intercourse was defined by psychologists such as Edmund Bergler and William S. Kroger as a medical condition they termed “frigidity” (“the incapacity of women to have a vaginal orgasm during intercourse” Maines 1999, p. 62).

A core issue with the lack of female orgasm during sexual penetration is lack of stimulation of a key female sex organ, the clitoris. Maines suggests that the in Western medical practice there has been “a systematic effort to subsume the knowledge that the clitoris, not the vagina, is the seat of greatest sexual feeling in most women into the androcentric model and to avoid one-to-one heterosexual confrontation over orgasmic mutuality by shifting the dispute onto medical ground” (112). Historically, even when the need for clitoral stimulation is acknowledged, Maines cites examples of doctors who were reticent to suggest this stimulation as part of coitus as it will potentially inconvenience men.

There is also a lack of awareness on the part of male partners in terms of the physiological reality of the clitoris. In a chapter of her book *Woman’s Experience of Sex* entitled “Genital geography” Kitzenger (1985) writes “Many women... might think that men, at any rate, would have a fairly good idea of what (the clitoris) looks like. But men often say that they have never actually seen the clitoris (46).”

This is not to say that penetration-based sex is not in and of itself unenjoyable for females; unlike for males, however, the peak enjoyable outcome (orgasm) is not achieved often. Kitzenger (1985) writes that females “may be aroused, but find that she is left stimulated and unfulfilled because the main action has moved to the vagina, and the clitoris is left like a stranded and neglected island of excitement” (79). Men “who do not understand the importance of the clitoris is female sexual arousal or who do not bother about providing any clitoral stimulation” but rather “go straight to penetration” (138). However, the previous discussion of “penetration” generally implies a male-on-top, missionary position. Other sexual positions involving penetration offer a different experience for females, for both physiological and psychological reasons. We now turn our attention to this dynamic.

### **Female-On-Top: Power and Pleasure**

Compared to the missionary position, penetration where the female is on top of (or “mounted” on) the male results in more clitoral stimulation and therefore a potentially superior experience—and one more likely to produce female orgasm. This was even acknowledged in the androcentric Western sexual environment of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Consider Alfred Kinsey’s widely influential research study *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, where he reports:

About a third (35 per cent) of the older generation and half (52 per cent) of the younger generation reported that they had frequently had coitus in a position in which the female lay above the male. Some moral philosophers and philosophically inclined clinicians think they see evidence of a personality disturbance when the “normal” male and female roles are so reversed. On the other hand, some of the gynecologists, impressed with the mechanics of coitus, have been inclined to recommend that the female should be above in order to effect the anatomic relationships which are most likely to bring her to orgasm. (363).

In terms of the utility of this position, Kitzenger (1985) writes that “being on top may give the woman more mobility... in this position she can also guide her partner in how she wishes to be stimulated. (142), and that by lying on top women can “easily control the degree of penetration” (Kitzenger, 222). Thus, there is the obvious physiological benefit of this position. However, a female-on-top sexual position may not only result in a superior physical experience for the female, but also in more control and other heightened dynamics beyond pure physiology, or in the interaction of the physiology and these other factors. As Susan Quilliam writes in her book *Women on Sex*, women-on-top positions “allows us deep penetration but turns the tables (from missionary) in terms of control” (1994, p. 136).

What (position) we like varies, according to what pleases us physically and what mood we are in. The key issue is usually depth: how deep does any particular position allow our partner’s penis to go. But other factors are important, too. How much do we want to move, and how much do we want the opportunity to movement to him; how much control do we want to have; how much opportunity to stimulate our clitoris do we need; how much do we want to lie face to face, kiss and talk? (135)

The themes of control are echoed in the fantasies in Nancy Friday’s books. She describes her own enjoyment of reading the submitting fantasies that involved “reversing the old roles of and for a change assuming the position and power of the one who controls the transcendancy of fulfilling sex” (67). One women speaks of her fantasy of seducing men she was supervising as “our competition was symbolized by each of us wrestling to “get on top” of the other sexually” (73) and her desire to “subdue my opponent and make firm but tender love to him” (73). In another chapter entitled “All I Want is To Control Everything” she writes that “the goal of these particular fantasies is not the men’s humiliation but the woman’s own sense of total sexual control” (131). She writes that compared to recent generations (whom she asserts may have even been more sexually active) that “these new women own their fantasies. If they can imagine themselves as sexual initiators, is it too farfetched to hope that they might carry this sense of control and power over into their real lives and be more responsible for themselves sexually? (131)” Friday contends that this has long been a desire—simply, until recent decades, a repressed one, or as she writes, “Nothing is new to the erotic unconscious. That these emotions of erotic domination...were always in women’s imaginations (130).”

## **Research Questions**

Given the previous discussion of females’ consumption of sex in advertising and of the different physical and psychological realities of male-versus-female-on-top sex, we offer the following research questions which we explore in an experiment:

- Will females have a more positive overall appraisal of sexually-themed advertising that shows a female-on-top sexual position vs. a male-on-top sexual position?
- Will females have a more positive overall appraisal of a higher sexually-themed advertising that shows a female-on-top sexual position versus one using a lower (moderate) level of sex?
- Which type of advertisement will give rise to the lowest/highest levels of positive and/or negative emotion (affect) in the female audience?

## **EXPERIMENTAL EXPLORATION**

### **Method**

#### *Participants, Design, and Stimulus*

Our study was designed to investigate whether different positions—one where a male had more control in a missionary-sex depiction of sex in advertising, and one where a female had more control in a woman-on-top type position, affected females’ reactions to the advertisement and advertising brand.

For our main study, we utilized Survey Sampling International (SSI), a sampling and data collection services provider and member of the Advertising Research Foundation (ARF) and American Marketing

Association (AMA), to obtain a sample of participants. With SSI, researchers do not directly pay participants from SSI's panel, but rather they complete surveys for which they are qualified for in exchange for company incentives. The approximate payment to SSI was \$4 per participant, which was funded from a research stipend provided by the first author's previous employer (a large public university in the Midwestern United States).

Our experiment's survey was prepared with Qualtrics Survey Software. Participants ( $n=114$ ) were American females with a mean age of 36.7 (min. age=18, max. age=74). Subjects completed the exercise online, first answering basic demographic questions (e.g., current age) and then questions about our stimuli's product category (mouthwash). They were next instructed to view "an idea that an advertising agency has for a mouthwash product advertisement" and viewed a fictional advertisement for a mouthwash product (a category which frequently utilized sexual themes in advertising (Reichert, Childers, and Reid 2012)). We picked the Close-Up since sexual themes in advertising are more effective with a female audience when a product is highly congruent with sexual themes (Peterson and Kerin 1977) and Close-Up's brand positioning of "Get Closer" seemed likely to be viewed as such.

We designed a series of advertisements for Close-Up brand mouthwash with varying levels of sexual content (using a male and female model in images obtained from freedigitalphotos.net). We first had a low-sex execution, with the top of the advertisement featuring copy that read "Why use CLOSE-UP?" with a picture of an attractive, demurely dressed couple kissing. At the bottom of the advertisement was the tagline "Get Closer," next to an image of the product (please see Appendix for all stimuli). In the high-sex ads, we replaced the picture of the couple kissing on the couch for an image of the now largely-unclothed couple in bed, one where the woman was on top of the man (for the high-sex female-on-top ad) and one where the man was on top of the woman (for the high-sex male-on-top ad). Each subject was randomly assigned into one condition (viewing one advertisement and answering questions); participants were asked to rate the measured variables which were mixed with unrelated personality scales and unrelated measured items in order to prevent hypothesis guessing.

### *Main Study--Measures*

To measure the relative presence of sex in the advertisements, we measured the level of perceived sexual content in the advertisement (henceforth  $\text{Perc}_{\text{sex}}$ , measured as the response on a seven-point scale to the question "Did this ad relate the product to sex?").

Since we were examining our research questions in only one product category setting, we measured two potential covariates— pre-existing purchase intent for Close-Up (7-pt. scale, very unlikely to buy/very likely to buy) and a measure of mouthwash category involvement (I don't care at all about what brand I buy; I care a great deal about what brand I buy; I think various types of brands are all very alike; I think brands are all very different; It's not important at all to make a right choice when buying it; It's extremely important to make a right choice when buying it; I am not at all concerned about the outcome of my brand choice; I am very concerned about the outcome of my choice;  $\alpha = .87$ ).

For our research questions regarding females' overall appraisal of advertisements, we measured several different dependent variables. First, we measured attitude-toward-the-ad ( $A_{\text{ad}}$ ) as a five-item seven-point semantic differential scale ("in my opinion, this advertisement is \_\_\_\_": unpleasant/pleasant, unlikable/likable, bad/good, irritating/not irritating, not interesting/interesting;  $\alpha = .94$ ). We also measured the fit of the advertisement with the brand ( $\text{Fit}_{\text{ad-brand}}$ ) as a two-item seven-point semantic differential scale ("in my opinion, this advertisement is \_\_\_\_": not a good fit with this brand/a good fit with this brand, not one that makes sense with this brand/one that makes sense with this brand;  $\alpha = .93$ ). We likewise measured attitude-toward-the-brand ( $A_{\text{brand}}$ ) as a five-item seven-point semantic differential scale ("in my opinion, this brand of mouthwash is \_\_\_\_": bad/good, not nice/nice, unlikeable/likeable, unfavorable/favorable, undesirable/desirable;  $\alpha = .98$ ). Finally, we asked participants how inappropriate or appropriate they found the advertisement as a one-item 7-pt. semantic scale measure. These scales were adapted from previous advertising research (Zhang and Zinkhan 2006).

In order to examine respondents' positive and negative affect after exposure to an advertisement, we also asked respondents to indicate the feelings they had as they viewed the ad using adjective pairs (e.g.,

not angry/angry) as anchors on a 7-pt. semantic scale. We utilized anchors from Richins' Consumption Emotions Set (1997). The total list included angry, ashamed, disgusted, excited, happy, hopeful, jealous, optimistic, sad, scared, warm-hearted, wishful, and worried. We aggregated the seven negative emotions into an index of negative affect (henceforth NegAff ( $\alpha = .85$ ), and the six positive emotions into an index of positive affect (PosAff  $\alpha = .91$ ).

### *Manipulation Check*

Sexual content is a construct that arguably rests, at least to some degree, in the eye of the beholder, so we tested respondents' perceptions of both what we believed to be the high-sex advertisements (where the male and female models were pictured in bed) and the moderate-sex advertisement (where models were kissing on couch), and also created a very basic advertisement with no models, but simply a bottle of Close-up replacing the sexual imagery (see the Appendix for this control). We added this to the manipulation check in order to ascertain whether the moderate-sex advertisement did at least contain more perceived sex than a control glamour shot advertisement, but less than the explicit high-sex ones. We performed the manipulation check with a one-way ANOVA of model sexual interaction (control—no model, moderate-kissing, high—male control, high—female control on Perc<sub>Sex</sub>; this test was significant ( $M_{\text{control}} = 3.38$ ,  $M_{\text{moderate}} = 4.55$ ,  $M_{\text{high-female}} = 6.49$ ,  $M_{\text{high-male}} = 6.08$ ;  $F(3, 165) = 39.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Planned contrasts revealed the mean differences when comparing any two levels were significant (all  $p$ 's  $< .01$ ), except when comparing the two explicit levels ( $p > .26$ ). We concluded that the moderate-sex and high-sex advertisements were properly operationalized, and removed the basic product-only advertisement from any further analysis.

### *Dependent Variables*

A one-way ANOVA of model sexual interaction on A<sub>ad</sub> was significant ( $F(4, 109) = 6.33$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The test revealed a significant main effect of model sexual interaction ( $F(2, 109) = 3.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ), with covariates of category involvement ( $M=4.94$ ) and Close-Up pre-purchase intent ( $M=3.57$ ) both included and significant (both  $p$ 's  $< .05$ ). Planned comparisons revealed that the male-control high-sex image was the least preferred ( $M=3.88$ ), lower than the female-control high-sex image ( $M=4.29$ ) and the moderate-sex image ( $M=4.85$ ). While the moderate interaction was significantly preferred to the male-control high-sex cell ( $p < .05$ ), it was not significantly higher than the female control cell ( $p > .14$ ). (Please see Figure 1 for results).

Another one-way ANOVA of model sexual interaction on Fit<sub>ad</sub> was significant ( $F(4, 109) = 6.71$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with a significant main effect of model sexual interaction ( $F(2, 109) = 8.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with covariates of category involvement and pre-purchase intent of Close-Up again included and significant (both  $p$ 's  $< .05$ ). Planned comparisons revealed that the male-control high-sex image had the lowest rated fit ( $M=4.01$ ), lower than the female-control high-sex image ( $M=4.41$ ) and the moderate-sex image ( $M=5.67$ ), and these mean differences were significant for when comparing the moderate interaction to either high-sex cell (both  $p$ 's  $< .05$ ).

A corresponding one-way ANOVA of model sexual interaction on level of appropriateness of the advertisement was significant ( $F(4, 109) = 3.94$ ,  $p < .01$ ), again revealing a significant main effect of model sexual interaction ( $F(2, 109) = 7.35$ ,  $p < .01$ ), with covariates of category involvement ( $M=4.94$ ) and Close-Up pre-purchase intent ( $M=3.57$ ) both not significant (both  $p$ 's  $> .16$ ). Planned comparisons revealed that the male-control high-sex image ( $M=5.46$ , directionally the highest mean) and the female-control high-sex image ( $M=4.90$ ) were both rated as more inappropriate than the moderate-sex image ( $M=3.72$ ). Both of those mean differences vs. the moderate sex image advertisement were significant (both  $p$ 's  $> .05$ ).

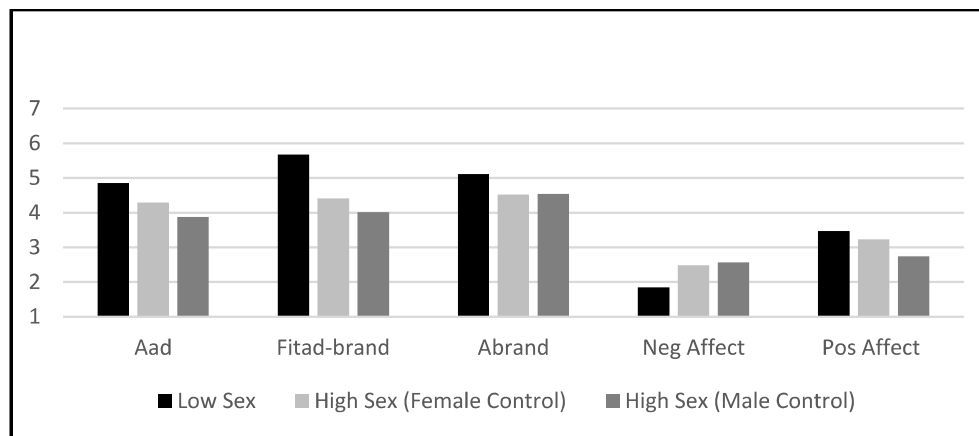
We ran analogous one-way ANOVAs of model sexual interaction on level on both PosAff  $F(4, 109) = 2.59$ ,  $p < .05$ , and NegAff  $F(4, 109) = 3.94$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Interestingly, there was no main effect of model position cell on PosAff, though directionally both the moderate-sex and female-control high-sex cells ( $M=3.47$  and  $3.23$  respectively) were higher than the male-control high-sex ( $M=2.74$ ). For negative affect, the one-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of model sexual interaction ( $F(2, 109) = 2.67$ ,  $p < .05$ ), with covariates of category involvement both not significant (both  $p$ 's  $> .10$ ). Planned comparisons revealed that the male-control high-sex image ( $M=2.57$ ) and the female-control high-sex image ( $M=2.48$ ) generated significantly more negative affect in participants than the moderate-sex image ( $M=1.85$ )—though



it is worth noting that these are all relatively low on the 7-pt rating scale. Both of those mean differences vs. the moderate sex image advertisement were significant (both  $p$ 's > .05).

For  $A_{brand}$ , a corresponding one-way ANOVA of model sexual interaction on level of appropriateness of the advertisement was significant ( $F(4, 109) = 6.09, p < .001$ ). However, this appears to be primarily driven by the presence of the significant covariates (both  $p$ 's < .05). Though directionally the moderate-sex image yielded higher brand attitudes ( $M=5.11$ ) versus the high-sex male-control ( $M=4.54$ ) or high-sex female-control ( $M=4.52$ ) advertisements, planned contrasts yielded no significant differences (all  $p$ 's > .05).

**FIGURE 1  
STUDY RESULTS**



## DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The current study offers an interesting perspective on portraying sexual advertising when using a heterosexual dyad. Taken as a whole across our attitudinal, fit-based, and emotion-based advertisements our study clearly shows that a moderate level of sex in advertising is preferred by mainstream female audiences. However, if a more explicit level of sex in advertising is used, it would appear that portraying a female in control of a high-sex image in advertising would be advantageous with a female audience versus showing a male-control image. Importantly, these effects did not appear to impact the advertising brand itself, though it's likely we might have seen stronger effects had a fictitious brand been used.

The use of sex in advertising is still primarily a male-targeted technique, though in rare cases, like Victoria's Secret, has been effective with females. The lack of its use in female-based consumer communication creates an inherent opportunity to potentially stand out versus competitors or against other "noise" in the advertising environment, but with that opportunity comes potential risk.

One major limitation is that this is a study with arguably low external validity. It is a single experiment conducted with a single sample of women, and using two models of certain physical characteristics. Further, the sexual positions are operationalized with a single image each, as advertisements for a single brand in a single category. Thus, whether through replication of our choices in this experiment, or expansion to different choices, there is inherent limitation in our study that presents significant opportunity for further research. Most obviously, it would be very interesting to see what men would think of female-control sexual advertising—would sex still "sell" to men if females were shown in control of the encounter.

A major limitation in terms of external validity is that this paper focuses on sexual imagery in Western culture, and the experiment was conducted on American adult women. Further research both theoretical and experimental on this topic on a variety of cultures would be fascinating and add much to the cumulative knowledge based on sexual advertising efficacy.

Also, as expressed in our review of the literature, certain personality variables might influence audience reaction to various position depictions of sexual dyads. For example, audience sexual self-schema or other sex-related personality variables could certainly be considered in future examinations of the effectiveness of position variations in further exploration of sexual position portrayal in advertising.

These were only two positions out of many (see, for instance, the classic text of *The Kama Sutra*). Further research could explore this topic in much more detail, so one possible area for further research is on other sexual positions, including male-on-top portrayals. For instance, sex researcher Susan Quilliam (1994) writes that “(females’) favorite position is still the missionary; that fact is so much of a cliché that some women even apologize in their answers for choosing it” (136). Though in our study we find that overall the male-in-control high-sex advertisement is probably the least effective with our female mainstream audience, it is possible that some portrayals featuring males in control might be more effective than our stimuli. There are, in fact, other male-on-top positions that offer much more clitoral stimulation

Another area for further research would be to examine if there are boundary conditions where portrayals of female control and empowerment actually backfire. For instance, Halliwell, Malson & Tischner, (2011) explored possible issues that portraying females as controlling sex might cause, finding that female participants had greater self-objectification after viewing the representations of women that were “framed as agentic sexual subjects” rather than passive sexual objects (p. 42). It is certainly possible that sexually themed advertising of this nature might have similar unexpected consequences, at both individual and larger-scale levels. Given that this was an exploratory study, further research might use different methods (e.g., qualitative) to gain more insight into this topic overall, and specifically in unforeseen outcomes.

Further research into efficacy of different sexual positions could also examine audience reactions to various positions for couples formed from non-heterosexual dyads (e.g., homosexual pairings). Within these dyads there might be further interesting dynamics; for instance, possibly incorporating the variable of age to differentiate between experienced and non-experienced sexual parties of the same gender. For example, IPachankis, Bittenwieser, Bernstein & Bayles, (2013) found during their study of sexual position identity of “young sexual minority men” that the men felt that being on the bottom during sex was for less experienced people, a more feminine position, and for “submissive,” individuals who would “kind of take[] it”; for some of the men, there was an expressed connection between being on top and feeling more masculine (p. 1248).

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**APPENDIX  
STUDY STIMULI**



Low Female Control / High Sex Advertisement



High Female Control Advertisement



Low-Sex Advertisement



Pretest Control Advertisement