



Does Sex Really Sell?

Survey explores how men and women look at sexually charged ads

Society drives people crazy with lust and calls it advertising," John Lahr once wrote. Of course, whether that craziness translates into sales is debatable.

MediaAnalyzer Software & Research in Somerville, Mass., recently set out to explore how men and women look at sexually themed ads and what effect, if any, that visual behavior might have on the ads' effectiveness. In September, the company had 200 men and 200 women take an online test. The first part of the test solicited general opinions about sex in advertising. (Those answers are summarized in charts on page 17.) The second part involved a visual test in which MediaAnalyzer used its AttentionTracking software to follow the visual behavior of respondents as they looked at 10 print ads. (The software has users move the mouse over each ad to indicate where he or she is looking.) The ad sample consisted of two U.S. print ads, one sexual and one nonsexual, from each of five product categories—cigarettes, credit cards,

jeans, shoes and alcohol. MediaAnalyzer used the data from the visual test to create versions of the ads that show viewing patterns (with arrows) and time spent in each ad region (with percentages). Those versions are reproduced over the next three pages. (The study also produced "heatmaps," not featured in this story, which show the emergence of each ad's "hot spots" over five seconds of viewing.) Responses to the general questions in the survey revealed that sex in ads is a polarizing issue. While almost half of men (48 percent) said they like sexual ads, few women did (8 percent). Most men (63 percent) said sexual ads have a high stopping power for them; fewer women thought so (28 percent). Also, most women (58 percent) said there is too much sex in advertising; only 29 percent of men said so. Women were also much more likely than men to say that sexual ads promote a deterioration of moral and social values and that they are demeaning for the models used in them.

The visual test exposed a similar polarization. Men tend to focus on an ad's sexual imagery (breasts, legs, skin, etc.), which draws their attention away from other elements of the ad (logo, product shot, headline). This may be why men's brand recall was worse for the sexual ads than for the nonsexual ones. An average of 19.8 percent recalled the cor-

rect brand/product for the nonsexual ads; for the sexual ads, 9.8 percent did. MediaAnalyzer calls this the "vampire effect," with a too-strong visual sucking up a lot of the attention that would have otherwise been spent on an ad's actual communication.

Women, meanwhile, tend to avoid looking at the sexual imagery, but curiously, their brand recall was worse with the sexual ads, too. An average of 22.3 percent recalled the correct brand/product for the nonsexual ads; only 10.8 percent correctly recalled the sexual ads. MediaAnalyzer hypothesizes that this might be the result of a general numbing effect that sexual stimuli has on the brain.

In trying to determine the effectiveness of each ad, the survey measured three other criteria besides brand recall: ad like, product like and purchase intent. Men said they liked the sexual ads more, liked the products advertised in them more and would be more likely to buy those products. Women scored the sexual ads lower than the nonsexual ones on all three of those criteria.

MediaAnalyzer also uses the data to offer advice for agencies considering using sexual images. For info, visit MediaAnalyzer.com.

Over the next three pages, we focus on how men and women looked at each pair of ads.

—TIM NUDD

Looking at the sexual MasterCard ad, the men spent a lot of time on the sexual imagery, starting with the model's breasts, then going either to her face above or the hamburger below, largely ignoring any text. The women largely avoided the sexual imagery. The differences were less pronounced for the nonsexual ad, although the viewing paths did diverge. Men first explored the model's body, including her knees, before eventually reaching the logo. Women almost immediately began exploring the text elements of the ad. But the

differences in time spent on certain regions of the ad were smaller. The cigarette ads offer similar findings in terms of viewing paths and attention by region. However, the sexual cigarette ad brought a more welcome response from women than the sexual ads in most of the other categories did. In terms of ad like, product like and purchase intent, the women's answers closely tracked the men's in this case. This may be because the ad is a drawing, and in an old 1940s pin-up girl style, and not seen by men or women as a "hard" sexual ad. —T.N.

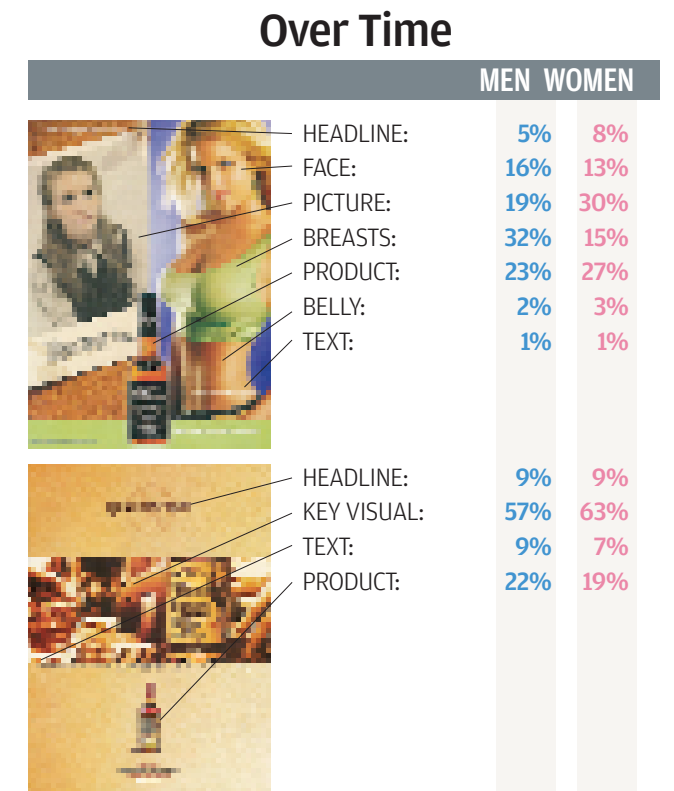
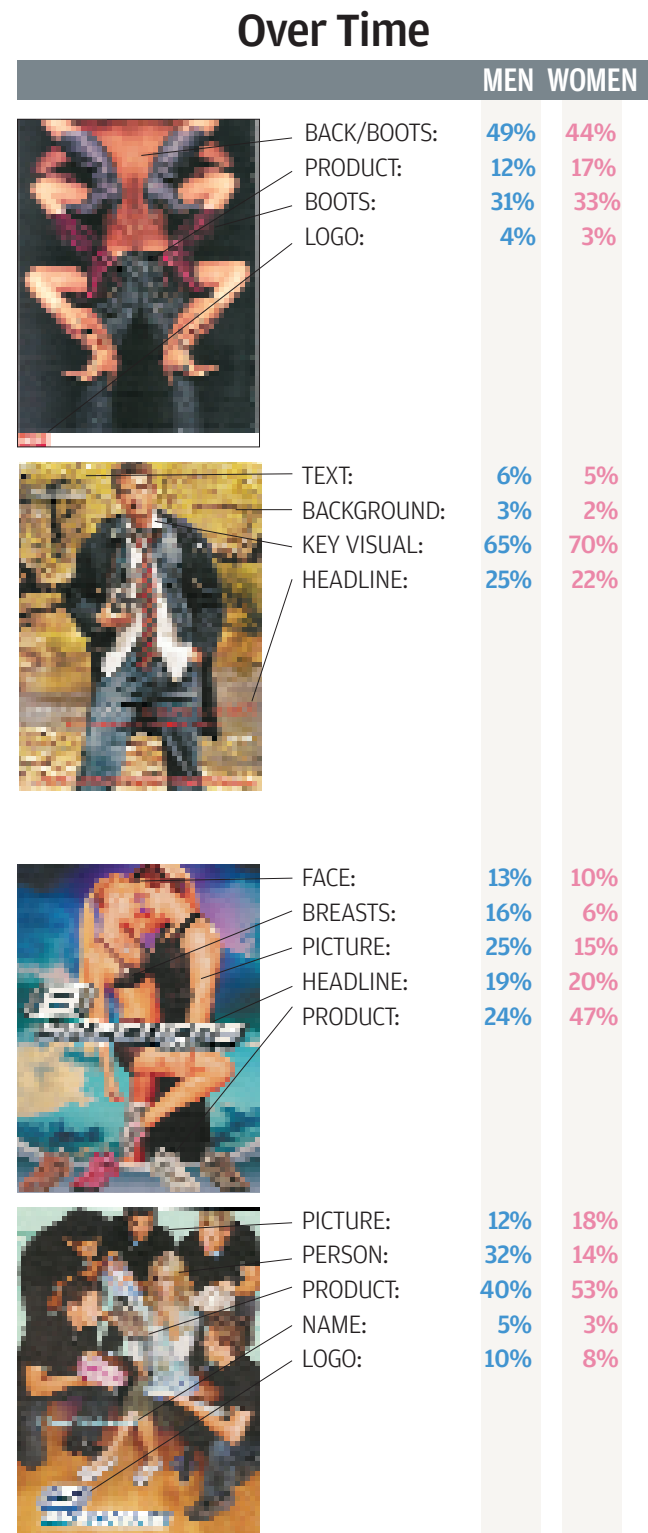
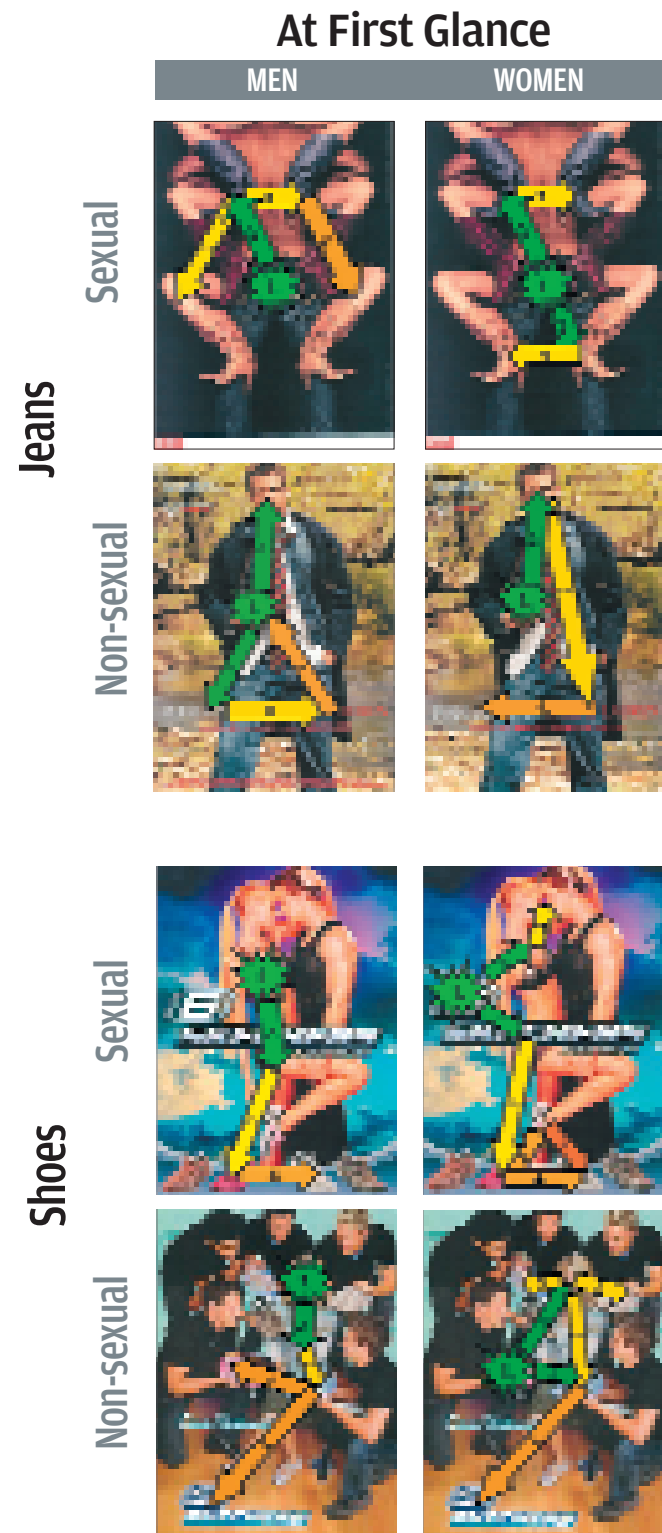


As with the Camel cigarette ad on the previous page, the sexual jeans ad shown here—for Diesel—did not have as large a male/female split in terms of likability as most of the other sexual ads did. Partly, this may be because a male model is the central figure. Also, women might feel this is a “soft” sexual ad and thus not be turned off as strongly by it. The viewing paths also suggest that the visual behavior of people looking at this ad may be determined as much by the geometric style of it as by the sexual imagery.

Response to the nonsexual ads on this page was also curious. Ad effectiveness for most nonsexual ads (credit cards, cigarettes, alcohol) was almost identical for men and women. However, women responded better than men to both the nonsexual Polo jeans ad and the nonsexual Skechers ad. For the Polo ad, the male model again may be a factor. For the Skechers ad, MediaAnalyzer theorizes that it may have to do with the use of a celebrity, *American Idol*'s Carrie Underwood, who is more popular with women than men. —T.N.

The whisky ads, much like the credit-card ads, are good templates for how men and women typically respond to sex in advertising. In the sexual ad, the men tended to focus more quickly and for a longer duration on the model, particularly her breasts. Conversely, the viewing patterns for the nonsexual ad were the same for men and women.

Almost 60 percent of men said they liked the sexual whisky ad; less than 15 percent of women did. For the nonsexual ad, the likability scores were close, both around 30 percent. More than 25 percent of men said the sexual ad made them want to buy the product. Almost no women said the same. —T.N.



Attitudes Toward Sex in Advertising: Men vs. Women

