

Intimate Advertising: A Study of Female Emotional Responses Using the ZMET

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For decades women of all ages have been targeted in intimate apparel advertising by means of erotic and racy images (Reichert, 2003). Past studies have focused primarily on consumer response to specific advertisement techniques as well as advertisement responses to consumer lifestyles (Buhl & Mick, 1992; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The study of consumer marketing in relation to human responses has distinct gaps in understanding a specific target market's emotional response to selected imagery. This research investigates the emotional reactions and responses of female college students towards erotic images of intimate apparel advertising. The study is based on Coulter and Zaltman's (1995) research in which images presented in print-based advertising are emotion-laden metaphors for the products and brands offered for sale. The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET; Coulter, Coulter, and Zaltman, 2001) was used because it offers a creative format to examine the emotional responses of female college students to intimate apparel advertising.

Dressed Identity and Advertising

When considering female emotional responses to intimate apparel advertising, it is important to begin with the issue of self-concept. Self-concept is a perception of who a person is

as a whole. People internalize and integrate their own personal qualities to define the self. An important characteristic of self-concept is that it is ever changing. Kaiser (1997) found that people mold their self-concept through both individual experience and social interactions. When clothing has the power to reveal something about one's self-concept, it is called "dress" (Kaiser, 1997).

Individuals are influenced by experience or social norms as they associate with positive and negative images. Sexual identity overlaps with elements of social norms and culture beliefs (Young, 2005). In addition, if an individual experiences a certain positive or desired outcome in one situation, he or she may be inclined to repeat certain factors of that environment to produce another advantageous outcome (Crane, 2000). Therefore, individuals react to these factors and these reactions, in turn, shape self-identity.

Consumers and Advertising

Companies are able to meet the desired results of their consumers through different forms of advertising, such as print media by addressing consumers' identity needs through dress. Advertisements largely represent what the product image can do for consumers and are one way that companies are able to lure their customers with promises of positive results on self-perception and appearance (Giuntini, 2007).

As in any advertisement campaign, there may be the use of images in print media. Changes in relation to how images are intended to be seen and then absorbed by consumers are subject to an "exterior reality" of perception (Mirzoeff, 1999, p.7). Consumers may call on this exterior reality from cultural and individual experiences. According to Weissberg, "Like a fetish, this element – the shoe or dress of the person depicted – expresses and stands for the viewer's desire and, metonymically, for his or her experience of the photograph itself" (1997,

p.109). Companies strive to reach a goal of creating an advertising platform that influences the change of disposition towards a positive outlook of a product which will in turn achieve a positive outlook on the customer once that product has been purchased and used (Lambiase, 2003; Wolfe, 2003).

Advertising has a social influence on those whom it aims to persuade through the message, purpose, and values that it conveys (Olsen, 2003). Advertising should serve the purpose of highlighting a product to provide the consumer with personal satisfaction and a positive inward and outward semblance of self (Manca, 1994). The popular culture of consumer driven buying and spending choices relies largely on the consumers' actual practice of free choice purchasing (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Advertisements in the media are one specific form of an influencing factor which can be perfected to persuade the consumers' decision-making process through research and analysis of consumer culture. The persuasive symbols, when implemented into a specific form of advertising media, underpin the theme of a company's "advertising platform" (Wolfe, 2003, p.869), which defines a target market and expresses how a product can satisfy that target market.

Market oriented symbols forge themselves into the awareness' of consumers, and in turn create a codependent environment wherein the two symbols draw information from the other, both cognitive and tangible. Company-created symbols are represented through advertisements to suit the needs and wants of a target market. When in sync, the symbols frame consumer perceptions causing some actions and thought patterns to be more likely constructed by the symbols influencing capacity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Traditional consumer theory suggests that these two symbols affect consumers' representation of self-concept (Belk, 1988; McCracken, 1986). Thus products are bought from a specific retailer or supplier who will fulfill

the image of self that was ultimately contrived by influencing businesses (Wolin, 2003). In the case of apparel, specific retailers will use their knowledge of their customers' relationships with the market oriented symbols to further encourage involvement in the brand. One such example of this type of relationship is with intimate apparel retailers advertising campaigns. Intimate

Apparel Advertising

Although there are numerous categories, sub-categories, classifications, and markets of intimate apparel firms, one common definition is "companies that design, manufacture, market, and/or license brands for underwear, intimate apparel, and lingerie" (Intimate Apparel Overview, 2008). Underwear, intimate apparel, and lingerie are all separate garment categories, yet tend to overlap each other in form and use. Two popular intimate apparel companies are Victoria's Secret and La Senza, which are large subsidiaries of the Limited Brand. Both have consistently top-selling products and launch numerous advertising campaigns each year (Chang, Lin & Mak, 2004; Mui, 2008). For the past few years Victoria's Secret has been pushing towards a more risqué presentation of advertisement campaigns. This has been achieved through the creation of product lines which fit their desire to generate a sexier store image, despite criticism from a multitude of quickly growing conservative consumers. Specifically, the Very Sexy and Sexy Little Thing product lines are being forced into the spotlight (Mui, 2008). The Sexy Little Thing product line depicts images not only of presumptuous intimate apparel like that of the Very Sexy line, but also depicts many of the models in a childish light: with everything from ringlet curls and bows in their hair, to holding round mirrors that mimic lollipops. This leaves many asking what visual messages are Victoria's Secret really trying to send, and what are people really perceiving about these images emotionally and mentally (Boteach, 2008)?

Theoretical Framework

The study of practical semiotics explores the basic symbols and signs found in specific media for the purpose of discovering what the particular piece(s) of media is trying to evoke. A study of socio-semiotics calls further for the investigation of symbols in coordination with material processes (Gottdiener, 1995). The goal of this research was to discover what the consumer's emotional involvement in perceiving and relaying the underlying symbols found in intimate apparel advertising adds to their own image and psyche. Thus, the purpose of this research was to explore female emotional responses to intimate apparel advertising. Specifically, how do these advertisements connect consumer self-concept and market experience with intimate apparel?

Methodology

Journaling

To conduct in-depth research, primary data were collected from the selected group of participants in a research process utilizing two distinct, yet complementary methods. In the first method, participants were asked to complete a series of journals. These journals were prompted through a series of four questions:

- 1) When purchasing intimate apparel, what do you expect out of the products (ex: how it functions, how you expect to feel when wearing the garments, etc.)?
- 2) What was your last experience buying intimate apparel? Where did you go and what did you buy? Describe, in as much detail as possible, the entire purchase experience.
- 3) How do you emotionally respond to wearing specific intimate apparel garments? Do you have intimate apparel wardrobes for separate occasions? Explain why or why not.
- 4) Free write (no specific topic) on your feelings toward intimate apparel.

Each question was open-ended with ample room for reasonable interpretation (Zaltman, 1970). The purpose of question one was to discover the expectations of intimate apparel in relation to customer thought, opinion, and previous experiences; question two explored emotional response based on direct statement or implied through actions from the participants' last experience of purchasing intimate apparel; questions three and four prompted answers from the subject that were personal and gave precedence for a qualitative examination. The participants were given two weeks to write in their journals, after which a collection of the journals took place. Each journal was read, analyzed, and all data were further examined in conjunction with the method described by Coulter & Zaltman (1995). Subjects were given a chance to review the interpretations of the research findings at a later focus group in order to provide internal validation for the findings.

Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique

The method used was a review of print advertisements chosen by the researcher as being representative of the particular Victoria's Secret advertising line discussed. The review of print advertisements has traditionally been the media of choice for consumer marketing research. Print media, already one of the earliest forms of advertisement, is readily accessible for economic and technological reasons (Coulter & Zaltman, 1995). ZMET, the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique, was used in this research as a focus group method designed for the purpose of extracting both positive and negative consumer perceptions of print advertising. ZMET bridges the gap between concrete advertising and intangible emotional responses through the use of imagery (Coulter & Zaltman, 1995). The research process consisted of the following steps:

1. Images were selected from a current Victoria's Secret line that has been the subject of wide-ranged debate and criticism (Boteach, 2003 ; Mui, 2008) regarding the sexual nature of the products depicted. The Sexy Little Things line depicted four advertisements with the models featured being in varying states of dress; the first two only had panties on while the second two were wearing both upper and lower garments.
2. Intimate apparel advertisements from a specific Victoria's Secret product line were presented to a target group of female college students in order to evoke a response (See Images 1-4).

Image 1:



Image 2:



Image 3:



Image 4:



(Victoria's Secret Sexy Little Things, 2008)

3. The subject group then selected images from physical sources (ex: magazines) that reflected emotional feelings aroused from viewing the intimate apparel advertisements (Images 1-4).
4. The pictures were arranged by the subject group to create a summary image, or contrived composite of total group emotions towards the advertisement (Coulter, Coulter, & Zaltman, 2001). The composite images created by the focus group

resulted in the selection of three response images in addition to the four images selected by the researchers.

5. The ZMET was followed by a focus group discussion to explore, in more depth, the emotional responses on an individual level, as well as connections found through group consensus (Zaltman, 1997).

The ZMET, in addition to the non-threatening environment of a focus group, provided a basis for validity when addressing the differences that were measurable only through qualitative examination of the images gathered (Coulter, Coulter, & Zaltman, 1995; Coulter & Zaltman, 2001). Participant Selection

After obtaining appropriate IRB approval from the Mars Hill College board participant were solicited for participation in the study. A total of 12 female participants were selected. Each of the 12 research participants was a college student majoring in Fashion and Interior Merchandising and enrolled in a visual merchandising course. The visual merchandising course was an upper-level course. Thus, most of these participants had more advanced knowledge of the use and marketing of apparel products than their junior counterparts, and in fact, they were chosen because they had specific knowledge in marketing and were more attuned to the use of visual appeals in practice. The depth of knowledge among the participants allowed for an in-depth understanding of the participants response to the advertisements that complemented the descriptive nature of the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique. Participants were directed to complete the journal process for two weeks prior to the focus group meeting in order to allow the individuals to more fully reflect upon the research topic prior to group discussion. The journals were then collected by the research prior to the focus group utilizing the Zaltman technique in order to analyze for thematic similarities and differences to be used as prompts for leading

discussion during the focus group discussion, and to allow for future comparison of individual responses in journals and group responses in the focus group. Upon the completion of the journals students met during assigned class time to complete the ZMET portion of the study. The students were given a copy of the prompt images (Images 1-4) to view and were provided with a variety of additional print images to use while constructing an individual visual response, in the form of a photo collage. After completing their individual collages the participants were asked to come together as a focus group to discuss their individual collages and how they interpreted the prompt images. The focus group was then asked to come up with “group images” that represented the overall interpretation of the prompt images. The focus group was videotaped throughout this discussion process and then transcribed by the researcher to further analyze, refine, and if necessary, expand upon the themes which developed in the journaling process. Before interpreting any of the transcriptions or journals, the participants were given copies of the transcripts to verify the accuracy of the recordings. In addition, the reflective process was completed as participants were asked to confirm the correct representation of their journal and focus group comments in the ultimate thematic interpretation of findings.

Interpretations

After the collection and analysis of data, the results were grouped into three conceptual areas of attention: advertisements as fantasy, perceptions of reality, and the emotional bridge between the two. These conceptual areas were selected based on emergent concepts revealed the majority of participants’ in their own journals and focus group comments.

Advertising as Fantasy

The two most commonly interpreted variables expressed as fantasy roles in the Victoria’s Secret print images were sexual romanticism and innocent fantasy ideals. Sexual

romanticism is the use of warm, soothing colors and pictures for the purpose of evoking sensual emotions. The theme of innocent fantasy ideals is characterized by the depiction of implied youth and quixotic imagery.

A.W.: It's like these first two [garments] have a more romantic, classic appeal, and the second two are trying to be baby-doll cutesy.

A.K.: Yeah, the second two are looking like outfits that you wouldn't wear on a regular basis. Probably only if someone would see them, you know, you're wearing them for someone. The last one really looks like an apron, maid role-play. I don't think older women wear those.

Two main marketing themes presented by Victoria's Secret are their two lines of intimate apparel: Very Sexy and Sexy Little Things. Very Sexy was described as warm in tone, more mature, and sensual in emotional expectations, as well as more calm and professional. In addition, the Very Sexy line tended to be the norm for each subject's overall view of Victoria's Secret's company theme.

The Sexy Little Things line, which was the physical print media used for the ZMET, employed responses that the specific line was appealing to younger and more innocent fantasy ideals. Innocent fantasy ideals were described as the sum of both the portrayal of what is viewed as symbols of youth and what is viewed as apparel with no functional protection:

A.W.: It took me awhile to notice, but the lollipop and hair ringlets really look like something a little kid should be wearing. Plus the whole innocent housewife outfit. It

looks like the age target of the 20-somes is really put out there for the age appeal of 8 year-olds.

A.M.: It seems like they're just for show. Could you really comfortable wear those under your clothes?

Perceptions of Reality

Discussion of individual view and group consensus yielded insight into the participants' particular expectations of intimate apparel and what Victoria's Secret's intimate apparel actually does to meet their expectations. The first issue, what the female consumers expect intimate apparel to do for them, was separated into two categories: to meet physical needs and to satisfy emotional expectations. As stated by numerous members of the subject group, it must provide some tangible function. More specifically:

A.L.: When I go shopping for intimate apparel the expectations I expect out of the products I am purchasing is protection, comfort, appearance, and I also look for it being reliable. I do not want to buy things that are not going to last or are going to fall apart on me.

A common notion was that intimate apparel should be able to stand up to regular wear and laundering, though there was no specific point of distinction as to what normal wear and care would encompass.

Emotional Expectations

The third conceptual area of concern was that intimate apparel needs to fulfill emotional expectations. For some, it was clear that emotional expectations outweighed the needs of functionality, whereas others simply stated that they would not purchase a garment if they did not like the appearance. Upon further questioning, it was clear that there was a very strong connection between emotional satisfaction and garment appearance:

A.K.: It is very important for it to be the right fit and I often select them on their appearance as well.

K.D.: It must first appeal to me aesthetically, then it must meet my requirements when it comes to comfort. Even though no one else sees the undergarments that I buy, they can affect my mood and my confidence. That self esteem boost is something that I've come to expect out of the intimate apparel that I purchase. If I don't feel that, then on an emotional basis, the product has failed me.

When purchasing intimate apparel, the participants agreed that, as with any other purchase, there is the view that when either emotional or function expectations are missing, product satisfaction would be low. Statements implying how not only appearance, but tangible attributes, can add to a products emotional value were given:

A.W.: When you're wearing something that feels good you definitely feel more confident.

Victoria's Secret appeals to many of the participants' needs by providing functional garments that look sexy or cute. Through this research, it was possible to explain bridges of connection between fantasies advertisers sell and how consumers emotionally react to specific advertisements as a form of *reality*. Fantasy is generated through images of what is pleasurable and desirable to consumers, whereas reality can be measured by looking at to what extent the product is actually capable of meeting the portrayed or implied fantasy for each consumer.

For each individual participant, it was recognized that the different body types and different body images of participants correlated with their emotional reactions to both the physical garments and intimate apparel advertising. Throughout the journals, it was clear that each participant enjoyed wearing intimate apparel that was able to make their confidence and self-esteem levels rise. Different garments were often selected by the participants based on self-knowledge:

A.L.: For some people it is definitely their body type and body image. Others think they can pull that off, but for me I know that style doesn't look right.

Other participants indicated confusion about their own body image and what a garment would actually contribute to their own image; this led to a discussion about the external and internal forces of intimate apparel advertisements. An image selected from the ZMET collage created by the focus group displayed a vast array of fresh vegetables, fruits, and grains (See Image 5). It was selected to describe particular feelings towards each intimate apparel image:

C.D.: You see pictures like this in a magazine, especially with food. The ad makes it look good but in reality it's disgusting. I think everyone tries to make-pretend that there is some hope for their own look whenever they see these (intimate apparel) ads, but in reality it just doesn't happen.

Participants responded to a variety of elements presented in the advertisements including: the product, props, and models selected. When intimate apparel was viewed through advertisements, interpretations shifted from a focus on what the actual garment would do for the individual to what the advertisement implied what the garment would do for the individual.

Image 5:



(Bon Appétit Test Kitchen, 2008).

The photo in which models wore torso and lower garments evoked negative emotional responses. Selection of imagery and group discussion uncovered feelings based on the use of

props and bodily expression that conveyed a sense of youth, to a point of extremeness. The use of what was interpreted by the participants as a lollypop, though it was in actuality a mirror, in one of these images removed a sense of connection between the participants and the advertisements; the participants felt they could not relate to the image presented in the advertisement. The major question was what particular market the advertisement was geared for:

A.L.: They're appealing to guys; obviously it's not just for us. The lollypop won't help us look like that.

K.D.: It's like what's happening in society: younger ages are trying to look sexier while older women are starting to age down.

In response – N.D.: Is it right to be thinking that younger is sexier?

One image selected by the focus group displayed a measuring tape around a human waist (See Image 6). It was determined that even though all four prompt images (See Images 1-4) images were designed to look cute; only the first two appropriately connected with the participants. The explanation of the measuring tape was a negative response to the second two advertisements:

A.W.: I don't need to be a little girl. I am who I am: a woman.

Further discussion between the group participants revealed that the measuring tape showed how we are not all one size and that the advertisements depicted extremely skinny models.

A.M.: I do have harsh feelings towards advertisements and huge posters in stores of girls with perfect bodies in the intimate apparel you are about to buy. I do not like walking into Victoria Secrets and being bombarded with images of what I am not. I always end up feeling a bit inadequate.

Image 6:



(Person measuring waist with a measuring tape, n.d.).

Conclusions

From a utilitarian perspective, an intimate apparel garment is an article or collection of clothing that serves the purpose of providing basic, body coverage, traditionally worn under an outfit. Yet these physical garments can greatly affect emotional expectancy. This research illustrated the importance of buying patterns and customer self-image. It suggested that the psychological factor related to intimate apparel dress may be more important than the physical

requirements of the garment. The emotional affects on the consumers self worth and confidence was determined by apparel generally viewed by only the wearer.

Many intimate apparel advertisements depict unrealistic, yet desirable, body images that create negative emotional reactions which, especially for women, can cause consumers to focus on often unachievable image-related goals (Pollay, 2000). Throughout the research it was shown that emotions can be greatly affected in negative ways. That is why print media advertising is a vital form of marketing; advertisements are designed to increase consumer buying by reinforcing product image in accordance to the demands of target markets (Ambler & Vakratsas, 2006). Although ZMET is a fairly new concept, it has been used with increasing popularity in other advertising studies; it serves as an extended measurement for emotional response and acts as a follow up to previous research on consumer attitudes towards advertisements (Bauer & Greyser, 1968; Coulter, Coulter, & Zaltman, 2001). The research conducted provided two distinct tests on emotional response, through which all were measured using a different medium (i.e., journaling and ZMET). The use of different techniques increased the possibility of discovering more aspects of specific advertisement study response than most other general techniques permit (Coulter, Coulter, & Zaltman, 2001). Through ZMET, companies can get answers through visual responses discussed further with participants during focus groups to issues which concern visual ideas. Ultimately, this can benefit market segmentation and research for companies.

Implications for Further Research

The research findings provide implications regarding advertisers' use of visual communication in the form of print media; the use of the ZMET to explore responses to visual prompts; and, more specifically, the use of the ZMET in consumer research to explore the relationship between interpretation of visual stimuli and purchase motivation. In this research, it

was noted that not all of the participants felt that each garment viewed as an image would have met their needs for emotional fulfillment. This research raised the question: Why, if intimate apparel images may be viewed negatively, are they so often used by the companies to sell products? In addition to the ZMET, quantitative research might provide insight into the number of companies, specific lines, or particular ads that are adequately bridging the emotional gap between fantasy and reality. Due to correlations between clothing and self-concept satisfaction, companies can efficiently advertise products that positively affect the ways that identity is created through dress. Additionally, the ZMET can be used to further explore the use of different products (i.e., sportswear or formal wear), especially those that have strong emotional connections to their markets (Coulter, Coulter, & Zaltman, 1995; Coulter & Zaltman, 2001). Since personal experience and social interaction are able to affect one's self-concept, research on target markets through ZMET can provide greater insight into how the consumers feel, what they desire to feel, and what types of advertising can achieve this goal.

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