

# **The Moderating Effect of Appearance Self-Esteem on Females' Identification of and Reaction to Sexually-Themed Advertising**

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*This research examines whether the impact of thematic fit of product positioning with sexual themes on female consumer responses varies as a function of appearance self-esteem (ASE). Study 1 demonstrates that perceived identification with sexual themes leads to more negative attitudes toward advertising and brand. Study 2 shows that higher ASE participants have more negative ad attitudes when exposed to sexual themes paired with utilitarian product positioning (low fit) than with hedonic product positioning (high fit). Furthermore, our findings reveal that the feeling of disgust partially mediates the relationship between ASE and attitudes. Theoretical and practical marketing implications are discussed.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Advertisers' use of sexual themes in advertising messages has become more frequent over time (Reichert, Childers, & Reid 2012). However, the conventional wisdom holds that this type of advertising is more appropriate and efficacious with a male consumer target than a female one, and some research has supported this view (LaTour & Henthorne, 1993; Reichert et al. 2012).

So generally speaking, "sex sells" is thought to be a male audience phenomenon—effective for males, much less so for females. However, emergent findings have called this basic assumption into question. For instance, Putrevu (2008) finds that "women do not have a general unfavorable disposition toward sexual appeals" as long as the fit between the sexual theme and the product is strong (p. 63) and Dahl, Sengupta, and Vos (2009) demonstrate that if certain female-favorable imagery is used, women can have a positive reaction to sexual advertising.

Importantly, another stream of research has examined how individual personality and self-concept differences affect womens' perceptions of sexual advertising. For instance, a sexual self-schema (SSS) scale developed by Anderson and Cyranowski (1994) has been conceptualized as "the cognitive view of the self" with regards to one's own sexual-ness (Reichert, La Tour, & Kim, 2007). Higher (lower) SSS scores have been associated with more (less) favorable attitudes toward explicit material, more (less) liberal views concerning sex-related behaviors, and an overall approach (avoidance) stance in regards to sexual themes (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994; Reichert, La Tour, & Kim, 2007; Reichert & Fosu, 2005). More specific to advertising, higher levels of SSS increase females' tolerance toward and appreciation of sexually suggestive advertising with women scoring higher on the SSS scale having more positive evaluations of it (Reichert & Fosu, 2005). In this paper, we explore the relationship of another potentially impactful aspect of self-concept with the efficacy of sexual advertising—that of appearance self-esteem (ASE, hereafter).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Appearance Self-Esteem

Overall (or “global”) self-esteem has been defined as the self-appraisal of one’s significance, worth, competence, and success, as compared to others (Coopersmith, 1968). ASE is a subdomain of self-esteem, which considers esteem related to physical appearance and can be defined as “the self-worth a person derives from his or her body-image and weight” (Argo & White, 2012). ASE has been found to be an important driver of many self-concept related outcomes, including body image perceptions (Ip & Jarry, 2008; Jambekar, Quinn, & Crocker, 2001; Le Grange, Stone, & Brownell, 1998), cosmetic usage (Rosenbaum, 1996), and binge eating (Hilbert, Tuschen-Caffier, & Vögele, 2002).

In terms of the use of sex in advertising, on one hand women lower in ASE might be expected to largely reject sexually themed advertisements, as advertisements featuring suggestively-dressed models might provoke a negative affective reaction (e.g., disgust) perhaps driven by their own insecurity, whereas females higher in ASE might more readily embrace (or at least tolerate) this type of advertising. However, the opposite effect might be seen as well: Aydinoglu and Krishna (2012) have explored the impact of ASE in terms of reactions to vanity sizing, “the practice of clothing manufacturers whereby smaller size labels are used on clothes than what the clothes actually are” (p. 565); ostensibly because women prefer smaller-size labeled clothing to larger. They found that women with lower-ASE engage in compensatory self-enhancement and thus the positive mental imagery driven by vanity sizing drives them to prefer clothing sized this way (whereas vanity sizing had no effect on higher-ASE females’ preference). In a sexual advertisement setting, perhaps females with lower-ASE would engage in this kind of compensatory self-enhancement where they would actually embrace sexual advertising featuring suggestively dressed models.

However, not all sexually-themed advertising is created “equal” in terms of that theme. We suspect that the degree of sex present in the advertisement might also come into play if ASE does affect sexual advertising perceptions. Consider the advertisements (see Appendix)—in one case, we have a couple kissing on a couch. In the other, we have the same couple seemingly engaged in sexual intercourse. While kissing is a “sexual activity” in defining what sex in advertising comprises (Soley and Reid 1988), the first advertisement might lead to different perceptions of how much sex is actually present, whereas the second would likely inspire a universal “it’s strongly present” reaction. We consider this aspect of sexual advertising next.

### How Much “Sex” is Present?

Most research to date exploring sexual advertising as a construct employs a rather high degree of explicitness. Even when degree of sexual explicitness is manipulated (Reichert, LaTour, & Ford, 2011) the lowest-sexualized (“demure”) level features a woman grabbing her own breasts (over clothing). However, different—and sometimes less “in your face”—levels of sexual themes are often present in advertising. Further, when the same advertising imagery (e.g., a couple kissing) is shown to different consumers, they might have different reactions in terms of “how sexual” the imagery actually is. We explore whether ASE might affect this initial classification of degree of sexual-ness of the advertising imagery.

### Thematic Fit of Product Positioning with Sex

Another possible effector of ASE’s relationship, or lack thereof, with women’s acceptance of sexually-themed advertising might be how well they feel the use of sex in advertising fits with the product being advertised. Though popular perception is that sexual advertising is only a male-oriented tactic, research suggests that whereas males respond favorably to sex in advertising regardless of the level of fit between sex and the advertising product, women are likely to respond favorably to sexually themed advertising appeals only when this fit is strong (Putrevu, 2008). However, this notion of fit is more complicated than at first glance. Some products seem rather congruent with sexual themes. Marketers might even attempt to tie basic product with hedonic aspects. In Putrevu’s (2008) research demonstrating

the importance of fit in sexually-themed advertising, the experimental stimuli features shoes, which could be very functional or very hedonic (high-fashion). In fact, research examining print advertising suggests that the majority of sexual advertising content are from categories not associated with sex (Reichert, Childers, & Reid, 2012) which implies that advertisers certainly believe a poor category-sex fit isn't necessary for success. Finally, some categories could feature brands that are rather congruent with sex with others that are not. Consider mouthwash, for instance. While on one hand a product's benefits in this category could be primarily functional and utilitarian (e.g., Listerine's strong germ-killing ability), the same basic ability could be positioned in a very hedonic or emotion-driven light (e.g., Close-Up's "Get Closer" tagline, tying fresh breath to romance). Thus, the notion of fit and product is a complicated one, without even considering the impact that a self-concept variable like ASE might have.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Following that discussion, we offer the following research questions. We explore RQ1a and RQ1b in Study 1, and the remaining questions in Study 2.

**RQ1a:** Does ASE affect females' identification of advertising as sexual or not?

**RQ1b:** Does this identification then impact resultant attitudes and purchase intent for the advertised product?

**RQ2a:** In a strongly sexual advertisement, does ASE affect female reactions to sexual advertising?

**RQ2b:** Does ASE-driven disgust play a mediating role in these reactions?

**RQ3:** In this strongly sexual advertising setting, does the perceived fit of a product with sexual themes affect these reactions?

## **STUDY 1**

### **Method**

Study 1 was designed to test RQ1a and RQ1b, exploring the potential role of ASE in female consumers' identification of "how sexual" an advertisement might be perceived to be, and then the potential resulting effects of that classification on important outcome variables like attitudes toward the advertisement and brand, and purchase intent.

Our sample consisted of internet-based participants recruited by Survey Sampling International (SSI), a leading marketing research firm, and were compensated through a rewards contract program with SSI. The online survey was prepared using Qualtrics survey design software, and online participants (n=40, 100% female, mean age=35.3) completed the exercise online. Participants first answered basic demographic (e.g., age) questions and questions about the product category (mouthwash). They were asked to view "an idea that an advertising agency has for a mouthwash product advertisement, in this case allegedly from the Close-Up brand. We utilized this category (mouthwash) because health and hygiene products often use sexual themes in advertising (Reichert et al. 2012) and we utilized this specific brand as its tagline is "Get Closer" as we deemed it a hedonic message which would fit well with our imagery.

At the top of the advertisement we placed copy "Why use CLOSE-UP®?" and underneath that headline was an image from freedigitalphotos.net which featured an attractive, demure (fully-clothed) couple kissing while sitting on a couch. While kissing is classified as "sexual contact" in research (Soley and Reid 1988) we felt this image (in contrast to decidedly nonsexual contact like holding hands and decidedly sexual contact like simulated sex) might yield a situation where some subjects might view the

ad as sexually-imbued, whereas others might not. We then placed Close-Up's tagline—"Get Closer" next to a product image shot.

### Independent Measures

Body satisfaction was measured with the 6-item ASE scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991), the aggregate of 6 items: "I feel satisfied with the way my body looks right now," "I feel that others respect and admire me," "I am dissatisfied with my weight" (reverse coded), "I feel good about myself," "I am pleased with my appearance right now," and "I feel unattractive" (reverse coded). This scale has shown strong validity in academic studies (e.g., Argo & White, 2012, Aydinoglu & Krishna, 2012). Respondents completed the scale along with other unrelated personality measures. In total, the mean ASE score was 3.17 (standard deviation = 0.98) and the scale exhibited acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

Perceived level of sexual content in the advertisement ( $Perc_{sex}$ ) was measured as response to a single-item, straightforward query: "Did this ad relate the product to sex?" On a seven-point scale, the mean  $Perc_{sex}$  was 4.55 (standard deviation = 1.97). Finally, preexisting purchase intent (pre-PI) for Close-Up was measured as a control variable.

### Dependent Measures

Dependent variables were adapted from previous advertising research (Zhang & Zinkhan 2006): Attitude-toward-the-ad ( $A_{ad}$ ) was a five-item seven-point semantic differential scale (in my opinion, this advertisement is \_\_\_\_: unpleasant/pleasant, unlikable/likable, bad/good, irritating/not irritating, not interesting/interesting;  $\alpha = .96$ ), Attitude-toward-the-brand ( $A_{brand}$ ) was a five-item seven-point semantic differential scale (in my opinion, this brand of mouthwash is \_\_\_\_: bad/good, not nice/nice, unlikeable/likeable, unfavorable/favorable, undesirable/desirable;  $\alpha = .97$ ), and Purchase intent (PI) was a four-item seven-point semantic differential scale (how likely would you be to buy this product?: unlikely/likely, improbable/probable, uncertain/certain, impossible/possible;  $\alpha = .92$ ).

### Results

We explored whether  $Perc_{sex}$  and ASE influenced the dependent variables. We regressed  $Perc_{sex}$ , ASE, and their interaction on Attitude-to-the-advertisement, with pre-PI as a control variable; the overall model was significant ( $F(4,35) = 4.54, p < .01; R^2 = 0.34$ ; see Table 1 for full model results).

**TABLE 1**  
**STUDY 1 RESULTS**

	$Y = A_{ad}$				$Y = A_{brand}$				$Y = PI$			
	Coeff.	SE	t	p	Coeff.	SE	t	p	Coeff.	SE	t	p
Intercept $i_1$	9.735	2.732	3.563	0.001	7.274	2.565	2.836	0.01	3.897	3.227	1.208	0.235
$Perc_{sex}(X)$ $b_1$	-1.271	0.451	-2.821	0.008	-0.830	0.423	-1.963	0.058	-0.529	0.532	-0.994	0.327
ASE ( $M$ ) $b_2$	-1.130	0.714	-1.583	0.123	-0.554	0.670	-0.826	0.41	0.071	0.843	0.084	0.933
$Perc_{sex} \times ASE (XM)$ $b_3$	0.282	0.127	2.225	0.033	0.186	0.119	1.559	0.13	0.108	0.150	0.720	0.476
Pre-PI Close-Up ( $C_1$ ) $b_8$	0.174	0.135	1.292	0.205	0.230	0.127	1.814	0.08	0.347	0.159	2.179	0.04
	$R^2 = 0.342$				$R^2 = 0.290$				$R^2 = 0.263$			
	$F(4,35) = 4.537, p < .01$				$F(4,35) = 3.518, p < .05$				$F(4,35) = 3.115, p < .05$			

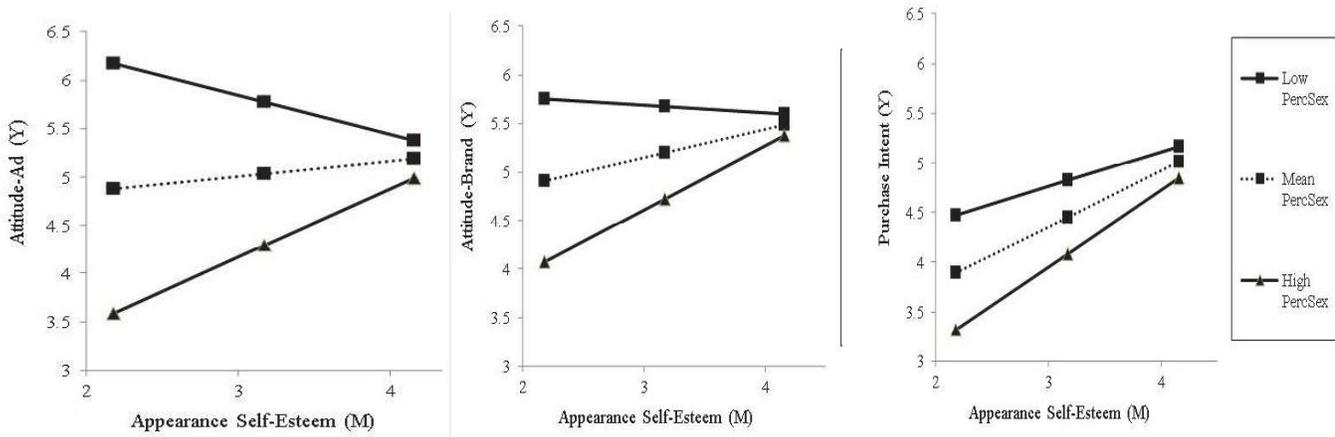
For  $A_{ad}$ , the two-way interaction of  $Perc_{sex}$  and ASE was significant ( $\beta = 0.28, t(40) = 2.23, p < .05$ , see Figure 1). For lower-ASE participants (one standard deviation below the mean; ASE = 2.18),  $Perc_{sex}$  had a significant negative effect on  $A_{ad}$  (effect = -0.66,  $p < .01$ ). However, for higher-ASE participants (one standard deviation above the mean; ASE = 4.16),  $Perc_{sex}$  had no significant conditional effect on  $A_{ad}$  (effect = -0.10,  $p > .55$ ).

For  $A_{brand}$ , an analogous model was significant ( $F(4,35) = 3.52, p < .05; R^2 = 0.29$ ). Though directionally similar, the two-way interaction of  $Perc_{sex}$  and ASE was not significant ( $\beta = 0.19, t(40) = 1.56, p < .05$ ), but follow-up analysis on the hypothesized effect of this interaction revealed that for

lower-ASE participants  $Perc_{sex}$  had a significant negative effect on  $A_{ad}$  (effect= -0.43,  $p < .05$ ) whereas it had no effect on higher-ASE participants ( $p > .70$ ).

Finally, for purchase intent, there were no significant main effects or interaction effects (all  $p$ 's  $> .32$ ).

**FIGURE 1**  
**STUDY 1 RESULTS**



## STUDY 2

### Method

The purpose of Study 2 was to explore RQ2a, RQ2b, and RQ2c, investigating potential effects of the interplay of ASE and sexual advertisements for products with strongly varying degrees of perceived fit with sexual themes. We again utilized the mouthwash category, with the Close-Up brand and its “Get Closer” positioning as a high-fit exemplar, and Listerine with its functional “Kills the Germs that Cause Bad Breath” positioning as a low-fit exemplar.

We created two sets of advertisements for each brand with a format similar to that in Study 1. We included a cell for each brand with overt sexual imagery. The advertisement was similar in layout but replaced the large product shot with a picture of the same models used in Study 1 (again, obtained from freedigitalphotos.net) this time in a decidedly sexual embrace on a bed (see Appendix for actual stimuli). Thus, our design featured product as a manipulated variable (product positioning fit with sexual themes: high (Close-Up) vs. low (Listerine)) and ASE as a measured variable. As in Study 1, subjects ( $n=79$ , 100% female, min. age=18, max. age=80, mean age=38.5) were recruited by SSI and again participated in the completed the experiment online. Participants followed a similar protocol as in Study 1, providing background demographic information, viewing the ad, rating measured variables and personality scales, and providing open-ended responses regarding the advertisement and its imagery.

### Measures

Since we had multiple brands in Study 2, we included potential covariates—pre-existing purchase intent for each brand (7-pt. scale, very unlikely to buy/very likely to buy) and category involvement (adapted from Zaichowsky 1994) (5-pt. Likert scales of agreement with mouthwash as a critical, personally relevant, and involving product category;  $\alpha = .82$ ). ASE was again measured as the mean aggregate of 6 items, and respondents completed the scale along with other unrelated personality measures. The mean ASE score was 3.27 (standard deviation = 0.76) and the scale exhibited acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = .75$ ). We included a manipulation check for the perceived fit of the advertisement with the brand ( $Fit_{ad-brand}$ ), measured on a seven-point semantic differential scale (“not one that makes sense for this brand/one that makes sense for this brand”).

The following dependent measures were identical to those in Study 1: attitude-toward-the-ad ( $A_{ad}$ ;  $\alpha = .94$ ), attitude-toward-the-brand ( $A_{brand}$ ;  $\alpha = .97$ ), and purchase intent (PI;  $\alpha = .97$ ). In order to test for the possible mediating presence of disgust, we asked respondents to indicate the feelings they had as they viewed the message using adjective pairs (e.g., not angry/angry) as anchors on a 7-pt. semantic scale. We drew the emotions from Richins' Consumption Emotions Set (1997). Indicators of positive affect were interspersed among the negative affect words to prevent hypothesis guessing. The total list included angry, ashamed, astonished, disgusted, excited, happy, hopeful, jealous, optimistic, sad, scared, warm-hearted, wishful, and worried. Thus, to prevent hypothesis guessing, disgust was disguised not only within the list of negative emotions but also due to the presence of positive emotions.

## Results

### Manipulation Check

Our manipulation check examined each brand's perceived fit with sexual themes. We designed the study with Close-Up ("Get Closer") thought to be a much better fit with sexual imagery than Listerine ("Kill the Germs that Cause Bad Breath"); thus, the two brands provide good exemplars of a higher and lower fit with sex. To see whether this actually was reflected in participants' reactions, a one-way (brand: Close-Up vs. Listerine) ANOVA was conducted on  $Fit_{ad-brand}$ . The overall model was significant ( $F(1,77) = 4.67, p < .05$ ), with Close-Up's  $Fit_{ad-brand}$  ( $M = 4.8$ ) significantly higher than Listerine's ( $M=3.8$ ).

### Regression Analysis

We regressed brand (2 levels: Listerine, Close-Up), ASE, and their interaction on attitude-to-the-advertisement, with pre-PI of both brands and category involvement as covariates; the overall model was significant ( $F(6,72) = 2.84, p < .05; R^2 = 0.19$ ; see Table 2 for full model results).

**TABLE 2**  
**STUDY 2 RESULTS**

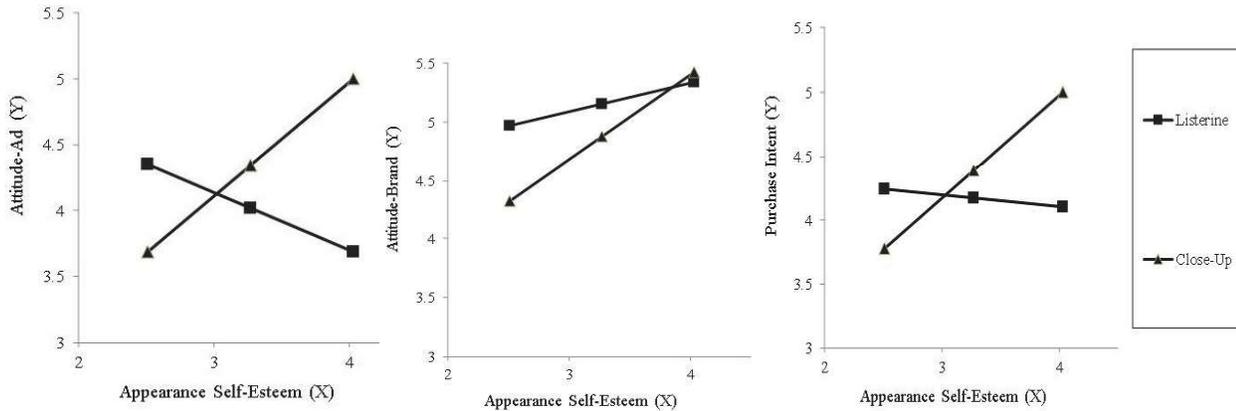
	$Y = A_{ad}$				$Y = A_{brand}$				$Y = PI$			
	Coeff.	SE	t	p	Coeff.	SE	t	p	Coeff.	SE	t	p
Intercept $i_1$	7.660	3.048	2.513	0.014	5.168	2.913	1.774	0.08	4.536	2.906	1.561	0.123
ASE ( $X$ ) $b_1$	-1.746	0.813	-2.149	0.035	-0.232	0.776	-0.299	0.766	-0.997	0.775	-1.287	0.202
Product ( $M$ ) $b_2$	-3.956	1.862	-2.125	0.037	-1.843	1.779	-1.036	0.304	-2.739	1.775	-1.544	0.127
ASE x Product ( $XM$ ) $b_3$	1.309	0.554	2.361	0.021	0.479	0.530	0.904	0.37	0.904	0.528	1.711	0.091
Pre-PI Close-Up ( $C_1$ ) $b_8$	0.213	0.127	1.685	0.096	0.131	0.121	1.082	0.28	0.260	0.121	2.154	0.035
Pre-PI Listerine ( $C_2$ ) $b_9$	0.114	0.102	1.119	0.267	0.247	0.098	2.530	0.01	0.415	0.097	4.263	0.000
Involvement ( $C_3$ ) $b_{10}$	0.077	0.155	0.493	0.624	-0.142	0.148	-0.955	0.34	-0.071	0.148	-0.477	0.635
$R^2 = 0.191$				$R^2 = 0.211$				$R^2 = 0.373$				
$F(6,72) = 2.837, p < .05$				$F(6,72) = 3.201, p < .01$				$F(6,72) = 7.151, p < .001$				

The two-way interaction of brand and ASE was significant ( $\beta = 1.31, t(72) = 2.36, p < .05$ , see Figure 2). For higher-ASE participants (one standard deviation above the mean; ASE = 4.03), using the sexual theme with Listerine ( $M=3.7$ ) led to significantly lower attitudes than for Close-Up ( $M=5.0$ ; effect= 1.3,  $p < .05$ ). However, for lower-ASE participants (one standard deviation below the mean; ASE = 2.52), there was no significant conditional effect of brand on  $A_{ad}$  (effect= -0.66,  $p > .25$ ). Similarly, there was no conditional effect of ASE on  $A_{ad}$  for Listerine, whereas there was a positive conditional effect of ASE on  $A_{ad}$  for Close-Up (effect= .87,  $p < .05$ ).

Analogous regression analysis on  $A_{brand}$  yielded a significant overall model ( $F(6,72) = 3.20, p < .01; R^2 = 0.21$ ). However, here the interaction of brand and ASE was not significant ( $p > .36$ ), and there were no main effects of ASE ( $p > .76$ ), or brand ( $p > .30$ ). Given the attitudinal results, despite the lack of a significant interaction we did explore the effects further, finding that although there was a marginal positive conditional effect of moving from lower to higher ASE levels for Close-Up ( $p < .10$ ) which were consistent with the results on  $A_{ad}$ , there was no effect for Listerine ( $p > .45$ ).

We next explored purchase intentions. Analogous regression analysis on PI again yielded a significant overall model ( $F(6,72) = 7.15, p < .001; R^2 = 0.37$ ). The interaction of brand and ASE was marginally significant ( $p < .10$ ). Exploring conditional effects further revealed that there was a positive conditional effect of moving from lower to higher ASE levels for Close-Up ( $p = .05$ ), there was no effect for Listerine ( $p > .77$ )

**FIGURE 2  
STUDY 2 RESULTS**

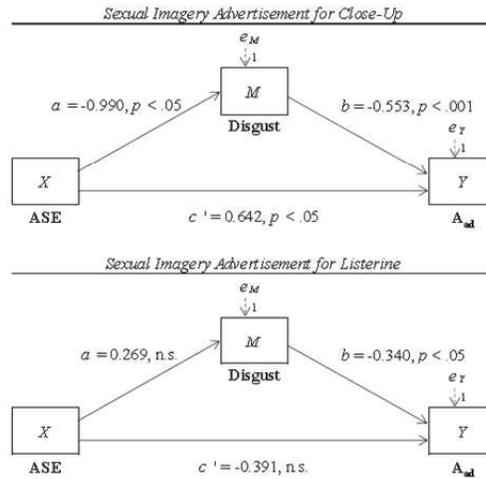


### Mediation Analysis

We employed the SPSS PROCESS macro (Hayes 2013) to assist in conducting a mediation analysis using ordinary least squares path analysis; see Figure 3 for results. In the high-fit product (Close-Up) advertisement with sexual imagery present, ASE had a significant negative influence on negative affect, and disgust had a negative effect on  $A_{ad}$ , and a bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect (10,000 bootstrap samples) was above zero. Given that there was evidence that ASE influenced  $A_{ad}$  directly, it appears that disgust partially mediates the relationship between ASE and  $A_{ad}$  for the Close-Up brand.

However, when sexual imagery was featured in the low-fit product (Listerine) advertisement, no mediation occurred. ASE did not influence  $A_{ad}$  directly and there was no indirect effect of ASE through negative affect either, as the bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect (10,000 bootstrap samples) on  $A_{ad}$  included zero.

**FIGURE 3**  
**MEDIATION OF ASE-A<sub>Ad</sub> BY DISGUST**



## DISCUSSION

The overarching objective of this research was to examine whether the impact of thematic fit of product positioning with sexual content varies as a function of ASE personality trait among female consumers. We provided support for our proposition that ASE moderates the effects of product category-sex fit on female consumer responses to sexual advertising. Specifically, in study 1, we empirically demonstrated that perceived identification with sexual themes results in more negative attitudes toward advertising and brand. These negative effects of thematic fit with sexual content are increased for lower ASE participants, but eliminated for higher ASE participants. In study 2, our results showed that higher ASE participants have more negative ad attitudes when exposed to the sexual theme paired with utilitarian product positioning for Listerine (i.e., low fit condition) than with hedonic product positioning for Close-up (i.e., high fit). Furthermore, we conclude that the feeling of disgust offers a key explanation as to why and how the ASE personality trait alters perceptions of positioning fit within the realm of sexual advertising.

Our current research provides several theoretical implications. First, we contribute to the growing body of evidence suggesting the sexual advertising is not always effective, especially when targeting female consumers, by challenging the conventional wisdom that asserts that “sex sells.” There is a clear consensus on the effects of sex in advertising, which leads to more attention and stronger information processing. (Percy & Rossiter, 1992; Reichert, 2002). Nevertheless, sex of the message recipients has been shown to become an important determinant that influences the direction of the effects of sex in advertising. As mentioned earlier, LaTour and Henthorne (1993) have found that women are more likely to have negative attitudes toward sexual images in advertising than men. Our findings extend their work by articulating a fit-based account that implicates positioning processes as females’ identification of sexually-themed advertising.

Second, our findings identify a boundary condition for the effects of hedonic versus utilitarian product positioning paired with sexual themes by suggesting the moderating role of ASE. Extant research has documented a positive relationship between sexual self-schema for women and sexual advertising evaluations (Reichert & Fosu, 2005). The current investigation extends the literature by demonstrating that higher ASE consumers show more pronounced positive effects of perceived fit of sexual themes with hedonic positioning (high fit) than utilitarian positioning (low fit). However, those with lower ASE show attenuated effects. To the best of our knowledge, the present research is the first to demonstrate the

interactive effects of product positioning fit with sexual themes and ASE personality trait on attitudes toward the brand and advertising.

Third, the current work provides valuable insights into understanding the underlying mechanism that may explain why ASE influences attitudes toward sex in advertising. We suggest that the feeling of disgust serves as a key mediator between ASE and attitudes toward sexual advertising. Importantly, understanding the mediating role of disgust reported in our research can enable researchers to provide a more unifying framework on how ASE and product positioning-sex fit in advertising come into play. Practical implications of our findings are clear. Marketers often use sex appeals in advertising to promote their positioning strategies that stress hedonic or functional benefits (e.g., the Axe brand campaigns with strong sex appeal). The drawback of this approach is that females might form negative attitudes toward sexual explicitness in advertising (Sengupta & Dahl 2008). The current research provides strategic ways for marketers to mitigate the negative effects of perceived fit with sexual themes among female target audiences. We found that women's reactions to sexual themes that fit with the advertised product could be influenced by their ASE personality trait. While ideally marketers could take into account the degree of ASE in their female segments when using sexual information in developing hedonic or functional positioning strategies, it is in fact unlikely that sexual ad campaigns can be targeted to female audiences based on the extent to which they feel good or bad about their physical appearance. However, such sexual ad strategies for product positioning could possibly be targeted to specific female segments based on proxies like nutrition and weight status, as the ASE construct has been shown to correlate with certain socio-demographic variables (e.g., obesity rate and weight status) (McClure et al., 2010).

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

The present research is not without limitations. First, we used the same product category (i.e., mouthwash) across two experiments. Although sexual themes are often used in ads for health and hygiene products (e.g., Reichert, Childers, & Reid, 2012), the generalizability of our findings might be limited for other product categories. Accordingly, future research is needed to better understand how the direction and magnitude of our results change depending on the product categories, especially those with varying levels of product positioning fit with sexual themes such as perfume, car, and clothing.

Second, we operationalized ASE as an individual difference variable that was measured in our studies. Future research should rigorously examine the persuasive influence that ASE has on female consumer responses to sexual advertising by manipulating the degree of ASE in both laboratory and field settings. Furthermore, future research could investigate whether other personality trait variables such as narcissism can influence the effects of perceived fit with sexual themes. Previous research has shown that narcissism, defined as "a personality trait reflecting a grandiose and inflated self-concept" (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008, p. 1304), is closely associated with self-esteem (Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991) and sexual orientation (Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2006). In light of the above discussion, we encourage future investigations to examine whether female consumers' narcissistic traits may change the dynamics of product positioning fit with sexual themes.

Another important limitation is that while our research was conducted with a real-world sample, it was entirely composed of American females. As Fam & Waller (2003) and other researchers clearly demonstrate, culture can play a key role in what is acceptable, offensive, etc. to a consumer audience. These findings would need to be replicated for other cultures, and might not hold for cultures dramatically different than that of our research.

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**APPENDIX—EXPERIMENTAL STIMULI**

**Study One Stimulus.**

**Study Two Stimuli**



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