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**Perception of Sex Appeal in Print Advertising by young female Anglo-Saxon and second generation Asian-Islamic British**

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# **Perception of Sex Appeal in Print Advertising by young female Anglo-Saxon and second generation Asian-Islamic British**

## **Abstract**

The aim of this research, is to provide empirical data to either support or challenge the view that subculture has an impact on how sex appeal in advertising is perceived. It looks at young females of two specific British subcultural groups, Anglo-Saxon and Asian-Islamic British. It reveals that there are differences in the perception of sex appeal, since the Asian-Islamic British have a rather more negative attitude towards this particular appeal, while the Anglo-Saxon have a much more positive attitude towards it.

Key words: Sex appeal, subculture, advertising

## **Introduction**

Cultural diversity influences marketing at all levels, mainly on segmentation the analysis of consumer behaviour, research methodology and marketing communications (Mariampolski 1999). Its position relative to globalisation is a subject of heated debate today. The issue is of great relevance to advertisers, in particular international advertisers, who are often faced with the dilemma of whether to standardise or localise their advertising campaigns.

Although cultural diversity is clearly an issue of great concern in the international context, it is also apparent in any national environment, due to the existence of subcultures. In both contexts the key consideration is the target audience and its projected reactions to the advertising stimulus. However past research has not analysed in-depth similarities and differences in the views of subcultural groups on various aspects related to marketing communications.

This study attempts to identify the perceptions and attitudes of two different British sub-cultures, the Anglo-Saxon and the Asian-Islamic, towards the use of sex appeal in advertising. It highlights differences and similarities, which could be used by advertisers to design appropriate advertising campaigns.

The paper first examines the role of perception in communication, the use of sex appeal in advertising and the role of culture, subculture and ethnicity in communication. It proceeds by setting the research propositions and describing the methodology adopted in this particular research. Then, based on the views of two different subcultures on sex appeal, it explores and discusses the extent to which

subculture impacts upon the way that the appeal is perceived. Finally, it concludes by identifying some implications for the advertisers and by bringing forward the limitations of the study and some thoughts on possible future research.

## **Communication and Perception**

Advertising is a communication between the advertiser and the audience. From the advertisers point of view, its aim is for the audience to interpret the message in the way the source intended. Perception has long been recognised as the most significant barrier to effective communication. The sender does or does not get through to receivers, since correct decoding of information depends on the audience's perception of the communication content. The problem being that different individuals may be subjected to the same stimuli under the same conditions, but how they recognise, select, organise and interpret the stimuli is a highly individual process based on each person's own needs, values and characteristics (Wang et al. 2000). Due to the existence of such perceptual diversity, communicators need to understand their audience before encoding messages so that they are credible and generate positive responses. Otherwise the perception may be negative, disbelief or rejection.

Positive perception could result in positive response to a particular advertising stimulus and positive attitude toward the advertisement. This positive attitude could influence purchase intentions (Severn et al. 1990) and even lead to the audience's brand choice without examination of beliefs on specific attributes, because it allows for the retrieval of an overall evaluation with minimal processing (Dotson and Hyatt 2000). To ensure that a stimuli produces favourable response, advertisers have to analyse where perception stems from, what influences perception and to ensure that no factors which may yield a negative attitude are present in an advertisement.

The way the message is presented, both pictorially and verbally, has a significant effect on the processing of the advertisement. However, it is acknowledged that perception and attitude depend not only on the physical stimuli but also on the stimuli's relation to the surrounding field and a whole range of factors within the individual, including the cultural background, experience, personality/cognitive style, values, expectations, and the context in which something is perceived (Usunier 1996, De Mooij 1998). In the following sections the use of sex appeal, one of the possible stimulus, and the role of culture, as a factor that influences the development of perceptions, will be examined.

## **Sex appeal in Advertising**

There are many appeals available to advertisers. Some are informative, providing information about the offer, while others emotional, attempt to evoke emotions to the audience rather than to make it think. Sex appeal is an emotional appeal. It is evident that its use in advertising is on the increase and it is widely used for all sorts of products in several countries (Gould 1994). It is even used for social marketing campaigns (Reichert et al. 2001). It is definitely used to attract attention (Reid and Soley 1983, LaTour 1990) and some argue that it might be used to sell “unneeded” products (Gould 1994).

Sex appeal can be used in a message as a motivating appeal in the visual presentation, the verbal portion of it or in a combination of both (Severn et al. 1990). There are many elements of sex appeal and in advertising it can be executed in a number of ways, such as double entendre, sexual attractiveness, nudity, suggestiveness and arousal (Biswas et al. 1992). It acts as an attention lure, to enhance recall or to evoke an emotional response - aiding an arousal to increase an advertisements persuasive impact, or indeed the opposite can take place if the advertisement elicits negative feelings such as disgust, embarrassment or uneasiness. When used appropriately, sexual content is capable of eliciting attention, enhancing recall and creating a favourable association with the advertised offer (Shimp 1999).

Although it is extensively used in many forms, sex in advertising is neither uniformly liked nor disliked and it is not always considered as ethical or needed (Veloutsou et al. 2003). The reactions to expanded use of sex appeal have ranged from outcries of dismay and disgust to claims that its use is merely reflective of the times or of cultural change. Some argue that it might even have a negative impact on the image of the advertiser (Ford et al. 1993), while past research provides mixed results on its ability to influence the attitude towards the brand, the advertisement and the purchase intention (Severn et al. 1990, De Pelsmacker and Guens 1996). Specific groups, defined by elements such as gender or age, respond more positively to sex appeal than others (Wise et al. 1974, De Pelsmacker and Guens 1996, Maciejewski 2004). Thus advertisers must be aware of their audiences and make sure that the appeal used will not arouse negative feelings and attitudes toward the product or brand.

## **Culture, Sub-Culture, Ethnicity and Advertising**

Perceptual differences make communication challenging enough between members of the same culture, but when communicators come from difference backgrounds, the potential for misunderstandings is even greater (Adler and Rodman 1994). Culture is the ‘Software of the Mind’ - the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes members of one group or category of people from another and it applies to ethnic or national groups, or to groups within a society at

different levels, such as age groups, professions, or social classes. It consists of norms that have emerged in adaptive interactions, and are transmitted across periods and generations. Furthermore, it determines, affects and describes human wants and behaviour (Leach and Lui 1998). It is generally accepted that consumption and decision making behaviour is influenced by group membership and it is argued that cultural factors exert the broadest and deepest influence (Usunier 1996, De Mooij 1998, Wang 2000, Wang et al. 2000).

The issue of cultural diversity is complicated by the existence of subcultures, which in turn further complicates matters for advertisers. Each culture consists of smaller subcultures that provide more specific identification and socialisation for their members, introducing multiculturalism (Mariampolski 1999). Subcultures are groups of individuals with different nationalities, religions, race, language, genders, sexual orientation or regions. As societies become more multicultural, subcultures and issues like ethnicity becomes an increasingly important consumer characteristic. Many subcultures make up important market segments, and marketers found that regional and ethnic subcultures represent an opportunity (Mariampolski 1999). Research indicates that ethnicity/culture can be a significant factor in relation to areas such as how advertising is perceived, brand loyalty, consumer values, consumption patterns and family decision making (Burton 2000). An important issue which marketers in a multicultural society need to address is whether ethnic minorities will ultimately accept the culture of the host country, or if they will retain their own culture. In this way, it could be argued that if ethnic minority groups become completely assimilated, ethnicity as a issue would cease to be important (Burton 2000). This could be the case for second generation immigrants.

Although there is an arguably increasing desire among marketers to utilise similar advertising campaigns for all markets (due to the many benefits), it is argued that there are still enormous cultural barriers that make its use impractical (Biswas et al. 1992). Some suggested that companies should pay attention to cultural similarities and differences (Gregory and Munch 1997), since there are significant dissimilarities in the way advertisements are perceived in various countries (Ramaseshan et al. 1996). Incorporating culturally relevant stimuli into advertising efforts is becoming increasingly advocated (Leach and Lui 1998). It may contribute in creating positive perception and many companies develop dissimilar creative approaches in different countries (Duncan and Ramaprasad 1995), while it is common knowledge that others who used a standardised approach, such as Benetton, faced serious problems.

Evidence suggests that advertisements are processed subjectively by individuals, on the basis of the group membership (Bhat et al. 1998). Cultural groups differ in their values, attitudes and prejudices they possess, and thus each group will read the advertisement distinctly and develop its own shared reactions, interpretations and meanings of the advertisement. In a cognitively diverse world, a

message that is sent is not necessarily the message that is received. Advertising could be more effective when it provides information and uses 'language' that is consistent with the preferences of the audience, because customised advertisements may be more successful than generic "one-size-fits-all" (LaBarbera 1998). The overall degree of standardisation appears to be more common for advertisements transferred between western markets, than for messages transferred between western and eastern markets (Mueller 1991), emphasising that the greater the cultural diversity, the less opportunity there is for standardisation.

The existence of selective processes has indeed challenging consequences for advertisers - culture reinforces this selective process - no two cultural groups see the world in exactly the same way. A concept may be very effective in one culture, but not effective elsewhere. What seems to be a soundly crafted advertisement to the advertiser may be construed as patronising and exploitative by one audience and as nostalgic and humorous by another (Grier and Brumbaugh 1999). When an audience encounters an advertisement, the reaction to it depends on the meaning they assign to it, which in turn depends on characteristics of both the advertisement and the members of the audience.

Values guide and determine attitudes and behaviour, which are the core of culture. Advertising reflects and influences cultural values. Therefore, advertising appeals that depict value orientations consistent with the intended audience is likely to be more persuasive than advertisements that depict inconsistent value (Leach and Lui 1998), a fact that advertisers take into account when creating their messages (Hetsroni 2000). Advertisers use cues, such as culturally similar actors, shared cultural symbols and preferred language to produce the intended meaning, in the hope that the cues will be "decoded" by the audience (Holland and Gentry 1997, Grier and Brumbaugh 1999).

Appeals should be used in accordance to the type of culture and the cultural values of the target audience (Wang 2000). Past research revealed that appeals in advertisements and cultural values often relate in a non-random way (Albers-Miller and Gelb 1996) and that culturally congruent appeals are more effective in general (Zhang and Gelb 1996). As with any other appeal, sex appeal may be perceived positively by some groups of people or by a country and negatively by others. However sex appeal is a much more sensitive appeal than any other, since it is related to values. Therefore, attitudes towards it in general vary quite significantly.

The individuals' knowledge and experience of their subculture is likely to influence the types of meanings that one creates from an advertisement. Thus, subcultures represent one way in which the meanings created from a particular advertisement may vary systematically across groups of consumers. For example, research has shown that men and women differ in their reading styles and that both ethnic group membership and gender affect the way in which people read and assign meaning to a message (Grier and Brumbaugh 1999).

## **Research Questions**

This study attempts to follow the call of researchers to consider the effects of sex appeal in various demographic and lifestyle groups (Gould 1994) and to aid advertisers to recognise the role of subculture and the characteristics and perception of the subcultural audience when designing an advertising campaign. Thus it sets out to examine the impact of subcultures on how sex appeal in advertising is perceived.

Sex appeal is known as a ‘soft’ issue. It is difficult to define as it reflects a large variety of personally subjective, culturally related and historically changing values and attitudes (Boddewyn 1991). This in itself suggests that in a culturally diverse world as this, the use of sex appeal may be of significant concern. The choice is to either incorporate it into a standard campaign, or to modify it for various cultural groups. Regardless, advertisers must know how their target customers perceive sex appeal.

A major difference exists between western and eastern cultures in their views on sex appeal. In Europe sex appeal is widely used and accepted. In France, for example, it is used even more than in the USA (Biswas et al. 1992). On the other hand, it is well documented that Muslim countries disapprove all kinds of body display and direct and indirect sexual references. There is an obligation to conform to codes of sexual conduct and social interaction, which includes modest dress for both men and women. In addition, all Arab countries oppose to some extent to the use of sexuality in advertising (Boddewyn 1991), while some companies adjust their advertising slogans and remove nudity (Usunier 1996, p. 414).

Differences not only exist solely between countries. They may appear in the way that different subcultural groups view sex appeal. For example, there was a somewhat greater tendency toward agreement to the statement “Advertisers make too much use of sex appeal” from the older than the younger (Wise et al. 1974), while men respond more positively than women to sex appeal (De Pelsmacker and Guens 1996). However, there is no evidence supporting similarities and differences in ethnic subcultures.

This study analyses the ethnic subculture’s impact on the perception of sex appeal in print advertisements. Since there is no past research in the area; based on the reported findings on the main cultures, one might question whether the Anglo-Saxon subcultural group might generate more favourable attitudes towards the use of sex appeal in advertising than the Asian-Islamic. The first proposition of the study is:



P<sub>1</sub>: The Anglo-Saxon and the Asian-Islamic British will differ in the way they perceive sex-appeal in advertising.

The degree to which sex appeal is used appear to influence its effectiveness. The more intensive the appeal, in the form of nudity or suggestion of sexual intercourse, the more negative the responses to the advertisement become (Tinkham and Reid 1988, LaTour et al. 1990, LaTour and Henthorne 1993). However there is no past research indicating whether the change in the reaction is cultural or subcultural sensitive. Thus, although it is expected that the two groups will have different overall attitudes towards the appeal, it can be proposed that:

P<sub>2</sub>: The Anglo-Saxon and the Asian-Islamic British will have similar changes in their attitudes towards the advertisements when the sex appeal becomes more intensive

Another element that appears to influence sex appeals effectiveness is its relation to the product advertised. Its ability to produce positive connotations seems to vary. It reduces when the audience find that the advertisement implies sexual intercourse, but the more erotic appeal is related to the product, the more positive the responses to it seem to become (Richmond and Hartman 1982, LaTour et al. 1990). Although this is known, there is no evidence of differences between subcultures. Thus, it can be proposed that:

P<sub>3</sub>: The Anglo-Saxon and the Asian-Islamic British will be more positive towards sex appeal when it is more related to the product advertised

## **Methodology**

### Sampling issues

Two British subcultures were chosen as the sample frames for this study, the first being the majority subculture, from an Anglo-Saxon background, and the other a minority subculture, Asian from an Islamic background. To ensure that they belong to the same main culture and different sub-cultures, it was vital to choose people that were born in the UK, or spend most of their life in the country, thus they are expected to be somewhat integrated. Second generation Asian-Islamic were the best candidates, since its was believed that they would be more integrated and would know and adopt the dominant British culture more than first generation immigrants. They qualified as “British”, although their parents’ have a lot of influence in their behaviour. To successfully recruit second generation immigrants, it was decided that the sampling frame would be restricted to one specific age group (18-25), rather than a spread of all age groups.

To control influence of other elements on the response of the subjects that may affect the results, it was decided that all will be female and they were matched on the basis of their age and education. A preliminary questionnaire was used around a university campus in Scotland, in order to recruit people of the correct sample criteria – age, nationality and background. A total of 15 people from each group participated in the study, all between 18 and 25, with the majority having been in the UK since birth (27), and 3 having been in the UK for 15 or more years. Subjects were e-mailed the details for confirmation, and were sent reminders of the date of the session they were to attend.

#### Data collection instrument and procedures

In order to gain the information required for the specific research question, focus groups, with the aid of a semi-structured questionnaire, were used to collect the data. It was felt that this method would give the best results, as they could fully probe respondents' attitudes and explore the interaction between the members of the same subcultural group.

The study focused on print adverts, taken from British magazines targeting both groups. Two product categories, that both groups are likely to need or use, were selected, coffee and perfume. Some products, such as alcohol, were considered not appropriate, due to differences in consumption. In addition, original discussions with 5 members of each cultures revealed that perfume could be more related to sex appeal than coffee.

Due to the time limit, four advertisements, two of each product category, were chosen, allowing differentiating between the attitudes towards the product categories. The advertisements were carefully selected to accommodate varying degrees and types of sex appeal, and to ensure a balance in the study was maintained. More specifically, they appeared in the following order:

Advert 1 = Perfume - with visual sex appeal.

Advert 2 = Coffee - with visual sex appeal.

Advert 3 = Perfume - with visual sex appeal and nudity.

Advert 4 = Coffee - with mild, less obvious, sex appeal

Six sessions, three for each sub-cultural group, were held. Each session had five participants and lasted no longer than 1 1/2 hours. There were two parts to each session. Firstly subjects were shown the chosen advertisements and answered questions on these advertisements. Secondly, a general in-depth discussion took place, in order to capture both groups' views on the issue of sex appeal in advertising. In both parts open ended questions were posed

In the beginning of the first part of the session, the participants were asked to name the first impression developed as a result of viewing the advertisement, to evaluate the advertisement and then

attempt to reason their reaction to it. This enabled a spontaneous answer, which was not influenced in any manner. This process was followed by an advertisement specific semi-structured questionnaire. In addition to the general background questions, respondents answered questions on the brand, the content of the advertisement, the sex appeal present in the advertisement and the possibility of no sex appeal in the advertisement. This process was repeated four times, one for each advertisement.

The second part attempted to capture respondents' views on matters such as the use of sex appeal in general, its use in different product categories and to discuss concerns of morality, ethics and legislation.

All the focus groups were identical to one another in terms of their structure. No tailoring of dialogue was adopted to suit different kinds of people as this would have hampered quantifiable analysis. Two researchers were present in each session, one with an Asian-Islamic background and the other European. Respondents interacted throughout the procedure and discussion was encouraged during all the faces of the focus groups. All sessions were taped and transcribed.

#### Data analysis

Content analysis was used for the analysis of the open-ended, uncoded question in the questionnaire, and for the discussion that took place in the focus groups sessions.

### **Findings**

#### Perception towards advertising

Tables 1 and 2 summarise the positive and the negative views on sex appeal expressed by the subjects.

For advertisement 1, all respondents agreed that it was indeed “*sexy*” and was showing some “*closeness*”, but it was “*stupid*” and unclear, since they were questioning “*what?*”. The common views show a level of similarity in attitude. However 63% of the expressions used by the Anglo-Saxon sample to describe how they felt when they saw this advertisement were positive, compared to only 20% for the Asian-Islamic, indicating an overall more negative perception from this group.

All respondents felt that advertisement 2, although “*romantic*”, was “*tacky*”, “*irrelevant*” and “*over the top*”, indicating the existence of the same sort of negativity, they felt that the sex appeal was unnecessary and irrelevant. However, the overall difference in perception towards the sex appeal used was quite major, with a staggering 71% of the terminology elicited by the Anglo-Saxon sample being positive, compared to only 16% positive expressions used by the Asian-Islamic. This indicates a clear

positive perception from the Anglo-Saxon sample and a clear negative perception from the Asian-Islamic sample.

Advertisement 3, although colourful, provoked a similar questioning response from both samples. The question “*why is the female model naked?*”, expressed an attacking attitude of the type of sex appeal used – nudity. The degree of negativity varied between both groups, since 94% of the terms used by the Anglo-Saxons were positive, whereas for the Asian-Islamic only accounted for 45%. One of the Asian-Islamic respondents even stated that “*I can’t understand why the use naked people. It is sometimes really shocking!*”. Therefore, for the Anglo-Saxon sample an overall positive perception was indeed deduced, compared to the negative response deduced from the Asian-Islamic.

The only advertisement for which all deduced completely positive perception was advertisement 4. They argued that the appeal was used gently, thus it was not shocking. Respondents shared five main positive expressions for this advertisement, these being “*elegant*”, “*sensual*”, “*warm*”, “*aroma*” and “*interesting*”. Both groups liked the advertisement, liked the imagery, the message, found it interesting and felt that it supported the image of the product. Furthermore, they did not perceive the sex appeal used as immoral or tasteless and did not put them off buying the brand, possibly due to the extremely little sex appeal employed.

**Table 1. Positive views expressed**

<i>Anglo-Saxon British</i>				<i>Asian-Islamic British</i>			
<i>Advert 1</i>	<i>Advert 2</i>	<i>Advert 3</i>	<i>Advert 4</i>	<i>Advert 1</i>	<i>Advert 2</i>	<i>Advert 3</i>	<i>Advert 4</i>
<i>Allure</i>	<i>Chic</i>	<i>Beautiful</i>	<i>Aromatic*</i>	Attractive	French	Artistic	Atmospheric
<i>Attraction</i>	<i>Closeness*</i>	<i>Clever</i>	<i>Classy</i>	Nice	Romantic	Colourful	Attractive*
<i>Closeness*</i>	<i>Desire</i>	<i>Colourful*</i>	<i>Clever</i>	Photogenic Models	Tasty	Different	Better
<i>Expensive</i>	<i>European</i>	<i>Deserty</i>	<i>Decadent</i>	Sexy		Eastern	Different
<i>Lust*</i>	<i>Expensive</i>	<i>Dream-like</i>	<i>Desire</i>			Feminine	Elegant*
<i>Passion</i>	<i>Provocative</i>	<i>Elegant</i>	<i>Effective</i>			Interesting	Interesting
<i>Powerful</i>	<i>Rich</i>	<i>Erotic*</i>	<i>Elegant</i>			Nice	Less sex appeal
<i>Raunchy</i>	<i>Romance*</i>	<i>Exotic</i>	<i>Evening</i>			Simplistic	Nice
<i>Romance</i>	<i>Sensual</i>	<i>Expensive</i>	<i>Expensive</i>			Vulnerability	Noticeable brand name
<i>Sexy*</i>	<i>Share</i>	<i>Good imagery</i>	<i>Eye-catching</i>				Peace
<i>Sophisticated</i>	<i>Smell</i>	<i>Luxurious</i>	<i>Good imagery</i>				Sensual
<i>Stylish</i>	<i>Striking</i>	<i>Natural</i>	<i>Interesting</i>				Smell*
		<i>Relevant</i>	<i>Naughty</i>				Striking
		<i>Rich</i>	<i>Relaxing*</i>				Warm
		<i>Sensual</i>	<i>Rich</i>				Well proportioned
		<i>Spicy</i>	<i>Sensual*</i>				
		<i>Warm*</i>	<i>Sophisticated</i>				
			<i>Warm</i>				

\* Most frequently used expressions

**Table 2. Negative views expressed**

<i>Anglo-Saxon British</i>				<i>Asian-Islamic British</i>			
<i>Advert 1</i>	<i>Advert 2</i>	<i>Advert 3</i>	<i>Advert 4</i>	<i>Advert 1</i>	<i>Advert 2</i>	<i>Advert 3</i>	<i>Advert 4</i>
<i>Exaggerated</i>	<i>Cheap</i>	<i>Why naked?</i>		Bold	Blatant	Disgusting	
<i>Nauseating</i>	<i>Irrelevant</i>			Closeness	Disgusting*	Exposure	
<i>Posed</i>	<i>Over the top</i>			Confusion	Groce	No need for sex appeal*	
<i>Stupid</i>	<i>Tacky*</i>			Disgusting*	Inappropriate	Nudity	
<i>Unclear</i>	<i>Unsophisticated</i>			Groce	Irrelevant*	Off putting	
<i>Unoriginal</i>				Inappropriate	Lips*	Pointless	
<i>What?</i>				Intimacy	Off the point	Strange*	
				Meaningless	Over The Top	Too bright	
				Off the Point	Senseless	Weird	
				Pointless	Sick	What?	
				Sick	Tacky	Why naked?*	
				Striking	Too close		
				Stupid	Too much sex		
				Too much sex appeal	Unappealing		
				Unappealing*	Vulgar		
				What?*	What?		

\* Most frequently used expressions

Results indicate that perceptions towards sex appeal in advertising differed quite significantly between the British Anglo-Saxon and the British Asian-Islamic subcultures. The overall finding seemed to be that the British Anglo-Saxon subculture had a positive perception towards sex appeal whereas the British Asian-Islamic subculture had a clear negative perception. This is possibly due to the different cultural backgrounds. Asian cultures are typically more sensitive to sexual issues, because of the Islamic culture, which in general forbids such sexual orientation.

Many similarities in both subcultures' perceptions also existed, suggesting perhaps that the two groups are not entirely different as regards attitude. This can perhaps be explained. Anglo-Saxon and Asian-Islamic are both British subcultures, and therefore some similarities are expected because even though they have essentially some different influences, they are still essentially both influenced by the main dominant culture. Consequently major differences can implicate root culture and religious divergences. The Anglo-Saxon subculture had a general defensive attitude of sex appeal, whereas the Asian-Islamic subculture was more attacking concerning its use. It is important to note that while in both groups attitudes of two opposite extremes were expressed, the main point to highlight is that an overall difference was indeed deduced.

It was surprising that, although they had different views towards the advertisements, both groups believed that sex appeal in advertising is morally acceptable. They felt that there is nothing morally wrong with such advertising. They believed there were indeed worse forms of sex appeal existing on billboards and on television, so compared to that, the advertisements shown were considered "harmless", which was the general consensus. However some differences still did exist across both groups, as this view of sex appeal being acceptable was much stronger amongst the Anglo-Saxon sample.

The Asian-Islamic were more passionate about regulating sex appeal, therefore their attitude towards sex appeal is not as passive as it first seems. They felt that the whole concept of sex appeal should be regulated, whereas the Anglo-Saxon sample only believed that the most explicit forms of sex appeal should be regulated. Indicating that in essence, the Anglo-Saxon sample have a more lenient attitude toward sex appeal than the Asian-Islamic sample – just as one would expect after having seen the Asian-Islamic sample's attitudes toward the advertisements shown as being more negative than those of the Anglo-Saxon sample's.

#### Intention of Sex Appeal and Changes in the Attitudes

Although overall there was a more positive attitude from the Anglo-Saxon group, when the intense of the sex appeal use and the subculture were analysed together, the results were surprising. There was no doubt that both groups had far more positive views to express when the use of the appeal was gentle

(ad 4). However, when the appeal was employed more intensively with nudity (ad 3), the members of both groups had more positive comments and less negative comments to make than when its use was moderate (ads 1 and 2). The advertisement specific discussions somewhat contradict some of the comments stated during the general discussions, where both groups expressed a less positive view on the extensive use of sex appeal.

This finding supports proposition 2. Both subcultural groups react in a consistent way when the degree of the sex appeal usage changes. However, it contradicts previous research, suggesting that the more intensive the appeal the more negative responses to the advertisements become.

### Sex appeal and Product Category

The majority of the respondents felt that, as individuals, are in fact conditioned to believe that sex appeal is associated with perfume. The Anglo-Saxons agreed that sex appeal is not totally unrelated to coffee. Some of them suggested that it could associate with other appeals such as “happiness” quite easily and work just as effectively. The Asian-Islamic had an attacking attitude, supporting that sex appeal had nothing to do with the product and definitely expressed negative views towards it. “*Coffee stimulates you. It doesn’t relax you or make you more attractive!!! I can’t understand why it is used*” commented one of the Asian-Islamic participants.

Therefore, it can be said that perhaps if a product is found to be unrelated to sex appeal, then a negative perception may be formed by the audience. Regardless of cultural background, both groups shared somewhat similar views. However, what can be said is that the degree of a negative perception will in fact depend on views about sex appeal in general. It is obvious that the Asian-Islamic group still had a much more negative attitude towards the advertisement 2 than the Anglo-Saxon group.

Although during the general discussion they supported that their attitude towards the use of sex appeal is influenced by the product category when the products and the advertisements were matched (ads 1 and 3 - perfume, ads 2 and 4 - coffee), the results were rather different. No significant relationship between the product category and the sex appeal was revealed at all. There was no difference even when only advertisements 1 and 2, which included a similar degree of sex appeal, were compared. Thus the proposition 3 could neither be supported or rejected, since the general attitude and the advertisement specific attitude did not match.

### **Conclusions and Managerial Implications**

Our own culture influences our perception and instigates how we communicate and what we communicate. Culture indeed has a great impact upon how an advertisement is perceived, providing a



perceptual filter that influences the way we interpret the simplest of events. In a multicultural environment full of subcultural groups, the issue of subcultural diversity is just as important for advertisers as is the general issue of cultural diversity. Failure to recognise both cultural and subcultural differences can lead to unfortunate misunderstandings.

Sex appeal is a culturally sensitive issue. Attitudes towards it vary from culture to culture, therefore, advertisements containing sex appeal will be perceived differently by different cultural groups. However this study supported that subcultures and ethnicity appear to play an important role in the perception of sex appeal. Although all participants were female, students and essentially British, they had different degree of acceptance of the sex appeal. Whilst some similarities existed across both British subcultural groups, results highlighted an overall difference across them, which can be argued to be due to the different cultural/religious backgrounds both groups possessed.

There is strong evidence to suggest that the British Anglo-Saxon subculture's perception towards sex appeal in advertising is that of a positive nature. It is also important to remember that indeed differences of opinion still existed within this group, as extreme positive and negative views were aired on the matter. Sex appeal was considered to be immoral only in extreme cases, where explicit sex appeal imagery was used. Perfume and coffee advertisements were on the whole perceived as being acceptable, but perhaps not as effective i.e. there were welcoming feelings of different appeals such as humour, to advertise perfumes. Finally, the Anglo-Saxons did not find the use of sex appeal with coffee to be appropriate, which seemed to affect the perception towards the advertisement to that of a more hostile one.

The British Asian-Islamic subculture's perception towards sex appeal in advertising is of a negative nature. Again, differences of opinion did exist within this group, as extreme positive and negative views were aired on the matter. However, generally, sex appeal was considered to be immoral, as the issue of it forcing people to think aesthetically was raised. Regarding the justification of using sex appeal, respondents agreed that in this society sex sells, therefore advertisers will no doubt use it. However, there still was a clear consensus that sex appeal was unnecessary and inappropriate. Mainly because it had no effect on purchase decision and also due to respondents feeling that the association between sex appeal and perfume, never mind that between sex appeal and coffee, had just been created by advertisers. Furthermore, it was clearly felt that such advertising should be regulated and they were concerned of its future use being more explicit. Therefore the whole concept of sex appeal was shunned by respondents from this sample, no matter how blatant or subtle. Thus, one can deduce a firm negative perception towards the use of sex appeal in advertising. Furthermore, this perception is influenced by the cultural background, in particular the religious background of this sample, as respondents felt their views were close to their religious background.

The degree of positive or negative response varied significantly, depending upon one's group membership, cultural and religious background. However when the appeal was used mildly, both groups accept the advertisement and expressed positive feelings towards it.

It is thus concluded that subculture has a massive impact upon how one perceives an advertisement. The main implication is that advertisers must not overlook it when designing an advertising campaign, and should perhaps design according to the culture of the target audience, since it is the main determinant in influencing one's perception. One's attitudes and values are derived from the cultural background one comes from, and therefore must be analysed by advertisers who want to create positive perceptions of their advertising. This may advocate incorporating cultural aspects in advertising or tailoring advertising to suit a specific cultural group. Non-relevant aspects, as it is argued, should be discarded. By testing the perception of subcultures alone and finding that extreme differences can exist, it can then be deduced that differences between cultures around the globe may be on a much larger scale. Advertisers, in order to yield the positive attitudes they want, must learn about and adapt to their target audience's culture in order to create positive perceptions when deciding on whether to use a standardised, localised or patternised strategy.

Advertisers targeting consumers of an ethnic background should be extremely careful. If targeted intentionally, advertisers must take into account which generation they are dealing with, since the literature suggests that this influence of the root culture is maintained during one's life. This study showed that even second generations have great differences in perceptions, indicating that the root culture is still quite strong in influencing one's perception. Therefore, it can be assumed that first generation audiences must be treated with greater care, as they hold on to their root culture will be much stronger, and therefore differences in perception will be even greater. It is not enough just to establish the background of the audience, but more importantly, advertisers must establish whether the audience is culturally strong or culturally deviant, allowing advertisers to predict a more accurate perception. The implications for national advertisers are that these differences must be taken into account when designing advertising campaigns that are likely to involve the ethnic population.

The extent of the differences in perceptions deduced between these two British subcultural groups is indeed a warning sign for international advertisers in particular. When attempting to penetrate a market with various subcultural groups, advertisers should take into account potential diversity.

The use of sex appeal proved to create often negative reactions in all subjects, with an emphasis to those with Asian-Islamic background. Advertisers must be extremely careful if deciding to use it when advertising.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

The main limitation of this study is its scale. Due to time and resource constraints, the sample was relatively small, a total of 30 subjects (15 per sample group). In addition, the data collection involved young females living in Scotland alone. Thus the sample is not necessarily representative of the UK.

Future research may build on these findings and thus establish a stronger conclusion of the perceptions of the two groups with a wider-scaled study. The potential link between the product category and the attitude towards sex appeal in different subcultural groups needs to be further analysed, since the results of this study were inconclusive. It would be interesting to test the overall perceived attitude versus the real reactions further, to confirm whether real and perceived perception differ. The perceptions of other sub-cultures could be investigated. The degree of the subjects' commitment to their sub-culture could be taken into account.

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