

SYMPOSIA SUMMARY

Sex and Consumption: Empirical and Theoretical Advances

Darren Dahl, University of British Columbia, Canada

SESSION OVERVIEW

A Google search of the phrase “sex sells” yields over two million hits. This pedestrian wisdom is an often-repeated quip when people are confronted by a particularly shocking or gratuitous use of sexual stimuli in advertising. As researchers we know that this simple causal relationship, though appealing in its parsimony, is undoubtedly a gross oversimplification of a much more complex series of inter-related behavioral variables. The objective of the session is to advance consumer behavior theory on this under-researched topic: the influence of sexual motivations and stimuli on consumption. In three presentations (each of which is based on completed papers), we provide experimental data that represent unique, substantive and theoretical contributions to the consumer behavior literature and elucidate some of the complex relationships at work when sex and consumption activities collide. All three papers address the theme of this year’s ACR of bridging different theoretical paradigms by incorporating aspects of economic, biological and social role theories to study consumer cognition and choice.

The first presentation (Vohs, Finkenauer and Burger) employs a social exchange perspective to further explore sex as a commodity traded between men and women, focusing on the sellers (typically women) and what kinds of resources they are willing to exchange for sex. The second presentation focuses on the buyers (typically men) and outlines conditions under which some of those men are motivated to engage in distinct consumption behaviors (i.e., conspicuous consumption) when primed with mating stimuli (Sundie, Griskevicius, Kenrick, and Tybur). The third presentation explores the effectiveness of marketing strategies that employ sexual stimuli (i.e., in advertisements); and demonstrates that the effectiveness of sexual images in advertising is moderated by both gender and personality differences (Sengupta and Dahl). Finally, the discussant, Gerald Gorn, will integrate the findings of the three papers and provide his own insights on the area. This special session is expected to be of interest to a wide variety of consumer behavior researchers; specifically those individuals interested in human sexuality, gender differences, conspicuous consumption, advertising response, and social exchange. Each of the papers included in this session are complete.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“Sexual Behavior as Predicted by a Social Exchange Model: Three Tests of Sexual Economics”

Kathleen Vohs, University of Minnesota
Catrin Finkenauer, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
Nina Burger, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

This research tests new theory, entitled Sexual Economics, which seeks to predict differences in heterosexual sexual behavior as viewed from a social exchange framework (Baumeister and Vohs, 2003). The theory starts with the premise that sex is a commodity that women possess and that men want. Because women are the gatekeepers of sex (Baumeister, Catanese, and Vohs, 2001), men must offer resources (e.g., time, money, respect, attention, commitment) to obtain it from women. From this perspective, women act like sellers and men act like buyers and each gender’s behavior can be understood as individual and gender-wide

attempts to maximize utility. Three studies tested the model and its implications.

In the first study, we tested one of the basic, underlying premises of the model. Because men have dramatically stronger sex drive than women (Baumeister et al. 2001) and women are the decision makers as to when sex is allowed to take place, women will be attuned to the amount or quality of resources they have been given. Accordingly, women will be in an exchange mode when cued with the idea of allowing sex to occur. Specifically, we tested the hypothesis that thinking of a sexual situation heightens women’s exchange (versus communal) orientation. In this study, Dutch men and women either read a scenario about a woman and a man on a first date or about an evening with friends. Both the *dating* and *friend* paragraphs were written in the second-person and included as the two main activities going out for dinner and then to a club to dance. However, the dating paragraph contained some sexual overtones whereas the friend paragraph did not. Thus, the scenes were equivalent in all ways except for the presence of a sexual connotation in the dating scene. Next participants read communal- and exchange-related statements in what was described as a proof-reading task. After a filler task, participants were given a surprise recall test for the items in the proofreading task. The results showed the predicted interaction effect between gender and scenario, such that women who read about a sexual dating scenario remembered more exchange-related (but showed no change on communal-related) items, relative to women who had read the dating scenario and men who had read the dating scenario.

A second study tested an implication of the model, which is derived from social exchange theory: when one person over-benefits relative to another, the over-benefited person will feel guilt due to this imbalance. Hence, in study 2, we tested whether women would expect to feel guiltier if they received resources from the man but did not return the exchange with sexual access. Six scenarios (2x3 between-subjects design) were presented to men and women and they made judgments of what the woman in the story would be feeling. Each scenario described a night wherein a woman and a man go to dinner. Their dinner is described as their first, fourth, or eighth, and the man either pays for the dinner (as he has on each occasion) or they split the bill (as they have on each occasion). The scenario ends in all conditions with the man walking the woman to the door, where the woman senses that he wants to come in but, being unsure of her feelings for him, she gives him a small kiss on the cheek and says goodnight. Again, the dependent measure was ratings of the woman’s feelings as a function of number of dinner dates and who paid for the dinners. The results showed the predicted effect, such that participants (both men and women) believed that the woman in the story would feel more guilt when she had been to dinner with the man on multiple occasions and he had paid for each dinner each time. Participants did not, however, perceive that she would be feeling more negatively in general; rather the effect was specific to guilt—as would be predicted by a social exchange account.

Study 3 took a more direct approach to understanding guilt as an outcome of over-benefiting in the context of sexual exchange. Analogous to the findings of study 2, we predicted that when women accept a gift but do not reciprocate in a sexual fashion, they will experience higher levels of guilt than men in the same situation

or women who did not receive a gift or have sex on Valentine's Day. In the week after Valentine's Day, participants completed a survey regarding gifts given for Valentine's Day. We asked participants whether they had received a gift on Valentine's Day and whether they had sex that day. Then we assessed several negative emotional states, with the key dependent variable being ratings of guilt. As predicted, women who received a gift but did not have sex with their partner on Valentine's Day reported stronger feelings of guilt than did participants in the comparable cells.

In sum, these data support the sexual economics theory of heterosexual sexual behavior. When men want sex from women, they must exchange resources. In study 1, we showed that when women are reminded of a sexual dating situation, they become more attuned to exchange-relevant (as opposed to communal) information. We showed in studies 2 and 3 that women are expected to feel (study 2) and actually feel (study 3) more guilt when they receive a resource or a gift from a man but do not reciprocate by engaging in sexual behavior.

References

- Baumeister, R.F. and K.D. Vohs (2004), "Sexual Economics: Sex as Female Resource for Social Exchange in Heterosexual Interactions," *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 8 (4), 339–363.
- Baumeister, R.F., K.R. Catanese, and K.D. Vohs (2001), "Is There a Gender Difference in Strength of Sex Drive? Theoretical Views, Conceptual Distinctions, and a Review of Relevant Evidence," *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 5 (3), 242–273.

"Peacocks, Porsches and Thorstein Veblen: Romantic Motivations for Conspicuous Consumption"

Jill Sundie, University of Houston

Vladas Griskevicius, Arizona State University

Douglas Kenrick, Arizona State University

Joshua Tybur, University of New Mexico

As they acquire wealth, people tend to spend an increasing amount on frivolous luxuries. The market for "new luxury" products was recently estimated at \$350 billion per year, with a 10–15% annual growth rate (Silverstein and Fiske 2003). Thorstein Veblen (1899) documented displays of such luxuries over a century ago, coining the term "conspicuous consumption." Conspicuous consumption can be motivated by different forms of impression management, such as signaling competency to potential clients, or one's social class to new neighbors. Our research focuses on an under-explored motivation for engaging in conspicuous consumption—signaling to potential mates.

Costly signaling theory (Zahavi and Zahavi 1997) and sexual strategies theory (Gangestad and Simpson 2000) are employed to generate unique hypotheses about mating-related motivations for conspicuous consumption. There are well-documented sex differences in mate preferences indicating that wealth displays are more advantageous for men than women in the mating market. The present research expands on this work by drawing on two biologically-based theories to predict that other factors, such as a man's sexual strategy and goal state, can also influence motivations to conspicuously consume.

In three studies we investigated how mating-related primes, participant sex, and participants' sexual attitudes may be linked to purchase evaluations and decisions (studies 1 and 2), and what mating-relevant impressions are formed by observers of others' conspicuous consumption (study 3). We provide evidence for a two-way signaling system; showing first that the propensity to send a sexual signal via conspicuous consumption is enhanced only for

some individuals when in a mating mindset, and second that observers of others' conspicuous consumption interpret that signal accordingly.

In study 1, tendencies to conspicuously consume were examined under different goal states. Men that hold sexually unrestricted attitudes (reflecting an openness to sex without commitment) were predicted to be the most likely to conspicuously consume, but only when primed with mating-related stimuli. 203 participants were either primed with pictures/profiles of opposite sex targets in a campus dating service (mating), or pictures/descriptions of dormitories in a residence placement service (neutral/control). In an ostensibly unrelated task, participants then spent a \$2000 budget on 36 possible items (e.g., clothing, iPod) varying in their conspicuousness (per independent sub-sample judgments). Materialism (Richins and Dawson 1992) and sexual attitudes (Simpson and Gangestad 1991) were also measured. Materialism did not significantly predict conspicuous consumption. An a priori contrast revealed that sexually unrestricted men who received a mating prime were significantly more likely to conspicuously consume than sexually unrestricted men not primed with mating stimuli, sexually restricted men regardless of prime, and women regardless of sexual attitudes or prime $F(1, 223)=12.35, p=.001$, providing support for the hypothesis advanced.

Study 2 employed two different scenario mating primes—a short-term (uncommitted sex) and a long-term (romantic love, commitment) prime to conceptually replicate study 1 and investigate boundary conditions on those results. Unrestricted men's conspicuous consumption was expected to be emphasized when primed with the short-term scenario, because that is a type of romantic encounter consistent with their sexual attitudes. 240 participants responded to 10 items: "Compared to the average student on campus, please indicate how much money you would want to spend on (e.g., a new car, nice dinner with your friends)?" Participants' sexual attitudes were measured. Compared to all other participants, sexually unrestricted men primed with short-term mating stimuli reported enhanced conspicuous spending, $F(1, 228)=10.30, p<.01$, relative to unrestricted men primed with either long-term or neutral stimuli, restricted men regardless of prime, and women and women regardless of sexual attitudes or prime, confirming our hypothesis.

Study 3 was designed to provide support for the receiving end of the signaling system—to show that observers of conspicuous consumers interpret or decode that behavior in a manner consistent with its function as a sexual signal (as documented in studies 1 and 2). Given such a system, we expected that when a person witnessed someone engaging in conspicuous consumption, he or she would form certain impressions about the target's attitudes towards relationships. Specifically, we predicted that if a man conspicuously consumes, he will be perceived as more open to short-term sexual opportunities than a man making a more conservative purchase. In study 3, 248 participants evaluated an otherwise identical male or female target who had purchased either a Porsche Boxster or a Honda Civic (MSRP, picture included). Background information (income, occupation, hobbies, target attractiveness) was held constant across conditions. The dependent measure was the set of sexual attitude items (Simpson and Gangestad 1991) as they thought their target would complete them. A priori contrasts revealed car type had a significant effect on impressions of the male target's attitudes $F(1, 197)=12.19, p=.001$, but not on the female target's attitudes, $F(1, 197)=2.51, p=.115$.

Data from three studies provide converging evidence that mating-related goals play a role in motivating conspicuous consumption, and that conspicuous consumption leads to the formation of mating-relevant impressions among observers. Rather than

finding a straightforward male-female difference in conspicuous consumption, we show that individual differences in sexual attitudes, and the person's motivational state (mating vs. non-mating) play key roles in motivating this ubiquitous consumption pattern. Conspicuous consumption was only enhanced among men who held sexually unrestricted attitudes, and only when they were primed with mating stimuli. The pattern of results fits best with costly signaling and sexual strategies theories, and less well with social role and normative explanations that focus on generalized male-female differences in consumption behavior. This research suggests that evaluations of "new luxury" products and the promotions designed to sell them may be influenced by the audience's sexual attitudes, and whether or not mating goals are salient when processing this product-related information.

References

- Gangestad, S. W. and J. A. Simpson (2000), "The Evolution of Human Mating: Trade-Offs and Strategic Pluralism," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 23 (4), 573-644.
- Richins, M. L. and S. Dawson (1992), "A Consumer Values Orientation for Materialism and its Measurement: Scale Development and Validation," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 19 (December), 303-316.
- Silverstein, M. and N. Fiske (2003), *Trading Up: The New American Luxury*, New York, NY: Portfolio.
- Simpson, J. and S. W. Gangestad (1991), "Individual Differences in Sociosexuality: Evidence For Convergent and Discriminant Validity," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60 (June), 870-883.
- Veblen, T. ([1899] 1994), *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, New York, NY: Mentor Book.
- Zahavi, A. and A. Zahavi (1997), *The Handicap Principle*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

"Gender-Related Reactions to Inappropriate Sex Appeals in Advertising"

Jaideep Sengupta, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Darren Dahl, University of British Columbia

This research examines gender-based reactions to the use of inappropriate sexual images in advertising (i.e., when the sexual image is either unnecessarily explicit, and/or has little to do with the product being advertised). We focus particularly on reactions obtained under a high cognitive load, both in order to simulate real-world conditions whereby consumers typically process ads at a very shallow level, and also to provide insights into respondents' spontaneous reactions.

Prior advertising research has shown that both men and women tend to react negatively to sexually inappropriate ads (Peterson and Kerin 1977; Simpson et al. 1996), possibly because explicit and product-irrelevant sexual images are deemed to be unethical and manipulative (Friestad and Wright 1994). However, the current research suggests that different results might obtain under constrained capacity conditions. Specifically, we argue that ad attitudes under such conditions should be primarily influenced by spontaneous affective reactions; thus, consumers who harbor positive affect towards sexual stimuli—such as those who have intrinsically positive attitudes towards sex per se—should evaluate sex-based ads positively, in comparison to equivalent non-sexual ads.

Two experiments used this conceptualization to provide some insights into both similarities and differences between men and women in their reactions to sex-based advertising. First, drawing on the premise (which has received much support in both evolutionary

and socialization perspectives of human sexuality) that men on average possess more positive intrinsic attitudes towards sex than women, Experiment 1 tested the prediction that men will evaluate the use of inappropriate sexual appeals more positively than non-sexual ads under high load conditions, while the reverse pattern will obtain for women. A 2 (Gender: Men vs. Women) x 2 (Ad Type: Sexual vs. Non-sexual appeal) was used. All participants examined an ad booklet after being given a ten-digit number to hold in memory; thus simulating a high cognitive load. The target ad (for Chaumet watches) featured product details and a picture with either an explicit sexual image (a couple having intercourse) or a product-irrelevant non-sexual image (a landscape visual). Participants then responded to a series of questions, including the critical dependent variable—a 3-item measure of attitude towards the ad. A significant interaction of ad type and gender was obtained ($p < .001$). As predicted, males reported better attitudes for the sexual ad than the nonsexual ad ($M_{\text{sex}} = 5.74$, $M_{\text{nonsex}} = 4.22$, $p < .001$). Further, women followed the reverse pattern ($M_{\text{sex}} = 3.25$, $M_{\text{nonsex}} = 4.54$, $p < .01$). Also of interest were the results obtained in two control conditions, in which men and women processed the sex-based ad under a low cognitive load. Replicating past results, both men and women reported relatively poor ad attitudes under these unconstrained conditions ($M_{\text{men}} = 3.91$, $M_{\text{women}} = 3.79$, $F < 1$).¹

Experiment 2 used our conceptualization to explore intra-gender differences in evaluations of inappropriate sex-based ads, with a particular focus on women's reactions. If, as we have argued, spontaneous reactions to sexually explicit ads are driven by intrinsic attitudes towards sex per se, women with more liberal attitudes towards sex should display a similar pattern of responses as the men in Experiment 1. A 2 (Ad type: Sexual vs. Non-Sexual appeal) x 2 (Sexual Attitudes: Conservative vs. Liberal) between-subjects design was used; all four conditions were run under high cognitive load (female participants only). In addition, two male control conditions (Sexual Attitudes: Conservative vs. Liberal) were also studied; control participants were all exposed to the sex-based ad under load. The primary DV was again attitudes towards the ad. There were also two key additions: a) a standard seven-item scale tapping into liberal vs. conservative attitudes towards sex (Mercer and Kohn 1979; example item: "I approve of unmarried couples engaging in sexual intercourse"; median score = 3.14 on a scale of 5); and b) items tapping into participants' cognitive deliberations about the ad (e.g., agreement with the statement "I think the ad featured an unethical use of sex") as well as items tapping into affective reactions during ad viewing—both positive (e.g., "happy") and negative (e.g., "upset")

A significant interaction of ad type and sexual attitudes was obtained ($p < .01$). As predicted, women with relatively conservative

¹We note that our research focused primarily on the extreme cases of inappropriate sex appeals, as operationalized by both high explicitness and product-irrelevance of the sexual image. However, our theoretical conceptualization posits that, under constrained capacity, deliberations regarding product relevance are unlikely to play a part in determining attitudes induced by the ad. We would predict, therefore, that the gender difference observed in Experiment 1 should hold even if the sexual image were product-relevant. A follow-up study, in which men and women were exposed under constrained processing conditions either to the sexual ad from Expt 1 (i.e., irrelevant and explicit) or a product-relevant explicitly sexual ad (the same ad, but for condoms rather than watches), provided good support for this thesis. Men reported substantially more positive evaluations of the ad than women, regardless of product relevance.

(below median) sexual attitudes reported a significantly better ad attitude towards the non-sex ad than the sex ad ($M_{\text{sex}}=3.44$, $M_{\text{nonsex}}=4.26$, $p<.05$). At higher (i.e., more liberal) levels of sexual attitude, however, the opposite pattern was obtained, with female participants (like the men in study 1) now preferring the sex-ad to the non-sex ad ($M_{\text{sex}}=5.15$, $M_{\text{nonsex}}=4.32$, $p<.05$). Further regression analyses revealed that across conditions, ad attitude was significantly predicted by the overall affective index ($p<.0001$) but not by the cognitive index (ns). Subsequent mediation analyses then found that the effect of ad type on ad attitudes was fully mediated by participants' affective reactions. Finally, control group results showed that, as with women, better attitudes towards the sex ad were obtained for liberal men ($M=5.73$) than conservative men ($M=4.23$, $p<.0001$).

In sum, our research extends prior literature by showing that, rather than being uniformly disliked, the inappropriate use of sex in advertising can actually produce positive evaluations under constrained processing conditions—for men, as well as for women with liberal sexual attitudes. Our findings are consistent with the premise that respondents' reactions to such ads are driven primarily by their intrinsic attitudes towards sex per se. At a more detailed process level, we identify the critical role of ad-induced affect in driving evaluations of inappropriate sexual appeals under high cognitive load. Finally, by demonstrating both inter-gender and intra-gender variation in attitudes towards sex-based ads, our research provides findings consistent with modern perspectives on human sexuality, which argue against a purely gender-determined view of attitudes towards sexual stimuli (e.g., Gangestad and Simpson 2000). Additional implications of our research, as well as directions for further research, are discussed in the complete paper.

References

- Friestad, M., and P. Wright (1994), "The Persuasion Knowledge Model: How People Cope With Persuasion Attempts," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21, 1-31.
- Gangestad, S.W. and J.A. Simpson (2000), "The Evolution of Human Mating: Trade-offs and Strategic Pluralism," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 23, 573-644.
- Mercer, G.W. and P.M. Kohn (1979), "Gender Differences in the Integration of Conservatism, Sex Urge, and Sexual Behaviors among College Students," *The Journal of Sex Research*, 15 (2), 129-142.
- Peterson, R.A. and R.A. Kerin (1977), "The Female Role in Advertisements: Some Experimental Evidence," *Journal of Marketing*, 41 (October), 59-63.
- Simpson, P., S. Horton, and G. Brown (1996), "Male Nudity in Advertisements: A Modified Replication and Extension of Gender and Product Effects," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Sciences*, 24(3), 257-262.