

A Model to Explore the Ethics of Erotic Stimuli in Print Advertising

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ABSTRACT. This paper discusses a test of a hypothetical model of the role of perceived ethical feelings about the use of female nudity/erotic stimuli in print advertising. Specifically, the linkages between perceived ethicalness of the use of the print ad (as measured by the Reidenbach and Robin ethics scale) and attitude toward the ad, brand, and purchase intention are explored.

The use of female nudity/erotic stimuli in print advertising has become quite commonplace. Ads characteristic of the genre, such as the continued run of controversial print advertisements for "Obsession" perfume and cologne by Calvin Klein, typically feature a nude couple or solitary female in a suggestively compromising position. Just as memorable are many of the print advertisements for jeans by Calvin Klein. Ads of this type are designed to elicit what the originators hope is a vicarious experience of sensuality without the result being extreme levels of anxiety or discomfort (LaTour and Henthorne, 1993).

The employment of sexual (or erotic) communication appeals in print advertising continues to be a controversial topic, as evidenced by the

strength and variability of reactions to its usage. This study evaluates the impact of a sexual appeal by testing a hypothetical model incorporating linkages between the ethical dimensions of the Reidenbach-Robin (1988, 1990) multidimensional ethics scale and resulting attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intention.

Background

The use of erotic stimuli in print advertising has become almost commonplace in current advertising practices (LaTour and Henthorne, 1994). It is not unusual to find provocatively posed and attired (or unattired) models promoting any number of items in general-interest consumer magazines. This routine use of erotic stimuli in print advertising has resulted in mixed consumer responses. Prior empirical studies have shown both positive reactions and negative reactions from viewers of such ads (see, for example, the works of Alexander and Judd, 1986; Henthorne and LaTour, 1994; LaTour, 1990; LaTour and Henthorne, 1993; Sciglimpaglia *et al.*, 1978). One of the central issues of the erotic stimuli controversy currently facing advertisers is believed to be the perception of continued traditional sex-role stereotyping of women (Boddewyn and Kunz, 1991). This traditional sex-role stereotyping is thought by many social critics to contribute to the perceived continuing injustice and inequality for many women. Additionally, there appears to be no reduction in perceived "sex objectification" in recent years even though female roles have substantially changed to more professional depictions (Ford

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and LaTour, 1993). Meanwhile, the advertising industry has come under increasing and consistently strong pressure from various outside sources (including well known feminists and feminist groups) who argue that the dignity of women has been lowered by their continued portrayal as sex objects (Kilbourne, 1987; Soley and Kurzbard, 1986). Because the whole issue of sex, sexual innuendo, and what is considered decent, moral, and/or acceptable in a culture or society is in constant evolution (Boddewyn, 1991), advertisers are finding it increasingly difficult to determine whether their viewers will perceive ads containing a relatively high level of female nudity as "sexy" or sexist" (Lipman, 1991; Miller, 1992). Women's perceptions, in particular, of such female role portrayals have been shown to have a substantial impact upon purchase intention and perceived overall image of the sponsoring corporation (Ford and LaTour, 1993; Lundstrom and Sciglimpaglia, 1977). To assist in coping with this precarious situation, advertising agencies are bringing in increasing numbers of female consultants to provide input on ads which may be viewed as potentially offensive to women (Lipman, 1991). Clearly, with such important and pragmatic concerns at stake, the impact of the use of such advertising on society should be examined.

The influence of ethics

One step toward understanding the impact of the use of erotic stimuli in print advertising is to examine the ethical dilemmas emanating from such use. Gould (1994) states that insight into these positive and negative consumer reactions may arise from an investigation of the basic concepts contained in normative ethical theories of moral philosophy. Normative ethical theories of moral philosophy may generally be classified as either deontological or teleological, with the principal difference being in the basic focus of the framework (Murphy and Laczniak, 1981).

Deontological philosophies focus on the specific actions of the individual without regard to the consequences of those actions. The deontological viewpoint is concerned with the inherent rightness of the individual act. Actions

should be judged by the actions themselves, without regard to the eventual outcome.

Conversely, teleological philosophies focus primarily on the outcomes and consequences of actions and behaviors in the determination of "worth" (Ferrell and Gresham, 1985). An individual behavior is considered ethical if it produces the greatest balance of good over bad, when compared with all other alternative actions (Hunt and Vitell, 1986). From a teleological perspective, many times the use of erotic stimuli in print advertising is not appealing to viewers and may actually assist in the generation of unintended (i.e., negative) side effects (for example, gratuitous sex). Therefore, these side effects of the use of erotic stimuli in print advertising, as well as the fundamental moral rightness of its use are of interest (Gould, 1994).

Reidenbach and Robin (1988) contend that individuals do not use the clearly defined concepts of deontology or teleology in making specific ethical judgements. They content that a mixing or combining of the philosophies is more the norm in ethical decision making. This belief is based in the work of Frankena (1963). Frankena (1963) advocated a view blending the seemingly mutually exclusive requirements of teleology and deontology.

The Reidenbach-Robin ethics scale

Normative ethical philosophy, containing a number of overlapping theoretical ideals, was used as the basis for the development of the Reidenbach and Robin (1988, 1990) multidimensional ethics scale. (For a detailed discussion of the moral philosophy base of the scale the reader is referred to the work of Reidenbach and Robin [1990].) The scale has typically distilled the three dimensions of "moral equity," "relativism," and "contractualism" (see Table I).

The "moral equity" dimension is composed of four items:

1. Fair-Unfair
2. Just-Unjust
3. Morally right-Not morally right
4. Acceptable to my family-Not acceptable to my family.

TABLE I
The multidimensional ethics scale

<p>The moral equity dimension</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">Fair – Unfair</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">Just – Unjust</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Morally right – Not morally right</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Acceptable to my family – Unacceptable to my family</p>
<p>The relativistic dimension</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">Culturally acceptable – Culturally unacceptable</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">Traditionally acceptable – Traditionally unacceptable</p>
<p>The contractualism dimension</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">Violates an unspoken promise – Does not violate an unspoken promise</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">Violates an unwritten contract – Does not violate an unwritten contract</p>

According to Reidenbach and Robin (1990), this dimension is believed to be based on lessons from early in life gained through basic institutions (such as family and religion) regarding such elemental constructs as fairness, equity, and right and wrong. The insights achieved from such institutions are considered decisive in establishing what individuals consider to be decent (positive) or objectionable (negative) in advertising (Gilly, 1988; Reid *et al.*, 1984).

The “relativistic” dimension is composed of two items:

1. Culturally acceptable-Culturally unacceptable
2. Traditionally acceptable-Traditionally unacceptable.

Dimension two is concerned with the social/cultural influences, guidelines, and parameters as they impact the individual. How we work to interpret individual events may be impacted by the items forming this dimension (Reidenbach and Robin, 1990). The possibility of a linkage between the ethical evaluative process and the social/cultural influences on the individual has been examined by Hunt and Vitell (1986). The current level of sex and eroticism in advertising may simply be a mirror of what is now acceptable social behavior (Courtney and Whipple, 1983).

Given the overlapping theoretical dimensions fundamental to the various ethical philosophies utilized in the initial distillation of the scales, it is not surprising to find a high degree of correlation between some of the various constructs. Specifically, dimensions one and two frequently have been shown to combine into a single comprehensive dimension (Reidenbach and Robin, 1990; Reidenbach *et al.*, 1991).

The final dimension, “contractualism,” is composed of two items:

1. Violates an unspoken promise-Does not violate an unspoken promise
2. Violates an unwritten contract-Does not violate an unwritten contract.

This dimension is centered around the concept of a “social contract” between the individual and society (Reidenbach and Robin, 1990). Implied obligation or contract is the fundamental issue addressed.

The hypothetical model

Figure 1 reveals the structural relationships posited as linkages between the ethical dimensions of the Reidenbach-Robin conceptualization and the resulting attitude toward the ad (A_{ad}), attitude toward the brand (A_b) and, ulti-

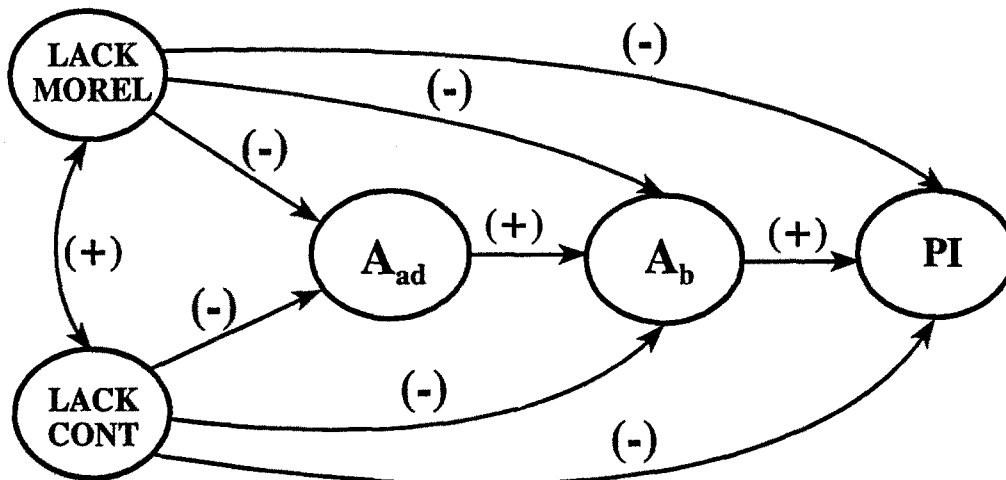


Fig. 1. Hypothetical model.

mately, purchase intention (*PI*). Figure 1 displays the two-dimensional structural outcome of the Reidenbach-Robin model. (Preliminary factor analysis of the present study's data supports this structural interpretation.)

It is hypothesized that a perceived lack of "Moral Equity/Relativism" (Lack Morel) associated with the use of the treatment ad will result in a negative relationship with attitude toward the ad (A_{ad}), attitude toward the brand (A_b), and purchase intention (*PI*). In addition to these "direct effects," it is hypothesized some of the negative impact of "Lack Morel" will be indirect. For example, "Lack Morel" may be found to impact purchase intention through the variables of attitude toward the ad (A_{ad}) and attitude toward the brand (A_b). It is further hypothesized the same type of relationships will exist between the endogenous variables and a perceived lack of contractualism. Based on prior research (e.g., Burke and Edell, 1989; LaTour *et al.*, 1990), the present model indicates attitude toward the ad (A_{ad}) should be positively associated with attitude toward the brand (A_b) which, in turn, should be positively linked with purchase intention (*PI*). This hypothetical model significantly extends previous research by providing a statistical test of linkages between moral philosophical dimensions and advertising response outcomes in one complete model.

The study

Data collection and ad stimuli

Data were collected by trained interviewers through the use of a mall intercept in a large regional mall located in a culturally dynamic and growing SMSA in the mid-gulf coast region. Following procedures suggested by Nowell and Stanley (1991), data collectors were rotated in random patterns throughout the mall during all hours of the mall's operation over a period of one week. Over 80% of individuals approached agreed to participate in the study. Each respondent completed the questionnaire in private, yet was monitored from a distance by research assistants. The use of the mall intercept as a data collection technique is commonly used in research such as this and has been shown to produce a significant cross-section of respondents (Bush and Hair, 1985). Such a cross-section will include older individuals which may be outside of the target market for youth-oriented products. However, the inclusion of such "non-targeted" individuals in the study is of importance due to their possible exposure to the ad and the resulting unintended social consequences for the advertiser (e.g., the perceived degradation of women) (Gould, 1994).

A high quality copy of a black and white print ad was used in the treatment. The selected ad stimulus was part of a collection of black and

white photographs promoting a well known brand of jeans and used in a metropolitan area different from where the current study was being conducted. As part of the treatment selection process, a focus group of adults ranging in age from 21 to 50 was used to select an ad from this promotional outsert perceived to contain substantial erotic content and nudity. The focus group selected ad featured a nude female model, with her body up against a chain link fence while at the same time being sexually embraced and kissed by a male model wearing only jeans with the fly unzipped. The ad contained the brand name of the jeans at the bottom. Each respondent was given the ad followed by the questionnaire.

Operationalization

Respondents completed two series of three seven-point items which were summed to measure attitude toward the ad (A_{ad}) and attitude toward the brand (A_b) (see Table II). The items were selected on the basis of focus group research and their use in related advertising research (e.g., Henthorne *et al.*, 1993; LaTour *et al.*, 1990).

In order to evaluate ethical dimensions asso-

ciated with the ad stimulus, respondents were asked to respond to a series of eight items in terms of their beliefs about the promotional use of the ad they had just seen. As discussed earlier, these eight items were identical to those which were distilled from an earlier instrument based on moral philosophy and validated by Reidenbach and Robin (1988, 1990) (refer again to Table II).

In previous validation research, both a three factor structure solution (Reidenbach and Robin, 1990) and a two factor structure solution (Reidenbach *et al.*, 1991) have been extracted. In the two factor solution, items representing the moral equity and relativism dimensions join to form a single composite dimension. According to Reidenbach *et al.* (1991), a possible explanation to the two dimensional structure may include the effects of a "natural relation expected between what people perceive to be culturally acceptable and what is just (p. 86)." The authors go on to say that the meaning of "fairness" comes to us in part through our culture and that, therefore, such a composite makes intuitive sense.

Next, selected demographic information was collected. Finally, purchase intention was measured by a seven-point item which read "The next time I purchase jeans I will purchase [brand

TABLE II
Variables used in the study

<i>Attitude toward the ad (A_{ad})*</i>	<i>Attitude toward the brand (A_b)*</i>
1. High quality	1. High quality
2. Interesting	2. Distinctive
3. Appropriate	3. Appealing
<i>Purchase intention*</i>	
The next time I purchase jeans I will purchase [brand name] jeans.	
<i>Lack morel composite dimension**</i>	<i>Lack contractualism dimension**</i>
1. Unjust	1. Violates an unspoken promise
2. Unacceptable to my family	2. Violates an unwritten contract
3. Unfair	
4. Not morally right	
5. Not culturally acceptable	
6. Not traditionally acceptable	

* Measured on 7-point scales anchored by "Yes definitely" = 7 and "No definitely not" = 1.

** Measured on 7 point bi-polar adjective item scales.

name] Jeans." This scale was anchored by "yes definitely" and "no definitely not."

Preliminary analysis and profile of the sample

Factor analysis indicated the two factor structure (as previously discussed). As in previous research (Reidenbach *et al.*, 1991), a composite dimension (six items) was distilled (entitled "Lack Morel" in the present study) along with the "contractualism" dimension (entitled "Lack Contractualism"). All tests of internal consistency of summed scales indicated adequate levels for basic research (e.g., Cronbach alpha tests greater than or equal to 0.70) (see Bagozzi, 1978; Nunally, 1967).

Table III indicates the per-item average on "Lack Morel" was above the midpoint on a 7-point scale ($29.50/6 = 4.91$). In contrast, the per-item average on the "Lack Contractualism" dimension was not found to be above the midpoint ($7.69/2 = 3.84$). Attitude toward the ad per-item average and Purchase Intention per-item average were below the midpoint ($9.75/3 = 3.25$ and 2.67 , respectively). Finally, attitude toward the brand per-item average was found to be above the midpoint ($13.26/3 = 4.42$). However, all of the scales had rather sizable standard deviations (refer to Table III) indicating substantial variability in responses. It stands to reason that individuals differ in the degree to which they react to such ad stimuli.

Of the 103 total useable responses, 44 were male and 59 were female. The average age of the sample was approximately 34 years, with a standard deviation of 14.7 years. 19.6% of the sample were African-American, 75.5% were

white, 2.9% were Asian, with the remainder indicating "other." Income levels were widely dispersed across several categories and generally reflected the income levels of the population surrounding a ten-mile radius of the mall (as supplied by mall management). The average number of years of education (high school = 12 years) was 13.6 years, with a standard deviation of 2.9 years. As mentioned previously, due to the importance of nontargeted individuals, based on their possible exposure to the ad and the subsequent possible negative social consequences of their viewing of the ad (e.g., perceived debasement of women) (Gould, 1994), no attempt was made to exclude nontargeted individuals from the study.

Results of the test of the hypothetical model

Maximum likelihood estimation was used to model the posited relationship of the variables. Figure 2 reveals strong goodness of fit indices of the data to the parameters specified in the hypothetical model. The chi-square index was non-significant, which in the case of causal modeling is an indicator of good fit. The percentage of variance explained by the structural equations representing the effects of other variables upon A_{ad} , A_b , and PI were 64%, 18%, and 30%, respectively. While this indicates appreciable amounts of variance remaining unexplained, it does establish that the structural relations featured in this model play a major role in these complex variable relationships and that the theoretical linkages were supported.

Analysis of the specific paths reveals a perceived "Lack of Moral Equity/Relativism" ethical dimension ("Lack Morel") associated with the use of the featured ad. This dimension was strongly negatively associated with A_{ad} (standardized coefficient = -0.795 , $p < 0.001$). The relationship between "Lack Morel" and Purchase Intention (PI) was also found to be significant (standardized coefficient = -0.277 , $p < 0.001$), but not as strong as the link from "Lack Morel" to A_{ad} . The link between "Lack Morel" and A_b was non-significant. Apparently, the main direct impact of "Lack Morel" is upon the perceptions

TABLE III
Variable averages

Variable	Mean	S.D.
Lack morel	29.50	10.68
Lack contract	7.69	3.40
A_{ad}	9.75	5.93
A_b	13.26	5.75
PI	2.67	1.69

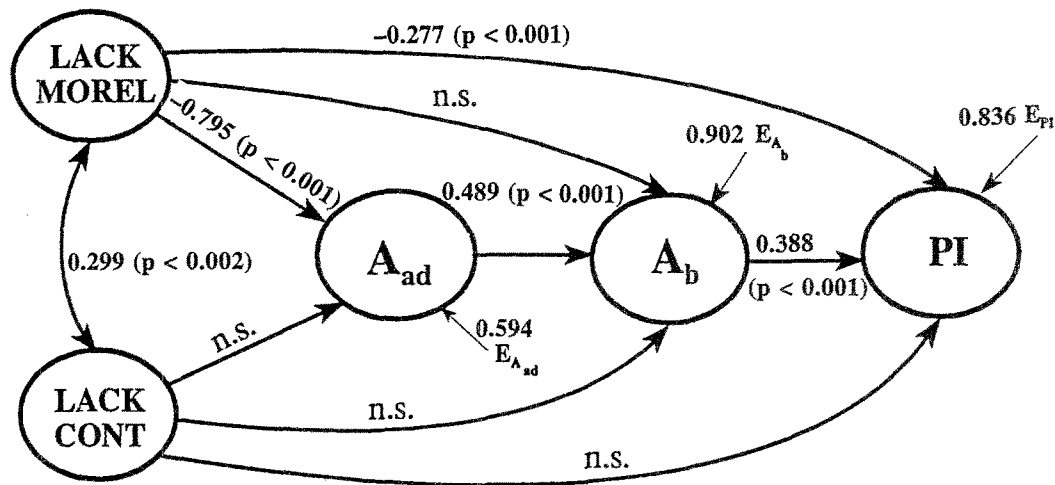


Fig. 2. Chi-square = 0.828, $p = 0.36$ 1 d.f., Bentler-Bonett Normed Fit Index = 0.99, Bentler-Bonett Nonnormed Fit Index = 1.01, Comparative Fit Index = 1.00.

of the stimulus and, to a lesser extent, perhaps a desire to “boycott” the offending ad sponsor. “Lack Morel” also had a significant (standardized coefficient = -0.388 , $p < 0.001$) negative indirect effect on A_b through A_{ad} (via the paths from “Lack Morel” to A_{ad} and from A_{ad} to A_b).

While the correlations between “Lack Contractualism” and Lack Morel” was positive and significant, none of the paths from “Lack Contractualism” to the endogenous variables were significant. It seems intuitively reasonable that the “Lack Morel” composite dimension would be more clearly associated with an advertising issue due to its focus on “moral acceptability” to society. Conversely, violation of an unwritten social promise or contract may not seem as relevant in this particular context as it is when, for example, a retailer promises some product performance characteristics that are not readily forthcoming.

As expected, the paths from A_{ad} to A_b , and from A_b to PI were all positive and significant. This supports the well developed arguments found in the advertising literature (e.g., Burke and Edell, 1989) that such linkage are a significant part of the “causal chain” of advertising events.

Discussion

The use of female nudity and erotic content in print advertising evokes dynamic reactions from viewers. However, the feelings which result from exposure to such strong stimuli may not be exactly what the advertiser intended (LaTour and Henthorne, 1994). As product marketers strive to differentiate and draw attention to their product offering, the use of erotic content has become increasingly common. It is suggested that such content be used with discretion and caution.

The results of this study indicate that the use of high levels of female nudity/erotic content in print ads may not be perceived as morally right or culturally acceptable to viewers of such ads. While the use of such stimuli may draw additional attention to the ad, the outcome of the use of such high degrees of erotic stimuli may, in fact, be negative. In other words (as indicated by the results of the test of the hypothetical model), the perceived lack of moral equity/relativism associated with the use of high levels of female nudity in print advertising appears to result in negative feelings toward the advertisement and indirectly toward the brand. Additionally, a direct “product boycott” effect from perceived “Lack of Moral Equity/Relativism” is supported. The lack of contractualism impact, at least in the test of this data, does not appear to be relevant to the advertising ethics environment.

Findings such as these should give advertisers pause as they prepare to use prominent levels of erotic content in print advertising. Care and consideration should be directed to predetermining the reaction of their particular target market to print ads containing high levels of nudity and/or erotic content. Additionally, advertisers must consider the likely exposure of individuals outside of the selected target market and the subsequent possible negative social consequences (e.g., perceived sex objectification (Ford and LaTour, 1993), perceived degradation of women (Gould, 1994), increased promiscuity (Boddewyn and Kunz, 1991), negative word of mouth (Miller, 1992) to the exposure.

Finally, future endeavors should examine this issue from a cross-cultural perspective. In fact, the controversy surrounding perceptually negative female portrayals in advertising has been shown to be a growing international phenomenon (Ford *et al.*, 1994). As world-wide societal change accelerates due in part to rapidly communicated social norms (such as the roles and portrayals of women in the media) of and among people of widely diverse cultures (Ford *et al.*, 1994), this controversy will become an even more visible and central issue to be deliberated.

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