

Sex appeals and advertising in the context of multicultural teaching

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Context

Sex appeals, which include partial nudity, sexual behaviours, pin-up girls and muscular men, are typically used (and abused) to advertise products, causing both cognitive and conative responses such as brand recall and behavioural intention respectively (Grazer and Kessling, 2011). This boosts sales even where there is no direct link between the product/service and sexuality (Willy et al., 2014). However, nudity and sexual images in advertising also offend consumers, since these are processed by the filters of religiosity, culture and gender (Putrevu and Swimberghek, 2013) which generate different responses to sex role portrayals, company image and purchase intentions (Willy et al., 2014).



As a marketing lecturer (teaching both UG and PG level units on brand management and event management), I face the challenge of teaching the role of sex appeals in advertising, trying both to protect my teaching autonomy and freedom as well as to respect students' sensitivities and cultural backgrounds in the context of diverse students groups. The images depicted above are illustrative of advertising which easily offends students, especially those with a Muslim background.

What we did

At the beginning of my career I held that universities are institutions where people from all over the world are free to attend and above all, are adults and that unit content need not be adapted to the social, religious and economic status of students. I considered that avoiding specific content as a form of (auto) censure. I considered that if sexual appeals were banned from marketing courses, it was the equivalent of Freud being forbidden in philosophy courses! However I became aware that some students appeared embarrassed and uncomfortable. This created in me an anxiety and awkwardness similar to that reported by Buston (2001) in a study of Scottish tutors dealing with sex education.

After several years of teaching experience in various European countries, I changed my approach. Informed by the constructivist framework, where learning is an active, constructive process, I now approach students as a “community of practices” (Lave and Wenger, 1998), seeing them as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 2006: 1). Following the constructive alignment pedagogical framework (Biggs, 2003), I changed my practice. First, I have reduced the sexual content to the minimum by avoiding the use of explicit images, videos and pictures in class. Second, I give students directions on where to find more sources on the topic for them to view in their own time. Third, I create conditions for a positive and relaxed debate, where the diversity represented by the student group became an opportunity to compare different cultural perspectives and experiences rather than acting as a barrier.

What was the impact?

Instead of embarrassment and awkwardness, students are curious, attentive and feel more comfortable in learning about how sex appeals differ across different countries. Following the direction traced by Kumar (2008), I act at the content, pedagogical and managerial levels, emphasising the links between theories and practices, academia and commercial companies.

What I learnt?

That it is important to have a deep understanding of the class in terms of cultural and background heterogeneity; to follow a clear pedagogical approach; to develop best practices that include students as much as possible in the teaching process; and to cultivate the ability to listen to them and their views.

Potential for adaptation for other units:

1. Where unit content may be culturally sensitive, assign it to student for independent reading.
2. Harness the learning opportunity created by the cultural diversity of the student group by encouraging students to discuss their distinct perspectives and experiences on a subject.

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Cre8: Valuing and acknowledging the diversity of students (P2); Challenging learning (R3); Provides students with global perspectives (C6)

Date: 16 February 2015. Details correct at the time of publication.