DOES SEX SELL ON INSTAGRAM?: INVESTIGATING THE EFFECT OF

SEXUALIZED IMAGES OF FEMALE INFLUENCERS ON INSTAGRAM

ADVERTISING

by

JOOYOUNG UHM

(Under the direction of Jooyoung Kim)

ABSTRACT

"Does sex sell?"- the questions that researchers have been attempting to answer for ages. Despite the mixed findings, the assumption that "sex sells" appears to be taken for granted in advertising, and social media advertisings are no exception. This study presents the effects of sexualized images of female influencers on the sponsored advertising on Instagram based on the basic human motivational activation and higher cognitive orders that interact with it. The results showed that sexualized images of influencers negatively affect the evaluation of the influencer, which in turn affects attitude towards the ad and behavioral intention negatively. Although there was little influence found on motivational activation, this study adds understanding of how the sexualized images of influencers affect the overall ad effectiveness and performance.

INDEX WORDS: Influencer marketing, Instagram, sexualization, LC4MP

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1

INTRODUCTION

The basic assumption that "sex sells" appears to be taken for granted in advertising (Gramazio et al., 2020), and social media ads are no exception (Hall et al., 2012). For social media like Instagram, 'attention' counts as revenue (De Veirman et al., 2017) because it can be attributed to an impression and other subsequent social engagements such as likes and shares. Highly sexualized imagery often attracts people's attention and it is one of the typically used visual tactics to shape 'influence' on Instagram (Drenten et al., 2020). When sexualized imagery is used on Instagram, it can garner more attention in a form of likes and followers (Ramsey & Horan, 2018).

Influencer marketing, which puts its aim on leveraging the power of a given individual's influence in order to promote the products or brands, actively utilizes the sexualized images of the influencers (Drenten et al., 2020), hoping to get the double-boosted impacts from using the power of both influencer and sexualization. Though the strategy sounds reasonable, literature findings are inconsistent in terms of the positive effect of the sexualization of models in advertising because attention doesn't necessarily mean to result in positive consumer reactions (e.g. Kaur & Hundal, 2017; Gong et al., 2020). More specifically, there has not been enough research done on the topic of influencer marketing and sex appeal. Therefore, whether the sexualized images of influencers on social media are effective when advertising a product still remains unclear.

To fill this gap, this study examines the effects of sexualized images of female influencers on the sponsored advertising on Instagram and seeks to contribute to an understanding of influencer marketing. Using several theories and models including Limited

Capacity Model of Motivated Mediated Message Processing (L4CMP; Lang, 2000), this study is conducted to unfold how the sexualized influencer ad affects the basic human motivational activation and higher cognitive orders that interact with it.

2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sex appeal and advertising

Sex appeal is one of the most popular tactics used in advertising (Chang & Tseng, 2013). Since the 1960s, researchers have investigated the effects of sexual appeals in advertising. In general, findings reveal that sexual content brings attention to the ad (Sparks & Lang, 2015) by increasing arousal and attraction, interest, and attention (Lombardot, 2007). However, it can evoke divergent evaluations based on audience factors such as gender (Reichert et al., 2007; Jeong & Hwang, 2005) and feminist attitude (Choi et al., 2016) or congruency with the product (Sherman & Quester, 2005; Chang & Tseng, 2013; Beetles & Harris, 2005).

The mixed results of these studies highlight the complexity of the effectiveness of sexual advertising appeals. According to a review of the studies on sexual information in advertising (Reichert, 2002), there is strong evidence that sexual information attracts attention. Past findings show ads with sexual appeals are rated more interesting by the consumers compared to the non-sexual advertisement (Bello et al., 1983), are effective at grabbing the audience's attention (Belch et al., 1982); and affect attitude towards the advertisement, the brand, and purchase intention positively (Severn et al., 1990). On the other hand, another stream of researches has shown the negative effects of using sexualized images in advertising, suggesting the presence of sexual content or nudity affects the processing and encoding of brand information by distracting consumers' attention away from it (e.g., Reichert, 2002), thereby decreases the recall of brand (LaTour, 1990). A recent meta-analytic review of the effects of sexual ads (Lull & Bushman, 2015) showed that brands advertised

using sexual ads are evaluated less favorably though there was no significant memory impairment for brands and ads that included sexual appeal.

Studies on sexual appeals have divergent views when operationalizing the concept of sexualized advertising. Some designs compare ads that display models in various levels of nudity (LaTour, 1990; LaTour et al., 1990; Jeong & Hwang, 2005). On the other hand, sexual explicitness is commonly operationalized in sexual appeals through sexually provocative language and the actions of the models (Reichert, 2002; Huang, 2004). This study conforms to the definition of 'sexualization'. Sexualization of a person, according to Tyler and Quek (2016), is understood as 'a problem of sexual objectification along with recognition of a culture that is more likely to reduce girls (and women) to sexual objects.' American Psychological Association (APA) report also establishes sexualization as synonymous with sexual objectification (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016). Thus, this study views sexualized ad image of female as an objectified image of a female figure that focuses on how one's body appears rather than what one can do or perform as a human being.

Influencer marketing on Social media

Because of its recent entry in the literature, there is a lack of academic consensus made on the definitions of the term "influencer" (Johanson & Guldvik, 2017). Influencers are often defined by the size of the network they have grown. They are referred to as individuals who have built a sizeable social network of people following them on social media platforms, to endorse brands and products (Schouten et al., 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017), or online personalities with large numbers of followers, who have an influence on their followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). On the other hand, there are definitions focusing more on the characteristics of influencers and how they earn the status of influencer, like "people who exhibit some combination of desirable attributes that allows them to influence a disproportionately large number of others" (Bakshy et al., 2011), or "a content generator: one who has a status of

expertise in a specific area, who has cultivated a sizable number of captive followers— who are of marketing value to brands—by regularly producing valuable content via social media" (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Other definitions are geared toward the practical aspect, such as "a reliable and credible channel with a real impact in swaying consumer behavior" (Berger & Keller Fay Group, 2019), "key leaders that drive brand's message to the larger markets" (Tapinfluence, 2020). Combining these definitions, influencers are defined as individuals who have become online celebrities with large number of followers on social media platforms by creating contents that exhibit desirable attributes- whether personal attributes like credibility or expertise, or network attributes such as connectivity— on social media. The present study follows this definition.

Recently, brands are increasingly turning to social media influencers to endorse their brands and products (De Veirman et al., 2017). Acknowledging the gained popularity of Social media and growing concerns for the ad-blocking behavior of consumers, brands choose to turn to trusted online personas to get their products and messages out to consumers instead of directly delivering them themselves (De Veirman et al., 2017). Instagram, used by almost all (93%) influencer campaigns, is one of the most influential social media platforms when it comes to influencer marketing. Marketers reported Instagram as the most important media channel for influencers (89%), followed by YouTube (70%), Facebook (45%), and Blogs (44%), and they plan to spend the most money on Instagram for influencer marketing (69%) in 2019, which is over six times more than YouTube (11%), the second most-selected channel for top spend (Bailis, 2020). Revenue generated from advertisements on Instagram is growing every year, it was estimated that Instagram was making $2 billion in the second quarter of 2018, and it is expected to grow close to $7 billion per quarter by 2020 (Wagner & Molla, 2018).

Attention has become a scarce and valuable resource when it comes to making profits through the platform (Terranova, 2012). Influencers who have obtained their place by earning that resources continue to produce content to gain attention on social media through representations of their everyday lives (Freberg et al., 2011). Influencers are therefore considered more accessible, believable, intimate, and thus easy to relate compared to traditional celebrities (Lou & Yuan, 2019). They can influence the attitudes, decisions, and behaviors of their followers through their social media activities (Watts & Dodds 2007; Lyons & Henderson, 2005).

A growing body of research is looking through the impact of influencer marketing in comparison to advertising without an influencer. It is shown that influencer advertising is unique in a way that the effectiveness of the ad being affected by the evaluation of the Influencer, such as perceived trustworthiness and similarity (e.g. Lou & Yuan, 2019). Unlike traditional celebrities, social media influencers have gained influence by successfully branding themselves as experts on social media platforms not by having a professional talent (Schouten et al., 2020). Influencers are regarded as more trustworthy than celebrities and that people feel more similar to influencers and identify more with them than celebrities, which had a positive effect on advertising effectiveness (Schouten et al., 2020). Consumers reported through an interview that they regularly follow lifestyle vloggers' product recommendations either by buying a product themselves or recommending it to others because they considered vloggers as credible sources of information, mainly driven by perceptions of trust and similarity (Chapple & Cownie, 2017).

Influencer Marketing and Sexualization

It has been observed that women's self-presentation on social media is highly sexualized (Drenten et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2012; Kapidzic & Herring, 2015), and posting sexualized photos on social media has been related to the wider idea that sexiness for women

is both valued and a mean of gaining attention (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016). Kapidzic and Herring (2015) found that compared to boys, girls posted profile pictures where they displayed seductive behavior significantly more frequently. Young women felt pressured to present themselves in a sexualized way (e.g., via suggestive clothing, flirtatious gaze) by offline gender scripts of the physically attractive woman (Manago et al., 2008). As Instagram is a platform that is based on visual aesthetics and filtered images (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), the tendency of presenting oneself in a sexualized way persists. An examination of undergraduate women's photos posted on Instagram and/or Facebook has revealed that they posted more sexualized photos to Instagram than to Facebook (Ramsey & Horan, 2017). On Instagram, sexualized photos garnered more attention, and women who post more sexualized photos tend to get more likes in general and more followers on Instagram.

To date, research has primarily focused on negative attitudes (e.g., less competent, less determined, less intelligent, less agentic, having less self-respect, being less fully human, less moral, and being more sexually experienced) levied against women and girls depicted in a sexualized manner (Cikara et al., 2011; Daniels, 2012; Loughnan et al., 2010). In social media settings, girls with sexualized profile photos on Facebook were more likely to be negatively evaluated on their physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and task competence by female peers (Daniels & Zurvriggen, 2016), and even by male peers (Daniels, 2016). In a focus group study, (Manago et al., 2008), young women reported that young women with sexualized photos on their social media profiles are at risk for criticism and judgment about perceived promiscuity from other young women for posting provocative pictures.

H1. Compared to an influencer in advertising with no sexualization, an influencer in sexualized advertising will be evaluated more negatively.

H2. Compared to an advertising with no sexualization, attitude towards the a) ad and b) brand will be more negative to a sexualized advertising.

Previous studies have focused on the effects of evaluation of the influencers on the attitude towards the brand and advertising (e.g. Lee & Koo, 2015; Schouten et al., 2020). Studies have found that source credibility contributes to the enhancement of people's ad attitudes (Yoon & Kim, 2016), the credibility of an endorser contributes positively to the attitude toward the advertisement, which positively affects brand attitude (Munnukka et al., 2016). In the context of social media, a positive attitude towards the ad and brand often affects engaging behavior, such as liking, sharing, and commenting. Researches have shown that attitude toward content is the primary factor that affects sharing behavior on social media (Huang et al., 2013), and attitude toward the brand had a significant impact on sharing (Berger & Milkman, 2013).

H3. Positive evaluation of the influencer will lead to a more positive attitude towards the a) brand and b) advertising.

H4: Positive evaluation of the influencer will lead to increased likelihood to a) engage in social media engaging behavior and b) intention to purchase.

Limited Capacity Model of Motivated Mediated Message Processing (LC4MP)

The Limited Capacity Model of Motivated Mediated Message Processing (LC4MP), proposed by Lang (2000), provides a basic model that can be used to examine how media messages are processed. It makes a basic assumption that people have a limited capacity of mental resources available for consciously and unconsciously encode, store, and retrieve information in media messages, which depends on their two underlying motivational systems: appetitive (approach) and aversive (avoid) (Lang, 2017).

Within the LC4MP, mediated messages are considered as environmental stimuli that are composed of varying degrees of motivational significance, which, in turn, evokes varying

levels of appetitive and aversive system activation (Lang, 2006). Pleasant mediated messages elicit the automatic activation of the appetitive system, and unpleasant messages activate the aversive system. Human motivational systems automatically activate in response to valence and arousal in mediated messages and initiate adaptive emotional processes (Sparks et al., 2011). The level of activation in the motivational systems influences affective responding or emotional experience of pleasantness and arousal (Bolls et al., 2001).

Sexual media are likely to be particularly relevant in any assessment of appetitive and aversive system activation because arousal itself is a common response to sexually explicit media (Lang et al., 2014). In general, sexual content is regarded as a stimulus that possesses inherent motivational primacy (McRae et al., 2012). As the survival of the human species depends on reproduction, the appetitive system has evolved to prioritize the motivational processing of sexual stimuli. Thus, it can be said that the sexual content in advertisements represents a type of content that the motivational system has naturally evolved to respond to (Sparks & Lang, 2015).

Researchers have been investigating this rather primitive reaction towards a sexual stimulus through the lens of motivational activation and resource allocation, utilizing methods that can measure immediate bodily responses – psychophysiological measures. Lang and colleagues (1993) had shown that the viewers of sexual content had increased appetitive activation, shown by Zygomaticus major activation, and higher arousal, indicated by skin conductance reactions. Sparks and Lang (2015) found that sexy content elicits immediate appetitive activation and increased resource allocation which was indicated by activation of Zygomaticus major and heart rate deceleration. Thus, sexualized advertising is likely to evoke increased appetitive activation, which is indicated by positive emotion and higher arousal, resulting in better encoding, storing, and retrieving of the given ad appeal.

This study attempts to explore how the sexualization in influencer advertising affects motivational activation relying on self-report measures. According to Lee and Lang (2009), self-report measures capture a global response to a message. As the motivational activation results in conscious emotional experience (Lang et al., 1995), self-report measures are used to show appetitive and aversive activation (Sparks & Lang, 2010; Bradley & Lang, 2000; Lang, 2006). Previous studies have found strong relationships between physiological measures of motivational activation and self-report measures of emotional experience (Lang et al., 2007), and for some emotions like sadness, self-report have shown to have better explanatory power of the emotion than psychophysiological measures (Sparks & Lang, 2010). In addition, there have been concerns regarding the theoretical problems concerning the causal relationship among psychophysiological systems adding to the complicated and expensive apparatus problems (Thayer, 1967). In this article, motivational activation was explored on the basis of self-reported emotional activation, indicated by emotional valence and level of arousal.

RQ1. How will the sexualized influencer advertising affect motivational activation?

Increased appetitive activation was found also to evoke a more positive attitude toward the ad and the brand (Eckler & Bolls, 2011). People showed a more positive attitude towards the public service announcements about safe driving in appetitive activation condition compared to aversive activation condition (Potter et al., 2006). It has been suggested that high arousal is the major contributor to a positive attitude towards the ad, as ads with emotional appeals are liked more and elicited a more positive attitude than non-emotional ads (Wang & Lang, 2012).

Appetitive activation is often linked with increased forwarding intentions (Eckler & Bolls, 2011; Chiu et al., 2007) and intention to purchase (Kim & Lennon, 2013; Cartwright et al., 2016). Emotion has constantly emerged as a key factor in the desire to use social media (van Koningsbruggen et al., 2017) and subsequent message diffusion (Nabi et al., 2019).

Messages that spark strong emotional feelings-humor, fear, sadness, or inspiration-are likely to be forwarded (Phelps et al., 2004). Sex appeals are the second popular tactic when it comes to viral advertising, as 28% of the viral ads used sex appeals (Golan & Zaidner, 2008). Brown et al. (2010) found that humorous ads with provocative nature elicit greater ad likability and higher pass-along probability. In a study of emotional appeal and virality, researchers found that positive messages resulted in increased behavioral intention to share and like (Alhabash et al., 2013). Emotions are commonly accepted as an important factor that drives decision making in general (Rick & Loewenstein, 2008). Positive emotions are said to be able to promote individuals' actions; bring people sensory pleasure and happiness, which can lead to the acceptance of the advertisement or love the brand (Fredrickson, 2001). In some contexts, emotions are the most important predictor of purchase behavior (Bues et al., 2017, Kemp & Kopp, 2011).

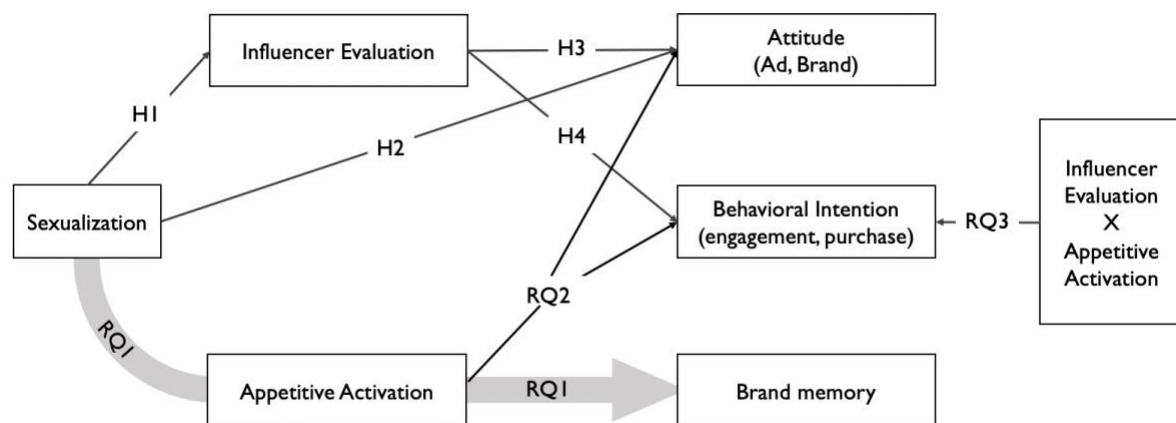RQ2. How will the motivational activation affect attitude and behavioral intention?

According to Lang (2006), motivation is considered ''the very beginning of a causal chain of responses that leads from a stimulus to an emotional feeling or experience" in LC4MP. The initial motivational activation happens immediately and unconsciously in response to a stimulus, but once that has occurred, emotional experience is influenced by higher-order cognitive processes such as consciousness, previous experience, and current context. Although higher-order cognitive processes often inhibit the motivational activation, it does not entirely eliminate the activation or its influence on psychological responses, emotional experience, and the information processing of the mediated messages. Instead, it interacts with the level of activation of the motivational systems and the balance between appetitive and aversive activation (Lee & Lang, 2009). This study aims to take a look at how the higher-order cognitive process- in this case, evaluation of the influencer- interacts with immediate affective motivation the sexualized images evoke. However, there has been little

previous research that explored the effects of sexual content in the context of influencer

marketing. As women and girls depicted in a sexualized manner in social media are perceived

negatively as previously mentioned, it would be important to understand how the negative

evaluation of the sexualized representation of the influencer and the automatic activation of

the appetitive system interacts and affects the overall ad effectiveness.

RQ3. How will the evaluation of influencer and the initial appetitive activation

interact to impact the ad performance – behavioral intention?

Figure 1 depicts the model with hypotheses the present study examined.

Figure 1
Proposed model

3

METHODS

Design

This study employed a within-subject design. The type of content was a within-subjects factor consisting of sexualized content and neutral content. Participants were presented with two different sponsored posts- one with an objectified image of an influencer and one with a neutral image- in random order.

Participants

In this study, university students who use Instagram more than once a week were chosen as a sample. This is because a large portion (69%) of Instagram users are between 18-29 years old, and most of the Instagram influencer advertisings are targeted toward the same age group (Clement, 2019a). Participants were recruited through the Grady research participation system SONA of the University of Georgia in exchange for course credit. A total of 247 students participated in this study.

Stimulus

For the experiment, sponsored Instagram posts from different vitamin brands are collected. Vitamins were chosen as the product category for this study considering relevance in the Instagram influencer marketing and feasibility of manipulating brand names. Beauty supplies such as hair and skin vitamins are seen as a category that is inclusive of two of the major categories that benefit the most from influencer marketing - wellness and beauty (Dholakiya, 2020; Wischhover, 2018). Brands such as SugarBearHair, Ritual, and Care/of have boosted their sales by filling their feeds with a combination of smiling customers, many of them being professional influencers, and artistic product shots perfectly tailored to the

minimalist Instagram aesthetic (Chappell, 2020). It is said that "one can't open Instagram lately without seeing a celebrity or major beauty brand selling them" (Wischhover, 2018). In addition, vitamin brand names are short and straightforward, often simply referring to the ingredient or main benefits (e.g. vitamin products with vitamin C were named: Vitamin C, C-1000, Vitamin Gummies, Immune C), unlike beauty and fashion brands that vary from short initials and abstract words to full names and even sentences. Also, vitamin products are often designed with a minimum variability as almost all vitamin products are contained in a bottle with similar sizes and colors. By using vitamin brands, manipulating the brands is possible with minimum impression of the names being fake.
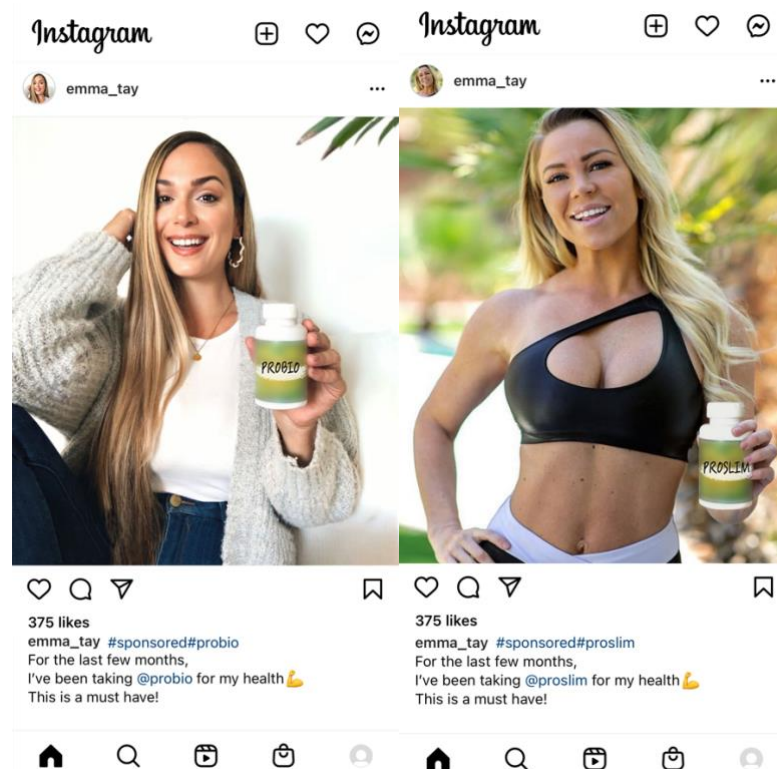
Among the sponsored post of vitamin brands, portraits of female models holding a product in a frame, where one's body image takes up more than 50% of the entire picture with non-distinctive backgrounds are first chosen as candidates. Although face to body ratio is often referred to as an indicator of sexualization (e.g., Bernard et al., 2015; Loughnan et al., 2010; Smith & Cooley, 2012; Wollast et al., 2018), the ratio is matched in this study to focus on more arousal-inducing aspects of sexualization such as nudity. The face-to-body ratio is measured using Face-ism Index made by Archer et al. (1983). The index measures two things in a picture: linear measurement from the top of the head to the lowest point of the chin (the numerator), and a linear measurement from the top of the head to the lowest visible part of the subject's body (the denominator). Previous studies have shown that average FI (Face-ism Index) for women's photographs in American periodicals (Archer et al.,1983), online social media profile (Smith & Cooley, 2012), mainstream magazine (Cheek, 2016) ranges from 0.44 to 0.47. The FI for each stimulus was matched to this average, ranging from 0.4 to 0.48.

A pretest (n=30) was conducted to select the stimuli images and brand names. Since physical attraction has been found to bias message processing (Bandura, 2001), physical attraction was controlled following the pretesting methods used in the Clayton et al. (2017)

study. As a result, two of the candidates with matching attractiveness score (Sexualized M:
4.75, Non sexualized M: 4.83) and different sexualization score (MD: 1.78) was chosen.
Selected images were cropped and fitted into the Instagram screen. Fictitious brands 'Probio'
and 'Proslim' were chosen based on the brand familiarity scores. The images were presented
with a simple description with hashtag #sponsored and #brandname (see Figure 2). The
fictitious names of the brands are photoshopped into the vitamin bottle with identical design
and size.

Figure 2
Stimuli used (left : neutral ad – FI:0.42: / right: sexualized ad-FI:0 43)

In order to ensure that the participants understand the context of the image provided,
the following text was provided before the stimuli: "On Instagram, some people are called
influencers, as having large numbers of followers they can affect. Companies pay those
influencers to promote their products or services. Following images are sponsored posts of
influencers which is a new form of advertising that is paid by the brands."

Instagram influencers were divided into nano, micro, macro, and mega according to their range (Alassani & Göretz, 2019). As the number of "likes" influences perceived popularity and opinion leadership (DeVeirman et al., 2017), influencer types in this study were set to be varied on three levels based on the number of likes that the post received – 121,032 likes as a mega influencer, 4,243 likes as a macro influencer 375 likes as a micro influencer. Participants were randomly presented with two different kinds of influencers.

Procedure and Measures

Procedure

The online survey for this study was created using Qualtrics and distributed through an anonymous link. The survey was only accessible to mobile devices in order to ensure ecological validity. Participants were allowed to participate in the study only after filling out an informed consent form and going through a screening process. If they were not older than 18 years old or do not use Instagram more than once a week, they were automatically directed to the end of the survey. After a brief introductory text, each participant was presented with two sponsored Instagram posts in random order. Each post remained on the screen until the participant pressed next, but the minimum time span was set to 15 seconds to make sure all the participants have seen the stimuli. After each post, participants were asked to answer the self-report questions regarding emotional response. After all of the stimuli are shown, 30 seconds of resting time was given. In order to minimize the distraction and make sure the participants are resting for 30 seconds, a simple personality test was provided. All the participants were automatically moved to the memory test section after 30 seconds. Then, the memory of the advertising was tested in the order of recall test and recognition test. Next, previous stimuli were shown again to ask participants to evaluate the influencer on their credibility and likeability. After that, questions regarding attitude towards the ad/product/brand, feminist attitude, purchase intention, and intention to engage in social

media engaging behavior were given. Finally, after demographic questions, participants were debriefed about the experimental conditions.

Measure

Emotional valence and arousal

As the level of activation in the motivational systems influences affective responding or emotional experience of pleasantness and arousal (Bolls et al., 2001), appetitive motivational activation is often measured by positive emotion and high arousal (Krcmar et al., 2015). This study employs emotional response to measure the level of appetitive activation. Participants rated their emotional reactions to the news messages in terms of valence and arousal using nine-point pictorial scales (SAM), (Lang, 1980). Both scales consisted of human figures expressing different states of emotional arousal. The 'appetitive activation' was computed as $\sqrt{}$(emotional valence* arousal), to represent the overall emotional response for data analysis.

Influencer Evaluation Evaluation of the influencer was measured with three different sub scales: credibility (trustworthiness and expertise) and likeability, then the mean score of the scales was computed and used as 'influencer evaluation' for data analysis.

Influencer credibility was assessed by using the trustworthiness and expertise subscales of the credibility scale by Ohanian (1990). Participants rated the endorser's trustworthiness on five 7-point semantic differential scales: undependable – dependable, dishonest –honest, unreliable – reliable, insincere – sincere, and untrustworthy – trustworthy. Expertise was also measured with five 7-point semantic differential scales: not an expert – expert, inexperienced – experienced, unknowledgeable – knowledgeable, unqualified – qualified, and unskilled – skilled.

Likeability of influencer was measured using three items of Dimofte et al.'s (2003) scale for attitude toward the spokesperson used in the De Veirman et al. research (2017) to

measure likeability. Likeability was measured with three 7-point semantic differential scales: cold – warm, unlikeable – likeable, unfriendly – friendly.

Attitudes toward the advertisement and brand Attitudes toward the ad appeal, product and brand were assessed using a scale from Spears and Singh (2004) article. Each were rated with five items on 7-point semantic differential scales: unappealing – appealing, bad – good, unpleasant – pleasant, unfavorable – favorable, and unlikable – likable.

Intention to engage in social media engaging behavior Intention to engage in like, share, commenting behavior in social media was measured with viral behavioral intentions measures used to measure social media engaging behavior in Facebook (Alhabash et al., 2013). Participants indicated their agreement/disagreement with five statements about whether the ad is worth sharing with others, whether they would recommend it to others, like it, share it, and comment on it on Instagram, rated on 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Purchase intention Purchase intention (modified Purchase Intention, Baker & Churchill, 1977) was measured with one item asking 'The next time you are looking to purchase a vitamin/health supplement, how likely are you to purchase this product?', rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely).

Memory tests

Free recall test. Recall of the brands advertised was operationalized as retrieval, measured through free recall (Samson, 2016). Participants were instructed to list two brands they remembered from the ads viewed.

Recognition test. Recognition of the ads was operationalized as encoding, measured through recognition tests. The ad recognition test consisted of four images presented in random order, presented with a set of three images with similar visual properties with the actual stimulus (see Figure 3). Participants were asked to choose the exact ones they have

seen among the others. For the brand recognition test, in total of six brand names were given

and participants were instructed to pick two that they think they have seen in the previous ad

post. The memory tests were always conducted in the order of Recall test to Recognition test

to correctly measure recall without priming the participants with the multiple-choice options.

Figure 3

Ad recognition test – non-sexualized images

Ad recognition test – sexualized images

4

RESULTS

Data Analysis

This study used SPSS 25.0 for Mac. The significance level $p<.05$ was used as the basis for deciding the significance for all tests for hypothesis conducted. First, a paired-sample t-test was adopted to investigate the effects of sexualized advertising on the dependent variables, answering H1, H2, and exploring RQ1. Second, Chi-squared test was used to test revealing the relationship between sexualized ad appeal and memory to add understanding to RQ1. In addition, logistic regression and linear regression were conducted to see the effects of evaluation of influencer and appetitive activation on memory, attitude, and behavioral intentions (H3, H4, RQ2). In order to find out the interaction effect of appetitive activation and evaluation of influencers on behavioral intention (RQ3), hierarchical regression was used.

Sample Characteristics

A total of two hundred and forty-seven undergraduate and graduate students participated in this research in exchange for course research credit. The majority of participants were female (n=177) and most of them were college students (n=170), the mean age was 20. The ethnicity of most participants (n=173) was Caucasian or white, followed by Asian (n=34) and African American (n=14). Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1
Demographic profiles of participants(continued)

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	68	27%

Female	177	70.20%
Other	1	0.40%
Prefer not to answer	1	0.40%
Age		
18	3	1.20%
19	41	16.30%
20	72	28.60%
21	85	33.70%
22	34	13.50%
23	7	2.80%
24	1	0.40%
25	4	1.60%
Education		
Highschool graduate	45	17.90%
Some college	170	67.50%
2 years degree	11	4.40%
4 years degree	21	8.30%
Ethnicity		
African American	14	5.60%
Asian	34	13.50%
Hispanic	11	4.40%
White	173	68.70%
Middle Eastern	3	1.20%
Mixed	11	4.40%
Other	1	0.40%
Total	**247**	**100%**

Manipulation Check

Three semantic scales: The influencer depicted in the post is (1) dressed – full nudity (2) In a neutral pose – sexual pose (3) with closed or smiling mouth – sensual mouth, and three questions using 7-point Likert scale(1:strongly disagree- 7:strongly agree): In the post, influencers' (1) Breast/Chest (2) Genital (3) Buttocks is emphasized were used to check the manipulation of the sexualized image. Paired-samples t-test was used to test the difference between two stimuli. There was a significant difference in the degree of sexualization between the sexualized (M=2.93, SD=0.74) and the non-sexualized (M=1.28, SD=0.49) image of influencers, so the manipulation was done properly.

Reliability of the Measure

A series of reliability analyses were run to test the reliability coefficients of the

influencer evaluation scale, attitude scale, and behavioral intention scale (see Table 2).

For the evaluation of the influencers scale, the results of Cronbach's alpha for each

subscales for the evaluation were: Trustworthiness: α=.943; Expertise: α=.919; Likeability:

α=.941. For the attitude scale, the Cronbach's alpha was .961 for the ad attitude, .969 for

brand attitude. The reliability coefficient for the intention to engage in social media engaging

behavior was α=.910, and the intention to purchase was α=.961. The reliability analysis

showed that the internal consistency of all the above scales was acceptable.

Table 2
Scale reliabilities

Variables	Cronbach's alpha	N
Evaluation of influencer		
Trustworthiness	0.943	5
Expertise	0.919	5
Likeability	0.941	3
Attitude		
Ad attitude	0.961	4
Brand attitude	0.969	4
Behavioral intention		
Social media engagement	0.910	5
Purchase intention	0.961	3

Test of Hypothesis

Effects of sexualized advertising on cognitive path

Paired-samples t-test was utilized to examine the effects of sexualized images of

influencers on the evaluation of the influencers and attitude towards the ad and the brand

(results are shown in Table 3). There was a significant difference among the evaluation of the

influencer in the sponsored ad based on the type of the ad. The influencer in sexualized

ad(M=3.99, SD=1.02) was significantly evaluated more negatively than the influencer in

non-sexualized ad (M=4.26, SD=1.08); t=3.98, *p*<.001. Thus, **H1 was supported**. The effect

of sexualized advertising was divergent on attitudes. The attitude towards sexualized ad (M=3.76, SD=1.42) was significantly more negative than the attitude towards the non-sexualized ad (M=4.18, SD=1.51); t=3.21, p=<.001. Thus, **H2a was supported**. On the other hand, there was no significant difference between the attitude towards the brands in the sexualized ad (M=3.31, SD=1.39) and non-sexualized ad (M=3.53, SD=1.52); t=1.69, p=0.09, leaving **H2b not supported.**

Table 3
Paired-sample t-test on effects of sexualized advertising

DV	Group	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Evaluation	Non-sexualized	247	4.36	1.08	3.988***	<.001
	Sexualized	247	3.99	1.02		
Ad Attitude	Non-sexualized	247	4.18	1.51	3.21**	0.001
	Sexualized	247	3.76	1.42		
Brand Attitude	Non-sexualized	247	3.53	1.52	1.69	0.092
	Sexualized	247	3.31	1.39		

***p<.001; **p<.01*p<.05

Effects of influencer evaluation on attitude and behavioral intention

In order to examine the effect of influencer evaluation on attitude towards the ad and the brand, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted (see Table 4). Positive evaluation of the influencer was related to a more positive attitude towards both advertising posts and advertised brand (Ad: F=352.597, p=<.001; Brand: F=134.004, p=<.001). The regression model was able to account for 41.7% (R^2=.417) of the variance in influencer evaluation to ad attitude, and 21.4% (R^2=.214) to brand attitude. **H3 was fully supported.**

A separate set of simple linear regression analysis was conducted to investigate the effect of influencer evaluation on behavioral intentions; intention to engage in social media engaging behavior and intention to purchase. Positive evaluation towards the influencer was related to a stronger intention to engage in social media engaging behavior and make a purchase (Social media engagement: F=75.408, p=<.001; Purchase intention: F=54.448,

p=<.001). The regression model was able to explain 13.3% (R^2=.133) of the variance in

evaluation of influencer to intention to engage in social media engaging behavior and 10%

(R^2=.100) to purchase intention. Thus, **H4 was supported.**

Table 4
Regression analysis on effects of evaluation on attitude and behavioral intention

DV	IV	B	S.E.	β	t	p
Ad Attitude	(constant)	0.217	0.206		1.05	0.294
	Evaluation	0.899	0.048	0.646	18.778***	<0.001
	F=352.597(p=<.001), R^2=.417, D-W=2.045					
Brand Attitude	(constant)	0.771	0.236		3.266***	0.001
	Evaluation	0.634	0.055	0.463	11.576***	<0.001
	F=134.004(p=<.001), R^2=.214, D-W= 2.046					
Social media Engagement	(constant)	0.401	0.196		2.051*	0.041
	Evaluation	0.394	0.045	0.365	8.684***	<0.001
	F=75.408(p=<.001), R^2=.133, D-W=1.646					
Purchase intention	(constant)	0.662	0.165		4.007***	<0.001
	Evaluation	0.283	0.038	0.316	7.379***	<0.001
	F=54.448(p=<.001), R^2=.100, D-W=1.716					

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05

Exploring Research Questions

Effects of sexualized advertising on motivational activation

In order to explore the effects of sexualized advertising on motivational activation

(RQ1), paired-samples t-test was utilized to examine effects of sexualized images of

influencers on motivational activation that is indicated by a positive emotional response.

(results are shown in Table 5). There was no significant difference between appetitive

activation from the sexualized (M=2.45, SD=0.70) and non-sexualized ad (M=2.41,

SD=0.66);t=-.06, p=0.56).

Chi-square test was used to investigate the effects of sexualized images of

influencers on brand memory. There was a significant relationship between the type of the ad

(sexualized vs non-sexualized) and successful recall of the brand name (see Table 6). Unlike

predicted, the brand in the non-sexualized ad was more likely to be recalled correctly than

that of sexualized ad X^2(1, N=494) =9.428, p=.002. When the advertisement uses a

sexualized image of an influencer, only 96 (38.9%) people has successfully recalled the brand

name, while 130 (52.6%) people remembered the brand name correctly when presented with

a non-sexualized advertisement. The result was the opposite of what LC4MP predicted.

There was no significant relationship found between the type of the ad and brand recognition.

Table 5

Paired-sample t-test on effects of sexualized advertising on appetitive activation

DV	Group	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Appetitive Activation	Non-sexualized	247	2.41	0.66	-0.583	0.56
	Sexualized	247	2.45	0.70		

Table 6

Chi-square test on effects of sexualized advertising on brand memory

		sexualization		All	x^2	p
		nonsexual	sexual			
Brand recall	successful	130(52.6%)	96(38.9%)	226(45.7%)	9.428**	0.002
	failed	117(47.4%)	151(61.1%)	268(54.3%)		
All		247(100%)	247(100%)	494(100%)		
Brand recognition	successful	195(78.9%)	206(83.4%)	401(81.2%)	1.603	0.206
	failed	52(21.1%)	41(16.6%)	93(18.8%)		
All		247(100%)	247(100%)	494(100%)		

***p<.001; **p<.01*p<.05

Effects appetitive activation on attitude and behavioral intention

How the different degree of emotional response affects attitude and the behavioral

intention was analyzed using linear regression analysis, in order to explore RQ2 (see Table

7). Simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between

appetitive activation and attitude towards the ad and the advertised brand (see Table 7). It

turned out that a positive emotional response was associated with a more positive attitude

towards the ad (F=29.615, p=<.001) and the advertised brand (F=17.214, p=<.001).

A separate set of simple linear regression analysis was used to see the effect of appetitive activation on behavioral intention (see Table 7). The results showed that positive emotional response positively influenced intention to engage in social media engagement behavior (F=64.991, p=<.00) and purchase intention (F=35.829, p=<.001). The regression model was able to explain 11.7% (R^2=.117) of the variance in the evaluation of influencer to intention to engage in social media engaging behavior and 6.8% (R^2=.068) to purchase intention.

Table 7
regression analysis on effects of appetitive activation on attitude and behavioral intention

DV	IV	B	S.E.	β	t	p
Ad Attitude	(constant)	2.702	0.242		11.165	<.001
	AA[1]	0.522	0.096	0.238	5.442**	<.001
	F=29.615(p=<.001), R^2=.057, D-W= 1.872					
Brand Attitude	(constant)	2.454	0.241		10.174	<.001
	AA	0.397	0.096	0.184	4.149**	<.001
	F=17.214(p=<.001), R^2=.034, D-W=1.989					
Social media Engagement	(constant)	0.634	0.182		3.483	<.001
	AA	0.582	0.072	0.342	8.062**	<.001
	F=64.991(p=<.001), R^2=.117, D-W=1.693					
Purchase intention	(constant)	0.95	0.155		6.13	<.001
	AA	0.368	0.061	0.261	5.986**	<.001
	F=35.829(p=<.001), R^2=.068, D-W=1.737					

[1]AA: Appetitive Activation
***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05

Interaction effect of evaluation and emotional response

Hierarchical regression analysis was selected to determine if there is an interactive effect of emotional response and cognitive evaluation of the influencer on the behavioral intention, in an attempt to answer RQ3 (see Table 8,9). A three-stage linear hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. The first stage examined the influence of the evaluation of influencers on behavioral intention and in the second stage, the influence of appetitive activation was added. Then, in the third stage, the interaction of evaluation and emotional response was added. To avoid multicollinearity, both appetitive activation and evaluation

were standardized before being put into the analysis. The result is shown in table 8. A hierarchical regression model was significant for the intention for social media engagement was significant over all three levels (see Table 8), not for the purchase intention. Evaluation of the influencer in the ad and appetitive activation from the ad interactively affects the intention to engage in a social media engaging behavior. However, there was no interactive effect of two variables on purchase intention (see Table 9).

Table 8
Hierarchical regression on interaction effect of evaluation and appetitive activation on Engagement

stage	variable	B	S.E.	β	t	p	F	R^2 $(_{adj}R^2)$
1	(Constant)	2.047	0.048		42.319***	<.001	75.408***	.133 (.131)
	Evaluation	0.421	0.048	0.365	8.684***	<.001		
2	(Constant)	2.047	0.046		44.419***	<.001	67.054***	.215 (.211)
	Evaluation	0.366	0.047	0.317	7.821***	<.001		
	AA[1]	0.334	0.047	0.29	7.144***	<.001		
3	(Constant)	2.031	0.046		43.684**	<.001	46.700***	.222 (.218)
	Evaluation	0.36	0.047	0.312	7.707***	<.001		
	AA	0.319	0.047	0.276	6.768***	<.001		
	Eval*AA	0.1	0.045	0.09	2.218*	0.027		

[1]AA: Appetitive Activation
DV: intention for social media engagement
***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05

Table 9
Hierarchical regression on interaction effect of evaluation and appetitive activation on Purchase intention (continued)

stage	variable	B	S.E.	β	t	p	F	R^2 $(_{adj}R^2)$
1	(Constant)	1.843	0.041		45.117***	<0.001	54.448***	.100 (.098)
	Evaluation	0.302	0.041	0.316	7.379***	<0.001		
2	(Constant)	1.843	0.04		46.236***	<0.001	41.45***	.144 (.141)
	Evaluation	0.268	0.04	0.281	6.629***	<0.001		
	AA[1]	0.205	0.04	0.215	5.071***	<0.001		

	(Constant)	1.844	0.04		45.629***	<0.001		
3	Evaluation	0.268	0.041	0.281	6.618***	<0.001	27.583***	.144 (.139)
	AA	0.206	0.041	0.215	5.03***	<0.001		
	Eval*AA	-0.005	0.039	-0.005	-0.127	0.899		

[1]AA: Appetitive Activation
DV: Purchase intention
***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05

5

DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

This study aims to investigate the effect of sexualized images of influencers on the effectiveness of advertising regarding both cognitive and motivational processing. Using the LC4MP framework, this thesis explores how the combined work of instinctive, immediate response evoked by motivationally relative stimuli and upper cognitive process that constantly evaluates and controls affects sexualized advertising effectiveness.

The research questions and hypotheses investigated and assessed the effects of sexualized advertising on motivational activation, influencer evaluation, attitude, memory. Sexualization of the influencer in the advertising was found to be negatively affecting the evaluation of the influencer, which influences attitude and behavioral intention. There was no significant effect of sexualization on appetitive motivational activation and memory. Interaction effect of evaluation of the influencer and appetitive activation on behavioral intention was found in sub-level analysis.

Sexualization on the evaluation of the influencer and ad attitude

Results indicated that the sexualization of the influencer in a sponsored ad has a significantly negative influence on the evaluation of the influencer. This is consistent with the previous researches on the evaluation of sexualized presentation of females on social media that people found sexually presented females to be less competent and less intelligent (Daniels, 2012). It could be implied that influencers on Instagram are evaluated with not much different eyes than general users. As influencers are "regular people" who earned

influences on their platforms, they are more likely to be seen as normal people than celebrities (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Also, the attitude towards the sexualized advertising post was significantly more negative than the attitude towards the non-sexualized ad. Although previous research on sexualized advertising often have found that sexualization often affects attitude towards the advertisement positively (Severn et al., 1990; Lynn, 1995; Reichert et al., 2001), there has been a disagreement about the effects of sexualized appeals on attitudes towards ads. Attitude towards the sexualized ad has been shown to be influenced by multiple factors such as genders (Simpson et al., 1996), feminist attitude (Choi et al., 2016), congruency with the product (Sherman & Quester, 2005; Chang & Tseng, 2013). In this case, it can be supposed that the evaluation of the influencer worked as the other factors did – it affected the way sexualized appeals affect people's attitude towards the ad. That being said, negative evaluation of the influencer who was sexually presenting herself has affected the sexualized ad as a whole to be perceived more negatively.

Sexualization on motivational activation

Results found no significant difference in the level of appetitive motivational activation between sexual and non-sexual ads, which was indicated by the difference in positive emotion and arousal. There could be a number of explanations for this finding.

First, there is a possibility that the sexualized stimulus was not sexy enough to bring out the primitive, innate motivational activation. Previous studies on motivational activation of sexualized media used professional ads, magazine ads for perfume, luxury goods, or even pornography (Latour, 1990; Jeong & Hwang, 2005). Although the stimuli of this study went through a pretest, most of the samples given in the pretest in the first place were socially acceptable, healthy-sexual photos because they were the actual photos uploaded by real-life people themselves. The degree of sexualization in this study, compared to previous

researches that have found the appetitive activation, could have been not strong enough.

Second, the use of self-report measures could have hindered the results from representing the true, immediate, primitive activation of the motivational system. Although the measures for the emotional response were given right after the presentation of the stimulus, participants were required to spend at least 15 seconds to look at the stimulus. That being said, the emotional response was not recorded in real-time, it was given at least 15 seconds later. That 15 seconds could have given the participants more than enough time to the cognitive processing system that can intervene with the immediate, instinctive response.

In addition, appetitive activation had no significant influence on memory but shown a significantly positive influence on the ad and brand attitude and behavioral intention. This finding is not only contradictory to the predictions of LC4MP, which proposed the positive effect of sex appeals on memory, but also seems somewhat similar to the results of cognitive processing, which in this research, the evaluation of the influencers. This result could also be an implication that the self-reported emotion was influenced by the higher cognitive process, rather than directly reflecting motivational activation. To sum up, although the appetitive activation did not help encoding, storing, nor retrieving the memory like LC4MP has suggested, it could be an addition to the overall ad performance by contributing to a more positive attitude and higher behavioral intention.

Also, the results of memory tests were confounding with the assumptions of LC4MP, as there was no significant difference in brand recognition between sexualized ads and neutral ads. Brand recall, on the other hand, has shown a significant difference among the two kinds of ads, but the direction was the opposite from the predictions of LC4MP; the non-sexualized ad was better recalled than the sexualized ad. There could be multiple explanations to add understanding to the given result.

First, it could be because of the generally low memory rate of the brands. In fact, more than 50% (N=131, 53%) have failed to remember the exact brand name, and almost 20% (N=44, 18%) could not select the correct brand name among the given examples. That being said, there is a high possibility of participants just not giving enough attention to the brand information of the advertising. Although the brand information has appeared in three different places in the advertising post (a. tagged, b. hashtag, c. embedded in the image), on Instagram, the visual-oriented, photo-focused platform (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), participants were more likely to focus on the visuals, not on the information in it.

Another possibility is the distracting effect of the sexualized stimulus. There is a stream of research that has found a significant brand memory impairment (e.g. Bushman, 2007; Reichert & Alvaro, 2001). Due to the attention-grabbing nature of the images with sexual appeals, increased attention and allocation of cognitive resources to the sexual content itself often come at the expense of the brand information that is presented in the ad (Alexander & Judd, 1978; Reichert & Alvaro, 2001). This could be the explanation for the reason why the brand name in the non-sexualized ad was better recalled from the memory than that of the sexualized ad. As people were too busy looking at and processing the sexualized advertising image itself, they missed the more important detail – the actual information of the advertised brand.

Influencer evaluation on attitude and behavioral intention

Results showed that positive evaluation of the influencer was related to a more positive attitude towards both advertising posts and advertised brands. This result is consistent with previous studies that delved into the effects of influencer evaluations such as credibility, likeability on the effectiveness of influencer advertisings. Evaluation of the influencer also significantly influenced intention to engage in social media engaging behavior and purchase behavior. More positive evaluation of influencer leads to higher intention to

like, share, and comment on the ad post, and higher intention to purchase the advertised product. Considering the fact that sexualized appeals negatively affect the influencer evaluation, there is a possibility of the sexualization of the influencer in an ad negatively affecting behavioral intention regarding the ad in a long term.

Interaction effect of influencer evaluation and appetitive activation

Results found that there was a significant interaction effect of influencer evaluation and appetitive activation on intention to engage in social media engagement behavior. This could indicate what Lee and Lang (2009) said about our minds working on novel stimuli. When stimulation is given, motivational activation happens immediately and unconsciously but it is constantly affected by the higher-order cognitive process. The initial activation and cognition that follow work together, inhibiting, but not entirely eliminating each other (Lee & Lang, 2009). Applying the point of view to this study, instant motivational activation caused by a novel stimulus- influencer advertising post- interacts with the higher-order cognition that constantly evaluates the influencer and forms attitude. The result showed that the collaborative work affected one of the end goals of social media marketing; increased intention to share, like, comment on the post.

Gender effects

The effect of gender is one of the most frequently mentioned moderators when it comes to the effect of sexualization on advertising (Jeong & Hwang, 2005). As a post-hoc analysis, the gender difference in the evaluation of influencer, motivational activation, attitude, and behavioral intention was analyzed using independent t-test. Unlike previous researches that found generally more positive attitudes of males towards nudity, pornography, and sexual openness (Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Wright, 2013) compared to those of females, this study has found no significant difference between genders on brand and ad attitude, nor on behavioral intentions. The only dependent variable that showed a significant difference was

emotional valence. Males have shown significantly more positive emotion on the sexualized ad, and more negative emotion on the non-sexualized ad than females. This result could be due to the smaller sample size and an imbalanced number of female and male participants.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Study

Although this thesis found the effects of sexualized advertising on the evaluation of influencer, motivational activation, attitude towards ad and brand, and behavioral intention, it is not without limitations.

First of all, this study used a student sample from the UGA department of journalism and mass communication only. Compared to the target population, this sample is generally more educated, and more likely to be more knowledgeable when it comes to digital media and advertising. In addition, as the majority of the students in the department are female, the gender composition is imbalanced. Thus, the findings of this study have limitations when it comes to generalization to a larger population. However, considering the fact that a large portion (69%) of Instagram users are between 18-29 years old, and most of the Instagram influencer advertisings are targeted toward the same age group (Clement, 2019), using student samples could provide a valid enough representation of how influencer marketing works on the targeted population. Further study could include more diverse participants and bigger sample size to ensure generalizability.

Secondly, as this study employed a within-subject design, participants were shown with the two different ad posts in a row. Seeing two similar-but-different in the degree of sexualization could have given hints of the experimental condition that should have been hidden from the participants. Given the fact that the participants were all students in their undergraduates, who are often familiar with experimental procedures, the within-subject design could have hindered the clearer experimental process. Future research could implement a between-subject design with a larger sample size to yield more accurate results.

The use of fictitious influencers also came with limitations along with its benefits. This study chose to use fictitious influencers with non-distinctive features as stimuli. In spite of the benefit of canceling out possible confounding effects from using a real influencer such as previous experience, the reputation of the influencer the findings of the present study might be limited by the use of fictitious influencers. By using fictitious influencers, this study could not take account of the relational aspect of influencers and followers. Influencers are unique in a way that they create personal, intimate relationships with followers (Wen, 2017). The pseudo-relationship called para-social relationships between influencers and the followers that positively affect the followers' purchase and electronic word-of-mouth intentions (Hwang & Zhang, 2018) was not taken into account in the current study. Future studies could benefit from taking the relational aspect of the influencer into consideration and see how that affects the process of evaluating, responding to the sexualized influencer ads, by using real-life influencers instead of fictitious influencers.

In addition, this study used self-report measures to assess motivational activations. However, as the motivational activation happens immediately with the presence of stimuli, employing real-time measures to assess motivational activation would be more appropriate. LC4MP researches often utilize psychophysiological methods that can record real-time emotional reactions, and future research should benefit from that approach. There is a strong possibility that the insignificant effects of sexualized ads on appetitive activation happened due to the unsuitable measurement to measure the activation which should be measured through more non-intrusive real-time measures such as psychophysiological measures. So, this is a good finding in terms of methodology with an open-ended question – future study needs to examine it psychophysiologically to confirm the results. Also, the limited effect on brand memory could benefit from further research using different measures. Previous research on sexualized advertising has pointed out the distracting effect of a sexual image

that distracts attention and diminishes ad and brand memory. As recall and recognition test was the only indicator that implies attention, further studies should employ various methods such as eye-tracking that can assess attention.

This study only used one image for each condition, and it was hard to tell if it was sexualized enough for motivational activation. Although the degree of sexualization between the two stimuli was significantly different in this study, using more images with more variations of the level of sexualization would help better understand the effects of sexualized appeals on influencer advertising effectiveness.

6

CONCLUSION

This is one of the first studies to investigate the effect of sexualized images of influencers on influencer ads. The results indicated that the sexualization of influencers in a sponsored advertising post does not help the ad to be more effective. Sexualized influencer posts will not only evoke negative evaluation towards the person but also a negative attitude towards the ad itself. Even instinctive, motivational benefits of sexual appeals are shown to be minimal or non-existent based on this study.

In the world of influencers, locating the right influencer is a key task for practitioners. Marketers should be aware of the fact that the like counts and follower counts are often not the only things that matter. This study could benefit practitioners as they plan the influencer campaigns and locate the influencers but also the influencers or 'wannabe' influencers of what kind of influence, the attention they want to garner, and what to be aware of.

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