Abstract

Sexual stimuli in advertising often evoke an emotional state able to shape both attitude towards the advertisement and towards the brands that interact in fostering consumers’ purchase intention. These relationships can be influenced by the interaction between the gender of the respondent and the gender of the model (opposite sex effect).

The present study focuses on the interaction between brand and advertising attitude and their conjoint effect on purchase intention in the light of the opposite sex effect. Results show that such effect influences the attitude towards the advertisement while it does not emerges whit reference to attitude towards the brand and purchase intention.

Implications for advertising and brand management are discussed.

Keywords: sexual stimuli, opposite sex effect, print advertising, attitude towards the brand, attitude towards the advertisement, purchase intention.

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Introduction

The increasing use of sexual stimuli in advertising might lead one to believe that the saying “sex sells” is somewhat reliable. These stimuli have become part both of our day-to-day experience and of our cultural and
stylistic model through a slow but unrelenting process of the sexualisation of products and services. Often, and explicitly, creative advertising strategies have combined images with sexual content to new or already existing products, to stimulate attention, interest and emotions of consumers to induce them to the purchase. This is not a recent process. Advertising has been, since its beginning, sexually allusive and it has always adopted images related to nudity.

In early 1870, the Pearl Tobacco Company publicized its products with a poster in which was depicted a naked woman on tiptoes touching the waves on the background of a light cloud of smoke. In the same period, the W. Duke & Son, as other tobacco manufacturers, inserted in their packages some cards representing actresses that were more or less undressed. In the same period, the end of 19th century, a gorgeous naked woman floating among the stars hanging on the handlebars of a bicycle, was the advertising proposal of Gladiator Bicycles. At that time, bicycles were associated with the concepts of speed, beauty and freedom.

Since then, the number of brands that have made explicit use of sexual content with naked or half-naked bodies is extremely high. Kalvin Klein, Tom Ford and Victoria’s Secret, Levi’s, Lee, Sisley are just some of the brands that have supported such images with increasingly explicit sexual innuendo in jeans, underwear and fragrances. There are, in this endless list, also brands and product categories that do not have much affinity with bodies and sex. It is easy to recall the long series of advertisement of Budweiser beer or Martini among alcoholic drinks or the allusive advertisements by Burger King and Arby’s in the fast food sector.

Nowadays images related with male or female bodies, both naked and scantily dressed, sex appeal, sexuality or double senses are broadly used for a great variety of products categories such as personal care, perfume, alcohol, apparel and cars. Often such images appears also in product advertisings that have few or no association with sensuality as, for example, lawn mower, sealing silicone, mechanical spare parts, etc.

As suggested by Amyx and Amyx (2011) this growth could be explained by the Weber’s law according to which the intensity of any particular stimulus (e.g. sexual stimulus in advertising) must be augmented in order to let the receiver of the stimulus be able to notice the differences.

However, on one side the use of sex in advertising is widely accepted, even if it occasionally feed discussions about morality, ethics or decency, while on the other side, empirical studies are still far from a coherent body of results that support it as a valid advertising tool.

Prior research demonstrate that sex succeeds in capturing attention but it also distracts attention from the object of the advertising campaign that is a brand or a product. With a different perspective, the same images can
affect attitudes towards the advertisement or the brand and shake – with
different strength – positive and negative emotions of men and women.

Although the more or less legitimate use of sexual stimuli in advertising
is eye catching, it would be also of interest having a better understanding
of the evaluative reactions that the two main segments, men and women,
have about it.

Previous research has supported the interaction effect between the sex
of the viewer and the sex of the model, even if the majority of the cases the
sexy model was a woman. These results held that such interaction
influences the response of the viewer of the ad in terms of purchase
intention. The present work is built upon the hypothesis of the opposite sex
effect, but instead of examining individual evaluations of sex images, it try
to shed light on the relationship among attitude towards the advertisement,
attitude towards the brand and purchase intention.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section
reviews the relevant literature and proposes the research hypotheses, while
the “Method” section presents the experimental design employed. The
subsequent sections present numerical results and discussion, highlighting
theoretical and managerial implications, together with future research
directions.

1. Theoretical framework

The studies on the role of sex in advertising are still far to be
conclusive. Some line of research, for example, show that the use of sexual
stimuli in advertising causes negative consumer feedback (Gould, 1994;
LaTour and Henthorne, 1994) because it shifts their attention from brand
names to different arguments related to concern (Blair et al., 2006), fear,
decency or, more generally, immorality (Pollay, 2000). In other works, on
the contrary, the use of sexual stimuli, leveraging more instinctive
reactions of consumers, produces better outcomes than neutral situations
where the subject of sexuality does not appear (Dahl, Sengupta and Vohs,
2009; Severn, Belch and Belch, 1990).

The information processing approach, on one side, and the analysis of
the hierarchy of the effects on the other, underlie these results.

The first approach deals with the assumption that consumers process
stimuli of the advertising through a series of basic cognitive processes. It
concerns the ways in which individual focuses attention on important
elements of the message: whether it originates vivid memories, whether it
improves the recognisability of some immaterial items (brand), and
whether it creates awareness. In this case, the research hypothesis deals
with the ways in which sexual content can alter these cognitive processes
by reducing or amplifying the effectiveness of the content message and, in particular, the level of persuasion the consumer feels (Reichert, 2002; Thiyagarajan, Shanthi and Naresh 2012). The main risk is that the sexual content in advertising, while capturing the consumer’s attention, can distract him from other information that is more substantial and relevant as, for example, those related to the brand (MacInnis, Moorman and Jaworski, 1991; Cui and Yang, 2009).

Doubtless, the use of sexual content in advertising raises the level of attention (Belch et al., 1981; Dudley, 1999; Reichert, Heckler and Jackson, 2001; Reichert, LaTour and Kim, 2007; Lombardot, 2007) and may help to make those messages more interesting and engaging. The ability of consumer to remember and/or recognize different details of the advertisement has been measured, highlighting that the attention is significantly captured by those contents with a sexual feature (Reid and Soley, 1983; Reichert and Alvaro, 2001). However, some studies showed also how the presence of sex-related images reduces the ability to encode and remember brand-related information, confirming the existence of a “distraction effect” (Grazer and Keesling, 1995). The extent of the distraction is likely related to the way the sexual content is bound both to the promoted product and to the text adopted. If sexual information is pointless, that is without an intuitive link with the properties and information of the product, it is very likely that the distraction effect is pronounced (Severn, Belch and Belch, 1990).

The studies conducted in this stream of literature converge on coherent findings. Sexual content promotes specific attention to the advertisement and improves the memory of allusive images. Moreover, they can act as an inhibitor of product/brand coding as it causes the viewer to make use of thoughts and, more generally, of cognitive activities that deal with sexual meanings rather than with the meanings driven by the textual message or by the product/brand (Reichert, 2002).

In the approach that emphasizes the hierarchical analysis of the effects, the relevant issues are the emotions, the attitudes towards both advertisement and brand, and the purchase intention. In this perspective, the attitude is considered as an individual’s psychological tendency according to which positive or negative values are assigned to a specific entity (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993), for example, an object, an organization or a brand. This implies that the attitude is one evaluative state that stands between the stimulus received by the subject and the answer he/she gives to that stimulus (Ajzen, 2001; Fishbien and Ajzen, 1972). The attitude is powered by affect, namely a set of emotional states, feelings and emotions, of varying intensity. The affect is a triggering condition, a threshold of excitement, which is connected to the entity, or to the stimulus, that generated it (Plutchik, 1980). When affect reaches a certain level of
intensity, it is registered as an emotional track, whose characteristic is to be not transient. This gives it the ability to be recalled in future moments reproducing the feelings already tested in the past by the subject. It is just this emotional response, almost automatic, to primarily affect the attitude of the consumer.

Sexy images in advertising are accountable to evoke an emotional state that shall be important in shaping attitudes towards both the advertisement and the advertised brand. Mitchell and Olson (2000) defined attitude towards the brand as an “individual’s internal evaluation of the brand”, while attitude towards the advertisement can be considered as an effective evaluation of the overall advertising stimulus that should be treated distinct from beliefs and brand attitudes (Gardner, 1983; Mitchell and Olson, 2000; Reichert, 2002).

La Tour (1990) demonstrated that when people create positive emotions from images with sexual content included in an advertisement, they tend also to create a positive attitude towards the advertisement. Conversely, if the emotional reaction is negative, then attitude towards the advertisement is negative as well.

Several studies introduced the notion that the attitude of individuals towards the advertisement has a direct effect on purchase intention. As individuals view advertisements on television, in magazines, or through new media, they form favourable or unfavourable feelings towards the advertisement that can influence purchase intention (Muehling and McCann, 1993). Specifically, a positive attitude towards the advertisement tends to produce a stronger motivation to buy the advertised product (e.g. Darley and Lim, 1981; Mitchell and Olson, 2000; Gelb and Pickett, 1983; Cox and Locander, 1987; Severn, Belch and Belch, 1990). Contextually, some scholars found evidence to support that the intention of consumers to buy a product is likely to be influenced by attitude towards the brand (Laroche and Brisoux, 1989; Laroche, Kim and Zhou, 1996). The effect of attitude towards the advertisement and attitude towards the brand on purchase intention was also demonstrated in the field of sexual appeal advertising. Willie et al. (2014) suggested that better attitude towards (a) the advertisement and (b) the brand leads to a higher intention to buy the advertised product.

Between the two main approaches, many different variables have been analysed. Just as an example, the themes related to the type of sexual content in advertising consider the amount and style of apparel shown by model (Reichert, 2003), the sexually provocative actions of the model or between the models (Reichert and Ramirez, 2000), the mix of verbal and visual elements of the message, including sexual symbolism, double entendre and allusive meanings (Trappey 1996; Bello Pitts and Etzel, 1983).
2. Research hypothesis

Even if sexual stimuli in advertising have been broadly analysed by both academician and practitioner, it still generates confounding evidence. There are either pros or cons about the adoption of sex related content and its effect on emotions, feeling, attitudes and purchase intention.

In particular the gender of the sexual advertisement viewer has been studied as variable able to interact in some ways on cognitive, emotional and behavioural response (Sengupta and Dahl, 2008, Reichert et. al. 2007).

Researches on this theme focused, initially in the 70’, on the impact of female models on attention getting and brand recall mainly on male respondents. Later studies evolved in order to include female as respondents and male as model (Lombard 2007). Because off different experimental methodologies, and a not clear definition of nudity, sex appeal or sexuality, results supported both the hypothesis, that is, nudity compromise and enhance brand recall.

After the 80’ a consistent number of researches indicated also that both male and female consider more favourably the opposite sex related imagines placed in advertising (Belch et al. 1981). Results were not always convergent according to the use of product intuitively associated with nudity, such as shower gel, soap, sunbathing cream, underwear or products far from any association with sex related imagines (Richmond and Hartman, 1982; Judd and Alexander, 1983; Severn, Belch and Belch, 1990; Jones, Stanaland and Geld, 1998; Dudley, 1999; Tissier-Desbordes and Manceau, 2002). Nonetheless, researches suggest that both females and males have a better appreciation of opposite sex models in advertising and this reflect also in adv evaluation (Dudley, 1999; Reichert et al., 2001; Severn et al., 1990).

Men show positive attitude towards the advertisement with sexual stimuli while women have negative attitude to explicit content. The spontaneous reaction of men to sex appealing content in advertising produces a more positive attitude compared to women (Baumaister, Cantanese and Vohs, 2001). The reasons can be found in the preference men have for casual and non-involving sex. On the contrary women prefer sex images that evoke a more intimate and relational approach (Sengupta and Dahl, 2008).

Building upon the opposite sex effect, with the aim to investigate the relation among attitude towards the advertisement the following hypotheses are stated:

\[ H1: \text{Advertising the product using a male testimonial has a more positive effect on female consumers’ (a) attitude towards the advertisement and (b) purchase intention than using a female testimonial.} \]

\[ H2: \text{Advertising the product using a female testimonial has a more positive effect on male consumers’ (a) attitude towards the advertisement and (b) purchase intention than using a male testimonial.} \]
Even if the positive evaluation of opposite sex imagines in advertising lead to a positive attitude toward the advertising too, attention should be paid to a direct extension of such evaluations to brand attitude as well. Dudley (1999), for example, referred that consumers’ attitude towards sexual content in advertising has a direct effect on brand attitude and both have an influence in consumers’ intention to purchase the presented brand too.

However, attitude formation toward brand and toward advertising with sex related imagines follow different path.

Brand attitude is the results of an integrated marketing communication process that evolve during time. It involves many different approaches such as product placement, advertising, publicity, sponsorship, events, public relations, digital communication and packaging. A coherent mix feeds different strategies related, for example, with positioning, corporate or product image, product life cycle management. All these elements contribute to create or modify consumer’s brand attitude.

Attitude toward advertising containing sex related imagines follows a different creation path that, according to the cited researches, is deeply rooted in psychophysiological individual response to sexual stimuli, in cultural or social background, and in personal beliefs.

Moreover firms adopt integrated communication strategies to create strong brand attitude that are likely to be stable along the time while specific advertising campaign have to be changed more often in order to maintain consumer attention.

Building upon the opposite sex effect, and according to these premises, the following hypotheses are stated:

**H3:** Advertising the product using a male testimonial has no effect on female consumers’ attitude towards the brand than using a female testimonial.

**H4:** Advertising the product using a female testimonial has no effect on male consumers’ attitude towards the brand than using a male testimonial.

In summary, the opposite sex hypothesis should not be applicable to the attitude towards the brand since it is an evaluative construct that pre-exist the specific advertising exposure. Moreover, it is reasonable to believe that attitude towards the brand that offers a product for a male (female) consumer depends mainly on the image that the branded product reflects on the male (female) image. The hypothesis of the opposite sex effect holds only in relation to the attitude towards the advertisement.

## 3. Method

A $2 \times 2$ between subjects factorial design was used to manipulate the gender of the model in the ad (male vs female) and the gender of the
consumer (male vs female) while also measuring participant intention to buy the advertised product, the attitude towards the brand and the attitude towards the advertisement (dependent variables).

The sponsored product was well known branded perfume for a young target, available in male and female fragrances. A colourful printed advertisement was chosen as experimental stimuli, manipulating the gender of the model. A nude female model lying on the water was used. She appears like a nymph; her body is half immersed in a pool of dark water where several orchids float. The nude is elegant but explicit, so that her B side is fully visible. The image has an ethereal allure, but at the same time is extremely sexy. Conversely, a naked male model was used. He appears sitting on a rock with his head resting on his knees and his arms hugging his legs. Also in this case the nude is explicit but elegant.

Therefore, we defined four experimental conditions: a) a female consumer exposed to the ad featuring the female model and the product with female fragrance; b) a female consumer exposed to the ad featuring the male model and the product with female fragrance; c) a male consumer exposed to the ad featuring the female model and the product with male fragrance; d) a male consumer exposed to the ad featuring the male model and the product with male fragrance.

In total, 400 undergraduate students took part in the study. Participants’ average age was 24.35, ranging from 19 to 30 (SD = 3.12); 50 per cent were female and 50 per cent were male. Subjects reported being regular purchasers of the focal product category and were able to recognize the advertised brand among other perfume brands in an aided recall test.

After agreeing to participate, the female participants were randomly assigned to one of the two female experimental conditions mentioned above. The same appended for male participants.

The study was conducted in a laboratory where each participant received a booklet containing a background questionnaire (with demographic questions), one full-page advertisement and an advertisement evaluation questionnaire including questions on the key dependent variables. Subjects were asked to follow the order of the materials in the booklet. First, they filled out the background questionnaire, then they viewed the advertisement for about 60 seconds, and then filled out the advertisement evaluation questionnaire. Following the completion of the self-administered survey participants underwent to a brief personal interview to verify their stimuli perceptions. The entire process took about fifteen minutes on average.

Participants reported their responses after viewing the advertisement in the subsequent questionnaire containing the dependent variables. The measure for attitude towards the advertisement was adapted from the five-items scale developed by Lee and Mason (1999). Statements were on a 7-
point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree; 7 = completely agree). Reliability indices indicated that the scale was internally consistent (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.86$; AVE = 0.55; CR = 0.86). Attitude towards the brand was assessed through four sets of seven-point bipolar adjectives (Putrevu, 2008): “dislike/like”, “bad/good”, “unfavourable/favourable”, “useless/useful” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.77$; AVE = 0.50; CR = 0.77). The purchase intention was measured using three seven-point scales, each anchored by 1 = “unlikely” and 7 = “likely”. These scales were “How likely is it that you will consider this brand the next time you purchase the product?”, “The next time I consider purchasing the product, I will enquire about this brand” and “The next time I buy the product, I will buy this brand” (adapted from Putrevu, 2008 by Wyllie et al., 2014). An index of purchasing intention was obtained by averaging the scores on each scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.807$; AVE = 0.63; CR = 0.83).

Post-study analysis indicated that the respondents had no familiarity with the advertisement. Meanwhile, they perceived it as a “real advertisement”.

The experimental design made comparisons between male and female consumers, whose involvement towards the focal product category (perfume) might differ. In order to control for the potential biases generated by these differences, consumers’ involvement towards the product category was measured using nine five-point scales, each anchored by 1: “strongly disagree” and 5: “strongly agree” (Higie and Feick, 1989). These scales were “perfume is part of my self-image”, “is boring to me”, “portrays an image of me to others”, “is fun to me”, “is fascinating to me”, “is important to me”, “is exciting to me”, “tells others about me” and “tells me about other people”. An index of product category involvement was calculated by averaging the scores on each scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.883$). The level of involvement was greater for female ($M = 28.17$, $SE = 5.97$) than for male ($M = 27.19$, $SE = 5.41$) consumers. However this difference was not significant ($t_{(398)} = 1.720$, $p = 0.09$).

Data analysis was performed using the IBM SPSS statistical software (release 23.0).

4. Results

To test the hypotheses, a two-way independent factorial ANOVA was carried out with the gender of the consumer and the gender of the model as factors.

The cell means and standard deviations of the variables of interest are shown in Table 1 with reference to attitude towards the brand, attitude towards the advertisement and purchase intention as dependent variables.
The analysis of attitude towards the brand did not reveal the existence of significant differences among conditions (Table 1, Table 2 and Figure 1). These findings support H3 and H4.

As Table 1 shows, the mean score for attitude towards the advertisement was higher for male consumer exposed to the female model (M = 12.07 for male model and M = 14.46 for female model) and vice-versa (M = 15.52 for male model and M = 12.80 for female model). The main effect of the gender of the model and the gender of the consumer on attitude towards the advertisement was not significant (F(1,396) = 1.36, \( p = 0.24 \); F(1,396) = 1.418, \( p = 0.23 \)), as shown in Table 2. Analysis revealed the existence of a significant interaction effect between the two independent variables (F(1,396) = 42.08, \( p < 0.01 \); Figure 2). Specifically, communicating the brand through a model of the opposite gender with respect to the target leads to more favourable responses than communication based on a gender similarity between model and consumer. This results support H1(a) and H2(a).

Table 1 – Cell means and standard deviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender of the Consumer</th>
<th>Gender of the Model</th>
<th>Attitude towards the brand</th>
<th>Attitude towards the advertisement</th>
<th>Purchase intention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16.90</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>12.07</td>
<td>4.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15.88</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>14.46</td>
<td>4.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>16.62</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td>12.08</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17.02</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>15.52</td>
<td>4.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16.96</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>13.80</td>
<td>4.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16.25</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>13.27</td>
<td>4.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 – Main and interaction effects of the gender of the model and gender of the consumer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender of the consumer</th>
<th>Attitude towards the brand</th>
<th>Attitude towards the advertisement</th>
<th>Purchase intention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>df F Sign.</td>
<td>df F Sign.</td>
<td>df F Sign.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender of the consumer</td>
<td>1 0.88 0.35</td>
<td>1 1.42 0.23</td>
<td>1 0.11 0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender of the model</td>
<td>1 2.40 0.12</td>
<td>1 1.36 0.24</td>
<td>1 0.23 0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender of the consumer*</td>
<td>1 0.46 0.49</td>
<td>1 42.08 0.00</td>
<td>1 1.18 0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender of the model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>396</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The mean score for purchase intention was higher for male consumer exposed to the female model (M = 7.71 for male model and M = 7.96 for female model) and vice-versa (M = 8.29 for male model and M = 7.65 for female model) as shown in Table 1. However the results indicate that there is neither a significant main effect of the gender of the model and the gender of the consumer (F(1,396) = 0.23, p = 0.63; F(1,396) = 0.11, p = 0.74; Table 2) nor a significant interaction effect (F(1,396) = 1.18, p = 0.28; Table 2 and Figure 3) on purchase intention. Therefore, H1(b) and H2(b) are not supported.

Figure 1 – Interaction of the gender of the model and gender of the consumer on Attitude towards the brand

Figure 2 – Interaction of the gender of the model and gender of the consumer on Attitude towards the advertisement
Discussion and conclusion

Previous empirical research on explicit sexual stimuli in advertising has yielded both positive and negative effects on consumer behaviour. The present study focuses on the opposite sex effect (the gender of the model compared to the gender of the consumer). Specifically, the aim is not to examine individual evaluation of sex images by gender (gender – different effect), but to shed light on the relation among attitude towards the advertisement, attitude towards the brand and purchase intention by gender of both the advertisement testimonial and the viewer. In a context where advertising literature recommends extreme caution when using explicit sexual appeals, exploring such an issue can help the effective design and selection of sexual stimuli.

In general, the findings show that the opposite sex effect does not emerge with reference to attitude towards the brand and purchase intention. The use of a male testimonial does not generate more favourable responses in female consumers than does the use of female testimonial. Similarly, the use of a female testimonial does not generate more favourable responses in male consumers than does the use of male testimonial.

On the contrary, the opposite sex effect emerges with reference to attitude towards the advertisement. From a female consumer perspective, the attitude towards the advertisement improves when exposed to a male testimonial compared to the testimonial of the same gender. From a male consumer perspective, the response towards sexual appeals conveyed by a
female testimonial is more favourable compared to the use of a male testimonial.

Overall it may be said that the use of a testimonial of the opposite gender of the target audience is appropriate to design effective explicit sexual appeal advertising strategy to positively influence attitude towards the advertisement.

Such a strategy appears even more appropriate considering the attitude towards the advertisement – intention to buy path and the correlation between attitude towards the advertisement and attitude towards the brand.

By contrast, the opposite sex strategy is not appropriate to influence the attitude towards the brand as it is an evaluative construct that, very likely, pre-exist at communication exposure. Brand attitude is a sort of stable preference built upon cognitive and affective beliefs that strengthen during time and evolve with consumer experience. Accordingly firms should manage the brand identity architecture in order to keep it in line with customer’s brand attitude.

Some limitations related to the current study should be acknowledged. The study is focused on a female/male model alone. Further research should investigate the role of a couple of a model. The study used a perfume as the advertised product. Further study should consider other product categories with few, or no association, with sexual recall. The sample composition of the study was limited to the student target, since the brand product has a market positioning right in that segment. Further studies should include male and female respondents of different ages.

References


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Sexual stimuli in advertising: The opposite sex effect


