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## **Research Paper**

**How does sex appeal in advertising affect the ad perception  
of teenagers and young adults?**

### **Bachelor Thesis**

Geneva Business School

Bachelor in Business Administration

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**Date:** 30/06/2021

**Word Count:** 10889 (8180 body only)

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Kopotiienko', written in a cursive style.

Signature:

## **List of Abbreviations**

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AAAS Ad's Average attractiveness score

SMM Social Media Marketing

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## Abstract

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The given research paper explores the impact of sex appeal content on advertising perception of millennials and generation z. It focuses on identifying patterns of answers of the online survey respondents by using an inductive approach with a purpose of identifying perception insights regarding sex appeal in advertising. The results from the research provide valuable information for modern businesses in terms of general attitude of young people towards sex appeal content and the ethical borders of the modern youth regarding advertisement perception. Therefore, research explores the efficiency of provocative content in advertising for businesses overall while targeting young consumers. Such information might be taken into account by companies while planning their marketing strategies and advertising campaigns. The research was taking into account several factors of influence on advertising perception, such as gender, age, religion and origin. The findings of the paper reveal through both literature and primary examples that sex appeal does have an impact on advertising perception. Sex appeal was found to have a positive effect on the consumer's intention to use the product, provided it follows a certain number of conditions, such as the applicability of sexual appeal to the brand image, the illustration of the realistic scenario of using the product and appropriability of sex appeal content to the culture where it is broadcasted. Besides, the paper contains recommendations regarding applicability of sex appeal advertising for zoomers and millennials, since the research revealed considerable differences in their perception.

**Keywords:** [Sex appeal, advertising, millennials, generation z]

## 1. Introduction

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### 1.1 Background. History of sex appeal in media.

The earliest known commercial that contained sex appeal in 1871 according to the World Heritage Encyclopedia and illustrated a naked woman figure printed on the cigarette packaging of Pearl Tobacco brand. Yet, in that time such advertising was more of an exception and illustrated rather a mythological character (the figure was drawn in the clouds) than a realistic woman and therefore did not cause significant ethical concerns from the public. The puritanic ethical structures of the societies of the Victorian age, did not make it possible for sexual advertising to appear in any case, yet the new cultural epoques, such as "jazz twenties", burlesque and the following "pin up 1940s" brought the significant democratization of views that resulted in a switch of fashion trends for women (silk dresses, corsets and shortened length of dresses) and eventually was depicted in the print media (Sivulka, 2003).

The patriarchal structures of the societies made the illustration of men's nudity in media prohibited by generations (Daniel 1989). Yet, the growing tendencies of feminism in the 1960s resulted in eventual equalization of gender advertising since women became equal consumers on the market after the increase in working opportunities for them (Goodroom & Darlympre, 1991). The rise of the number of researches in the field of psychology exploring consumer behavior in the beginning of the 20th century (ex., studies of W.D. Scott regarding psychology of advertising) caused the increase of interest from marketers towards sex appeal as a tool to manipulate the consumers and resulted in the "boom" of sex appeal in media from 1920s to 50s (Sivulka, 2003). Sex appeal images of models were posted in Vogue and Harpers Bazaar magazines, the sellers of beauty products were manipulating on the fear of women to be left by their male partners and were imposing self-care products as necessary elements for staying attractive (ex. palmolive campaign "A skin you love to touch") (Sivulka, 2003). The launch of Playboy magazine in 1953 was the key event in the change of perception of sex appeal in media as with decrease of censorship, it started to openly promote the pleasurable lifestyle with luxurious food, travelling and sex as a "normality" (Sivulka, 2003).

Following the trend on sex appeal, many fashion brands started to use it as a tool for promotion. S. Grayson in her paper in 1970 stated that sex was the main focus of advertising strategy for 49 percent of the fragrances on the market. The iconic Calvin Klein campaign: "Know what comes between me and my calvins? -Nothing" was launched in 1981. Although the campaign was instantly banned in the media, the sale of the company grew by 300% according to the company's annual report. Today, sex appeal is used by brands from various industries (ex. Pepsi, Axe, Diesel, Gucci, and etc.).

The modern consumer is exposed to between 6,000 to 10,000 commercials every day (Carr, 2021). Moreover, a study performed by Tom Reichert, the Head of the Advertising and Public Relations Department at the University of Georgia in 2014 reveals that the amount of commercials containing sex appeal grew from 15% to 27% between 1983 and 2003 (Reichert & Lambiase, Eds, 2014). In February 2021 Diesel released a campaign “When Together” illustrating couples reunion after covid-19 lockdown. Therefore, many brands nowadays believe in the efficiency of sex appeal in advertising, the given study will explore the attitude of young people towards it.

### 1.2 Human interest in sex appeal.

Gallup & Frederick (2010) stated that the features we find attractive in individuals of the opposite sex are directly connected to the dimensions of health and reproductive viability. Their paper underlines that the way we perceive other people has been developed in accordance with human evolutionary history. For instance, females turn out to choose fit male figures due to the fact that it is an indicator of “better genes” and the high likelihood of the partner to transfer physical benefits to children by increasing survival chances or reproductive success. (Frederick, & Haselton, 2007 citing Kokko, Brooks, Jennions, & Morley, 2003; Moller, 1997). Therefore, it is completely natural for human beings to react on sex appeal. This pattern of human behavior was always noticed by marketers as a powerful source of impact on the consumer.

### 1.3 Thesis objectives

This paper aims to explore the perception patterns of young people once they are facing the sex appeal content in commercials. The key objectives of the thesis are to explore the factors impacting sex appeal perception, general attitude towards sex appeal in advertising and provide insights for modern businesses regarding ad perception of young adults and teenagers as the next generations of consumers. Through conducting the research and data collection processes, the given paper attempts to provide the conclusions and recommendations for businesses regarding the efficiency of integration of sex appeal content into marketing strategies while targeting young adults and teenagers.

## **2. Literature Review**

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In recent years there has been a serious discussion regarding the usage of sex appeal in promotions as many people find this sort of advertising offensive or unethical. The roles of men and women in society are changing and so are the expectations from advertising. The given authors discussed the topic in their studies in order to answer the questions: “Is sexual advertising an opportunity for the businesses to push the consumer purchase decision or is this strategy too risky as it can harm the brand's reputation due to ethical concerns of the consumers?”.

According to Kumar and Raju (2013) “advertising serves as a major tool in creating product awareness in the mind of a potential consumer to make an eventual purchase decision”. The goal of an advertisement is to attract the attention of the target audience, demonstrate a product or service, and engage consumers in a decision-making process finished with the purchase. Curtis, Arnaud, and Waguespack (2017) claim that the main task while advertising planning is to identify the topics that trigger specific emotions of the consumer and stimulate the individual to perform a purchase. However, a large competition on the market combined with a huge amount of advertising made it extremely difficult for marketers to create awareness about the products and, what is most importantly, differentiate the brands in the eyes of consumers (Curtis, Arnaud, and Waguespack 2017) citing Koszembar-Wiklik, 2016). As a consequence, “manipulation became one of the elements of communication strategy” (Koszembar-Wiklik 2016).

Therefore, the vast variety of advertising in media resulted in the increased demand for unique content. The distinctiveness of the commercial in both its message and the visual part became the main factor for advertising efficiency. Keller (1998) stated that in order to be effective, the commercial must leave strong traces of the brand in the consumer’s memory. Lynch (1982) has proved that information perceived as novel or unexpected is processed more deeply and thoroughly and has significantly higher chances to be recalled in the future than information that is seen as ordinary or more obvious in the provided scenario.

Provocative advertising became a popular choice for marketers to gain individuals’ attention and awareness as a way to break through the information clutter (Curtis, Arnaud, and Waguespack 2015). Such advertising contains controversial images and texts, illustrates taboo subjects like violence, sex/erotica, death, vulgar body parts etc., crossing the traditional societal norms and values. The purpose of such challenging advertising is to play with consumers’ emotions due to its disparity with the consumer’s daily experience (Huhmann, and Mott-Stenerson, 2008 citing Venkat and Abi-Hanna 1995; Vezina and Paul 1997).

Many researchers support the implementation of provocative advertising by mentioning its considerable benefits like increased attention, brand awareness and recall, free media coverage (Kadić-Maglajlić, Arslanagić-Kalajdžić, Micevski, Michaelidou, and Nemcova 2017 citing Fordand, LaTour 1993; Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchanda 2003; Pope, Voges and Brown 2004; Waller 2006) despite its chances of shaping controversial advert perceptions.

Yet, the attitude of the consumers towards the provocative commercials and their purchase decision are complicated processes that depend on a number of factors of influence, such as:

- Demographics (Age, gender, culture, religion, social structure (collectivism/individualism))



- Personality (Character, personal ethics, social norms, current state & mood, buying habits)
- Environment (Media channel: smartphone/TV/radio/social network etc., location)
- The sector & type of advertised product
- Attitude to the brand and its behavior history
- Attitude to the communicator of the message

For instance, Putrevu and Swimberghek (2013) recently confirmed the results from LaTour and Henthorne's (1994) research regarding the fact that individual ethical judgment impacts the consumer perceptions of sexual appeal in the media, stating that religious commitment is an antecedent of ethical judgment. (Kadić-Maglajlić, Arslanagić-Kalajdžić, Micevski, Michaelidou, and Nemkova, 2017). The authors suggest that such advertising raises ethical concerns among religiously committed people. Hunt and Vitell (2006) stated that religious people treat moral values with higher importance than non-religious individuals.

Therefore, in the context of marketing religious commitment has been found to be directly connected to decision-making (Delener, 1994), consumerism (Varul, 2008), purchase behavior, (Sood, 1995) and has been proven to impact the attitudes towards the commercials (Waller, Fam, and Erdogan, 2005; White, 2000).

Similar conclusions were reached by Ismailand Melewar (2014) claiming that Muslim attitudes to the sexual topic in advertising were more negative than non-Muslim attitudes toward the same ads which confirm the fact that reactions to sex appeal commercials highly depend on the background of the viewers. So marketers must seriously take into consideration the cultural nuances in particular demographics as culture is a significant factor influencing consumer behavior of people.

Apart from religion, Sameer (2018) claims that the size of the impact of sex appeal advertising on the purchase decision highly depends on the geographical location of the consumers and their culture. For example, American consumers get more influenced by sex appeal in advertising than European or Asian ones according to the researches.

The structure of the society from which the customer comes from also plays a significant role in one's consumer actions and advertising responses. For instance, Chan (2007) suggested that consumers in collective societies (societies in which collective/communal goals are treated higher than personal ones (Kagitcibasi 1997)) are less tolerant to advertising pieces that violate societal norms. As sexually-related products do not have a high demand in suggested regions (ex. Asian cultures), sexually-related appeals and executions are also less favorably treated. However, he also stated that consumers from individualistic cultures (societies that value personal rights and freedom ex. EU countries and the USA (Kagitcibasi 1997)) have shown a higher acceptance of sexually-oriented products and such appeals, as their

social values tend to be more liberal and democratic which results in different consumer behavior and advertising perception. The results indicate that the more negative the executions are seen, the higher the likelihood of rejecting the products and the brands.

The level of intensity of the sexual stimuli in the commercial was also mentioned to be the factor of impact. In particular, a considerable number of researches show that commercials including mild indecent language or other lighter forms of provocation can result in more positive advertisement attitudes, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions as it entertains the user, captures the attention but does not cross the ethical borders. For example, Wyllie, Carlson, and Rosenberger (2015) stated that “mild sexual-stimuli intensity in advertising (lower amount of nudity objects in the scene, using erotic scenarios instead of the direct nudity) is more effectively influencing behavioral responses”. The survey suggests that mild sexual-stimuli intensity has a certain positive impact on women's purchase behavior and attitude toward the brand. But, if consumers experience discomfort while watching commercials and as a consequence, judge the brand and the product negatively, the advertisement is likely to have a negative influence on their intent to purchase, as more aggressive challenging commercials tend to turn the clients away due to being extreme with borders of normality (Wyllie, Carlson, and Rosenberger 2015).

As well as religion and culture, gender is an important factor. For instance, Wolin (2003) performed research regarding the gender issues in advertising. Her findings indicate that gender influences purchase intention in a way that men and women have differences in terms of information comprehension which results in different advertising responses and so the different buying behavior. For example, females process information more elaborately, paying attention to the details whereas men are looking for objective statements and facts. In terms of advertising perception, men prefer advertising illustrating large social groups and competition, women, on the contrary, prefer non-competitive executions. Regarding the implementation of sex appeal in advertising, females tend to find such commercials sexist more often than males. The majority of female participants reacted more negatively towards images with attractive women than men during the research.

Overall, the majority of female advertising attitudes towards sex appeal perception tend to be based on darvinistic theories and evolutionary psychology. As an illustration, Sengupta & Dahl (2008) found that women perceive sexual appeal advertising more favorable if it illustrates the relationship commitment of the character. Such behavior is explained by the evolutionary intention of the females for the committed relationship which results in following advertising reactions.

The applicability of sexual appeal to the brand image seems to be another important factor for ad perception. The attitude to the provocative commercial highly depends on the sector of the product and the industry of the advertised brand. For example, in case the brand is perceived as “sexual” by nature (sex

products store, lingerie, etc.), its advertising will be treated more tolerantly by the consumers (Boddewyn and Kunz, 1991; Grazer and Keesling 1995; Pope, Voges and Brown 2004; Waller, 2004). The given idea has also been supported by the research of Khan and Sanchez-Munoz (2015) suggesting that usage of sex appeal in advertising can be highly positively perceived by consumers when it matches the idea of the brand, for example, while selling sex-related goods or while promoting luxury items like perfumes. In this case, according to the research, usage of sex appeal can affect consumer attitudes positively on the stage of final purchase decision.

Talking about individual advertising perception, Brown & L'Engle (2009), Gangestad & Simpson (2000) stated that individual differences in attitudes toward sexuality are based on various factors such as childhood experiences, control of material resources, physical attractiveness, etc. Such factors as a consequence, influence the advertising response to the sexual appeal content by the individual.

Apart from the mentioned factors, many researchers provided evidence that age of the consumers has a significant influence on the advertisement perception and purchase intention. For example, Eze and Lee (2012) explored the attitude of young adults towards advertising by performing research on people in the age of 18-35 from different countries. The results showed that successful advertising creates hedonic emotions and that young people have more positive attitudes towards advertising overall. The studies on Bulgarian young adults have shown that the advertising campaigns that caused hedonic reactions of viewers were proven to get more approved by the consumers and resulted in increased sales.

Liu (2009), also provided research stating that younger consumers on average have more positive reactions to shocking advertisements than senior ones. Prendergast and Hwa (2002) as well concluded that consumers who are over the age of forty had a higher tendency to reject advertised products than younger people. The results from Brugiere and Barry (2011) showed that young consumers do not experience a negative impact on their buying behavior after watching provocative ads – contrariwise, older consumers preferred to choose other brands with more neutral commercials.

Curtis, Arnaud, and Waguespack (2017) conducted multiple research analyses that have proven that consumers' positive emotions directly influence their purchase intent. Moreover, the results showed that both positive and negative emotions impact the decision-making and behavior processes of the consumers. Positive emotions like satisfaction or joy can be linked to higher levels of psychological arousal and increased levels of attention. On the other hand, participants who experienced negative emotions

during the research, while watching the sex appeal ads, demonstrated feelings of offense and disgust and showed a decreased desire for further interactions with the brands. However, the authors stated that, despite the fact that the commercial may cause negative emotions, this does not necessarily influence the purchase decision of the consumer. It happens due to the fact that a purchase decision is a complex process and that the purchase decisions are impacted by many other factors including the current emotional state of the consumer. Consumers may disagree with the brand's policies, its lack of social responsibility, but they might still buy the company's products or use its services due to the fact that those fulfill their needs or provide superior quality.

The process of modern consumer behavior also plays an important role in advertising perception and processing of the advertised message. For instance, people who are "digital natives" and receive the majority of the marketing messages online through social networks, using their mobile phone (Hennig-Thurau, Malhotra, Frieger, Gensler, Lobschat, and Rangaswamy, et al. (2010) experience a more intimate and personalized perception effect which leads to longer information processing and may result in higher brand recall, according to the mentioned research.

Despite the large number of researches conducted, the authors have not reached a consensus regarding the general impact of sex appeal advertising on the consumer. The reason for that is the complexity of the process of human information processing and decision making and the large number of factors affecting it. Yet, it can be clearly stated that despite the ethical issues occurring during provocative advertising assessment, such commercials are considered to be efficient already due to the fact that they require more time for processing and so have a higher chance for the brand to be remembered and recalled (Lawrence, Furnham, McClelland 20221 citing King et al., 2015) and such components can be crucial on the stage of consideration when the consumer after identifying the need, starts to review the appropriate brands for purchase (Baxendale 2015) .

In the given overview, most of the authors agreed on the idea that using sex appeal in advertising may be beneficial for brands if following certain rules such as identifying first if the audience is appropriate and prepared for such sensitive content according to its demographics and cultural specialties, and if such topic fits the brand image. However, certain authors among mentioned, concluded that sex appeal in advertising does not impact the final consumer decision on purchase, so there is a need for more research to answer clearly the given research question.

The given research provides many studies regarding different reactions of participants in different scenarios, however, it misses research regarding the reactions of young consumers on sex appeal advertising in the past few years, the analysis of ethics of modern consumers and most importantly, the information regarding the efficiency of sex appeal advertising for modern

businesses. Therefore these topics will be the focus of my research through conducting further data collection processes.

### 3. Methods

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In order to answer the research question, an inductive approach was chosen as the main method. The inductive analysis alludes to methods that mainly use detailed revision of raw data, aiming to extract concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations adopted from the raw data analysis by an evaluator or researcher. (Thomas, 2006) The reason was that the inductive approach allows the researcher to extract findings from the raw data, without the limitations inflicted by more structured methodologies like, for instance, deductive analysis where the key patterns frequently appear underestimated and as a consequence - lost, due to too high focus on hypothesis proving by the researchers (Thomas, 2006 citing Scriven's 1991, p. 56). The main advantage of the inductive approach is its methodological flexibility since it is not controlled by any specific qualitative methodologies, like, for instance, grounded theory, phenomenology, or a case study (Liu, 2016 citing Creswell, 2009). The base of such an approach includes moving from the particular to the general, while making empirical observations about some topic of interest and eventually forming conclusions and theories based on them (Woiceshyn & Daellenbach, 2018 citing Locke, 2007). The process of inductive analysis contains such steps as: initial reading of text results, identification of specific text parts related to the research objectives and labelling the parts of the text to create categories (Liu, 2016 citing Thomas, 2006).

The research process consisted of the vast secondary data collection on the topic in the form of revision of the available literature regarding provocative advertising and its efficiency and appeal for younger generations; qualitative data collection in the format of contextual semi-structured interviews and a primary survey. The secondary data evaluation process has shown limited amount of research available regarding the efficiency of advertising containing sex appeal for youth in the last 5 years and no researches containing interviews with generation z participants. The identified gap in investigations led to the decision to conduct a primary survey, questioning young people regarding their perceptions of provocative ads with a purpose of identifying patterns of reactions that could be useful for modern businesses.

The survey was created in the format of an anonymous google form and sent to more than 160 participants aiming to reach the largest number of people possible in order to provide the most objective results given the circumstances. The majority of the respondents were volunteering undergraduate and graduate students both of Geneva Business School and outside of it without receiving any kind of monetary reward. Apart from students, the survey also contained few participants aged between 30 and 44,

yet, their responses were reviewed separately since they do not represent the groups of millennials and gen z and, as a result, are less relevant for the research.

In the analysis of the research there was used the theory of generations, initially developed by William Strauss and Neil Howe, that states that historical decades are associated with a certain type of persona that starts a new era with a new social, political and economical climate in the world. The last "personas" of the theory were defined as generation x, millennials (or gen y). Yet, the terminology started to be used massively by marketers and other researchers and also with the appearance of the next generation - zoomers (or gen z) it became more complicated for specialists to find the middle ground. Since there is no consensus among the researchers regarding the clear age borders of both millennials and generation z, the given survey uses the term "millennials" for the participants aged between 19 and 29 (in order to cover the decade) and the term "gen z" for the ones aged less than 19 (16-18 in the case of the research).

The results included participants of 43 nationalities, with 86 female and 82 male respondents. The majority of those surveyed were aged between 16 and 25, however, the study counted few members aged between 26 and 38 for comparison. The questionnaire consisted of 29 questions. The first 5 questions asked about the age, gender, country of origin, religion of participants and their general attitude to advertising containing sex appeal. The reason for that was the intention to spot the possible patterns and connections between relevant factors and answers of students since the listed aspects have a strong impact on an individual's judgment of advertising (Homer 2006). After that the participants were asked to evaluate 6 advertising executions containing sex appeal by giving them a score from 1 to 10 according to the level of attraction and then answer if the visual fits the brand in their opinion.

The given paper is based on a general formulation of sex appeal, explaining sex appeal as a sexual presentation of a product or service with the sexual intentions or the exploitation of the female or male body (Richmond and Hartman, 1982). Reichert et al., 2001 formulated sex appeal in advertising as the idea or brand message with appeals that are associated with sexual information. Sexiness of clothing, body language, wording, and amount of nudity, are regularly perceived as sexiness according to the research conducted by Goodrich, 1999. Therefore, the main sex appeal criterias during the preparation for this research while choosing the appropriate visuals of marketing executions for the survey were the amount of nudity on the

advertising, the position of the advertised product according to the model body and the posture of the model(s) themselves (in terms of erotics).

The visuals included sex appeal containing ads of 2 underwear brands ("Homine" and "Calvin Klein"), one bag ("Snaked"), one beauty product of the fashion brand ("Tom ford" beauty), a cafe ("LouLou" Odessa), gym chain ("Equinox") and protein milkshake ("Maxi Milk") commercials (see appendix 1). The first image of the underwear brand ("Homine") illustrated a couple in the posture of a passionate hug. Such sexual position was considered the sex appeal element of the execution. The man in the picture is wearing the brand's underwear. The second commercial of the "Snaked" bag displayed a young woman wearing a skirt and holding the bag with both hands by her bag while slightly lifting her skirt, enabling the viewer to see her forms. Such "peaky" and slightly erotic position was viewed as a sex appeal of the given ad. The third visual represented a young woman sitting by the table of the "LouLou" cafe, wearing the evening outfit with a deep decolte accompanied by the red lipstick and red nails. Her mouth was half opened. The woman also had a dish with pancakes between her hands. The erotic posture of the woman demonstrating her decolte and having her mouth half-opened was considered as the sex appeal parts of the commercial. The Calvin Klein campaign showed three images of a young lady wearing the brand's clothes. In the first image the girl had her both hands inside her underwear. The second one illustrated the girl lying on the floor with one of her legs lifted in the direction of the camera, her face demonstrated relaxed, partially erotic expression. The last image demonstrated a backside in the jeans worn in the wrong way and unzipped, so that the viewer can see the forms of the model. The erotically hold hands on the gentiles of the model, erotic position on the floor and direct focus on nearly undressed backside were viewed as the sex appeal of the given campaign. The Tom Ford commercial illustrated the brand's perfume held between the naked breasts of the woman which was counted as the direct sex appeal. The gym chain execution showed a couple on the bed in their underwear sitting in the pre-sexual posture. The sexual position was used as the sex appeal of the ad. The last commercial (protein milk) showed a young man hanging on the cliff and drinking the product. The guy was half undressed, wearing only shorts as a result of the sports activity. The naked torso of the man was viewed as a sex appeal of the commercial.

The participants were intentionally introduced to commercials containing sex appeal elements belonging to brands from various industries illustrating goods that are and are not generally associated with sex, since, according to several studies (ex., Boddewyn and Kunz, 1991; Grazer and Keesling 1995; Pope, Voges and Brown 2004; Waller, 2004), the attitude towards sex appeal



containing advertising highly depends on the connection between product and sex in the mind of consumer. The brands chosen for the survey included two well-known fashion companies and seven less familiar niche brands. The aim for that was to test the possible correlation between brand recognition and ad perception in the way of finding the patterns between answers of the participants who knew the brand and the ones who did not.

Besides, the survey was trying to match the average interests of the young people while choosing the brands and products for the questionnaire (ex., the interest of both female and male millennials and generation z consumers in fashion and healthy lifestyle) in order to create a possible match of need which is necessary for purchase desire. The last few questions of the survey were asking students if they found any commercials unethical or offensive and whether any of the ads had evoked in them the desire to use the advertised product. The participants were asked to justify each choice with a short explanation, in order to enable the researcher to follow their reasoning processes and explore the individual ethics.

Apart from the survey, several business managers were interviewed with the purpose of identifying the common reactions from youth to provocative advertising on social media.

The contextual data interviews were held with two Ukrainian sex store businesses since they are actively using erotic content on their social media. The semi-structured interview format was chosen to provide an individual approach for the interviewees in order to create an informal environment for trust-building purposes, while still following the initial structure plan and getting the necessary data on the topic (Harrell & Bradley 2009). The social media managers of the businesses were contacted directly through personal messages on social media. The interviewees were asked about their experience of using sex appeal content in online commercials, ethical concerns from public, limitations from the side of social media ad policies, the public expectations and future content trends for the industry influenced by modern ethical ideologies and movements like feminism/body positivity.

## Data Analysis

After collecting the online responses, the data from the survey was transferred to the excel spreadsheet and stored there. The data interpretation process included an inductive analysis approach using qualitative data. All the responses were stored by categories regarding participants origin/gender/age/religion and open individual answers. The advertising evaluations were compared to the answers regarding advertising-brand fit. The further stage contained finding the patterns and collecting similar

responses, taking into account the age, gender and culture of the respondent as the ethics-impacting factors. After categorizing the responses, the average score by each question was calculated with a purpose of creating the major responding pattern.

After processing, all the collected data was formed into visual graphs illustrating the statistical findings.

#### Data limitations

The initial research question was formulated as “Does sex appeal content in advertising impact the consumer purchase decision?”. However, during the research, it became clear that the given time and resource limitations made it impossible to collect the necessary data to prove or disprove the hypothesis. The research process for that question would require the larger scale of participants, preferably focus group creation and volunteers who would agree to perform the analysis of different stages in the offline format. Therefore, the format of the research has changed to an online data collection process which also embodied the safest approach, giving the pandemic situation in the world.

Other limitations regarding the research included the difficulties in communication with businesses applying sex appeal content in their marketing strategies. The sensitivity and specifics of the research topic made it complicated for the researcher to name the type of content and find the clear and appropriate terminology to address the questions. For example, several fashion brands refused to answer the questions as simply did not find the content that they use containing sex appeal or provocative (even though their content included direct focuses on naked body parts and erotic positions of models). The reason for that was, supposedly, the differences of perceptions of sex appeal caused by different ethical models.

Regarding the survey, there also occurred certain complications, such as the number of unserious answers caused by the supposed ethical sensitivity of the topic (ex., for Ukrainian male participants) and the specifics of age. Therefore, some participants did not treat the research respectfully enough, answered ironically or were shy to give a sincere explanation in the written form. Such lack of completeness of answers had slightly affected the results, since a certain part of the written explanations was missed. However, the alternative solution for that was to review such responses in the separate category since they still did share their opinion through putting a score on the images which therefore enabled the researcher to count their answers for calculations of the average responses, for instance.

Since the large number of participants were from Ukraine (28) and other post-USSR countries where a significant part of the population does not have fluent English knowledge, the language barrier has occurred as another slight research complication. A certain number of respondents found it difficult to interpret the ironic advertising message of the gym commercial as it required a deeper knowledge of English. Few respondents shared the answers that did not correspond with the idea of the commercial therefore a conclusion was made that they did not interpret the message correctly. For future research, such complication could have been eliminated by sending the respondents a form that has been translated into their native language.

## 4. Findings

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The given chapter describes the results from the mixed research described in the methodology section. In this part of the paper the findings from the online survey and the interview with the social media managers of the businesses applying sex appeal elements in its digital marketing strategies are presented.

The survey contained more than 160 participants from different age groups and varied cultures. The age of the participants varied from 16 to 44. However, the majority of the respondents were aged between 19 and 23. 22% of the participants (37 people) were at the age of 22 which ended up being the most popular age group of the survey. 15 participants were aged between 16 and 18 and represented the generation z in the research. The gender distribution of the answers was nearly even: 51.2% of female participants and 48.8% of male ones. Participants of more than 40 nationalities took part in the online questionnaire. The majority of countries of the respondents were located in Europe, however, certain part of the responses were from the USA (9 participants), some from Asia and a few from African and Latin American countries. Yet, the majority of participants were from Ukraine (69 people).

The online survey consisted of 29 questions: 4 questions about general information about the participants (age/gender/origin/religion) and 25 questions about their attitude towards sex appeal in advertising. 96 participants answered that they were not religious. Besides, the survey counted 49 people whose religion was Christianity (20 Catholic and 29 Orthodox), 13 Muslims and few participants following Judaism and Lutheranism. Regarding their overall attitude towards sex appeal in advertising, 64.3% of participants reported a neutral attitude, 23.8% - positive and 11.9% negative. The answers did not represent any correlation between gender or religion and attitude towards sex appeal in advertising in general. Both genders had a nearly equal proportion of attitudes. However, age turned out to be a valuable factor. None of the gen z respondents (aged between 16-18) demonstrated a negative attitude towards sex appeal while answering the question regarding their general attitude to that.

After general information questions, the participants were asked to evaluate the different commercials containing sex appeal. They were first asked to score the execution on a scale from 1 to 10, according to their level of attractiveness. In order to analyze such results, there has been added the term: Average Ad Attractiveness Score (AAAS) (see appendix 3) that illustrates the average number of results during attractiveness evolution of each ad. (Grade per ad times number of such answers, added together and divided by total number of answers per ad). Another pattern for the evaluation was the number of times when the commercial was mentioned to facilitate the desire to use the advertised product after seeing the commercial (the participants were asked such a question (at the end of the survey)).

Homine commercial (men underwear brand) was the first ad presented for the evaluation. The majority of participants scored relatively high, compared to other commercials (Homine AAS: 6,2) in terms of the level of attractiveness. More than half of the respondents found it suitable for the brand (71.4%). Among the most popular answer patterns were: critics regarding poor visibility of the product and the brand name; comments that the idea of the campaign was relevant since underwear has a strong connection to sex. Besides, many people saw a contradiction regarding the presence of the woman in the men's underwear commercial. 18 survey participants stated that Homine commercial catalyzed their desire to use the product. Another brand in the survey that was advertising underwear elements was Calvin Klein. Yet, this commercial has the most contradictory results from all ads. An equal number of respondents - 14.13% - scored it at 1 (lowest grade option) and 8 (nearly highest score). 21 participants called the commercial unethical, however, 13 people stated the increased desire to try the product. Few participants had also mentioned that the proposed execution was typical for the brand. The particular execution was considerably positively perceived by gen z participants as the majority of them gave it a high score (more than 5), commenting the ad as creative and aesthetically pleasing.

Another fashion brand in the survey was Snaked bag. The execution had quite a low attractiveness average score (4,6). 73.2% of respondents answered that the commercial does not fit the product. Many participants mentioned as well that the posture of the model and the location of the bag distracted attention from the product due to "the wrong focus". Only 5 respondents demonstrated the initiative to buy the product. The last fashion company was Tom Ford with their perfume commercial. This execution caused the highest ethical concerns of the participants, it was found the most unethical. It was also the commercial with the highest number of comments discussing the model's body. Its average attractiveness score was 5,2. In the results regarding suitability of the commercial to the brand, the answers were nearly even: 44.6% for and 54.2% against. However, a significant amount of participants expressed the increased desire to use the product. Regarding the answering patterns, certain number of respondents saw the connection between perfume and sex.

LouLou cafe illustrated the advertising execution of the popular public catering place.

The campaign had a quite high average attractiveness score (6,1). Although, the majority of the respondents found it unsuitable for the cafe. Moreover, few people called the advertised scene unrealistic, since the model had a more evening-type outfit and bright makeup. Talking about patterns, a large number of respondents demonstrated an increased desire to try the product. Many female participants called the commercial artistic and aesthetic, while also underlining the successful match of colors. Although, many respondents found the execution unnecessary objectifying the woman's body.

Another brand advertising food products was Maxi milk (protein cocktail). This execution was the most favorably perceived and demonstrated the highest

number of intentions to buy the product (22). It had the highest average attractiveness score (6,3) and 87.7% of respondents found it suitable for the product. The most frequent answering pattern was the statement that the ad is appealing and reasonable since it illustrates the promised result from using the product. The only concern regarding the ad was the questionable statement “drink for the real men”. Many respondents found this message unethical and even sexist, meaning that a real man does not have to necessarily be fit.

The Equinox campaign advertised the gym services. This commercial was considered the second most unethical and raised many concerns regarding its applicability to the product (82.9% of people answered that the ad does not fit the gym). It also had the lowest average attractiveness score (4,3). 19 people found it unethical and very few expressed the desire to use the services. Moreover, several respondents called it highly disrespectful towards the gym industry and some even stated that the commercial causes associations with porn or condoms advertisement. However, apart from answering patterns from each brand (see appendix 2), the survey revealed a certain number of other categorical responses. For instance, a certain number of participants stated that they do not get convinced by any ads in terms of purchase decision. Certain number of respondents has also mentioned the significant level of influence of sex appeal on their perception: for example, stating that sex appeal was a distracting factor in some cases, or, on the other hand, the reason of turning the attention.

To summarize the overall commercials evaluation, Maxi-Milk, Homine and LouLou ads had the most positive reactions from the respondents according to defined metrics (AAAS and intention to try the product). Calvin Klein, Snaked and Equinox were scored to be the least appealing, accordingly. Maxi-milk was the most favorable campaign with the highest AAAS and largest number of comments regarding intention to try the product, and Equinox ended up being the least one. The results from both AAAS and trying intention were showing a correlation of answers. In both cases the ads were scored in nearly the same order.

The results from the interview with the sex store manager (see appendix 4) contained a number of valuable insights regarding the efficiency of sex appeal for businesses. Giving an instance, the manager shared that usage of sex appeal in advertising brought a significant increase in engagement rate on the store’s social media and also resulted in increased sales. Previously the brand used a different approach towards content strategy, using images of products, shot on the plain background. The switch towards content where the product is demonstrated next to body parts or as a connecting element for couple’s interaction helped the business to match the expectations of its target audience. Besides, the manager stated that business did not face any ethical issues with consumers directly, yet experienced a number of limitations from the side of social media platforms since the visualisation of more intimate body parts is forbidden to use in targeting advertising.



## 5. Conclusions, Limitations, and Recommendations

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This work discussed the efficiency of sex appeal content in advertising for modern youth (people belonging to generations z and millennials according to their age) through analyzing their ad perception patterns. The mentioned research was taking into account several factors of influence, such as gender, age, religion and origin - since they were identified as the major aspects impacting the ad perception, according to the researchers mentioned above (Waller, Fam, and Erdogan, 2005; White, 2000). The primary data collection process revealed a number of patterns that had been used as a base for the conclusions of the work.

Talking about the listed factors of influence, findings in this thesis highlighted that gender and religion were not found to display any considerable impact on the results. Although more than 60 participants claimed to be religious, there were no particular correlation between this factor and their attitude towards sex appeal. Such results indicate that young people, despite their religiosity can be considered as the target audience by modern businesses for commercials containing sex appeal, without expecting any significant ethical concerns from the young public. Age, on the contrary, was noticed to be a factor of impact. The responses from generation z and millennials varied considerably. The formers were demonstrating less critical approach towards advertising evaluation and nearly no negative reaction towards the sex appeal. The executions were perceived by them as rather creative and artistic (especially favored were Calvin Klein and Snaked bag commercials).

Such results match the general characteristics of the gen z representatives, since zoomers are often described as “the generation most opened to a variety of ideas that do not necessarily match with the general understanding of ethics or moral borders” (Francis & Hoefel 2018). However, there is the lack of evidence confirming that such answering patterns are the result of specifically generational behavior and not caused by the age of the participants, meaning that younger people in general have less critical approaches in terms of information processing. In order to answer that question, there is a need to conduct comparative research in 5 years. Nevertheless, this age group should still be considered by the marketers as the potential target audience for provocative advertising, especially for the fashion brands. Yet, businesses must verify first the policies in the targetted countries regarding display of the sex appeal content for teenagers.

Millennials, on the other hand, showed generally more sceptical attitude towards sex appeal and were more concerned by ethics. Such responses again match the general description of millennials, since they are characterized as more idealistic and confrontational individuals who are usually less open for diverse opinions (Francis & Hoefel 2018). Talking about cultural aspects, there was also a pattern that Ukrainian participants and overall the ones from post-USSR countries (ex., Russia, Lithuania, Azerbaijan) demonstrated a smaller concern regarding ethical sides of the



executions, while respondents from the UK, USA and Sweden displayed a high preoccupation about possible objectivisation of both female and male bodies. Therefore, while planning the advertising campaign containing sex appeal in the listed countries, marketers should be more careful with nudity in order to escape possible offense.

Overall, the analysis revealed that the most important factor for positive perception of sex appeal advertising was the connection of the product and sex in the eyes of the ad receiver. The majority of critical comments in the survey were related to the examples of brands where the sexual message was not perceived as relevant for the advertised product or service. The hardest it was to establish the connection, the more negative the commercial was perceived. For instance, the Equinox campaign was one of the most criticized examples, while Maxi-milk was the most favorably perceived since the commercial illustrated the clear explanation of the undressed male figure (sport activity).

Another important pattern of answers revealed was the strong desire of the respondents to see the realistic scenario of the ad. The respondents were mentioning this in the critiques of the executions which frequently ended up being the reason for the negative attitude towards the commercial. For example, LouLou was criticized for an unrealistic outfit for the model and Maxi Milk was often accused of using a non-average body. Such a tendency of reactions indicates a strong strive of consumers towards authenticity that is expected to be reflected in the marketing executions. That is why modern businesses should pay a lot of attention towards realistic scenes, characters and scenarios for their advertising campaigns.

To summarise, sex appeal can be used by modern businesses as the tool for getting the attention of consumers, yet it must contain a certain amount of requirements in order to be appealing for the target audience, such as:

- Demonstrate a clear connection between sex and the advertised product/service;
- Illustrate realistic scenario of using the product/survey;
- Be adapted to the culture where it is presented;

## Recommendations

The following research investigated the reactions of millennials and generation z. However, if in the case of the millenials, there has been a considerable amount of research exploring their behavior and ethics, in the case of zoomers, there has been only a few. The reason for that is likely to be the small amount of time passed, since the generation is relatively young. The given study provides results regarding the attitude of zoomers towards sex appeal in advertising. Yet, there could be additional comparative research performed in several years, in order to prove that such patterns of attitudes

are the result of generational features and are not caused by the specifics of a younger age.

Besides, the given paper also explored the connection between the advertising and the desire to try the product of zoomers and millennials. Although, there could be conducted another research in the future that explores the effects of commercials on purchase intention of zoomers and millennials, which was impossible in the circumstances of the given research.

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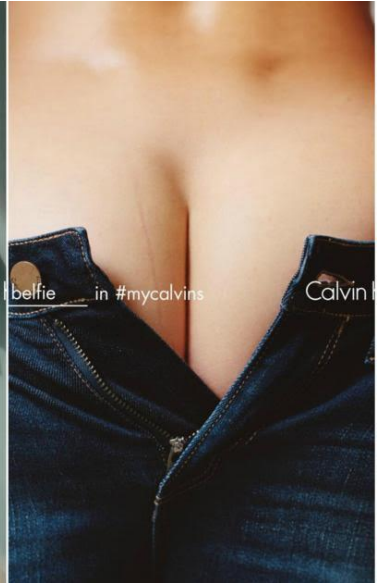
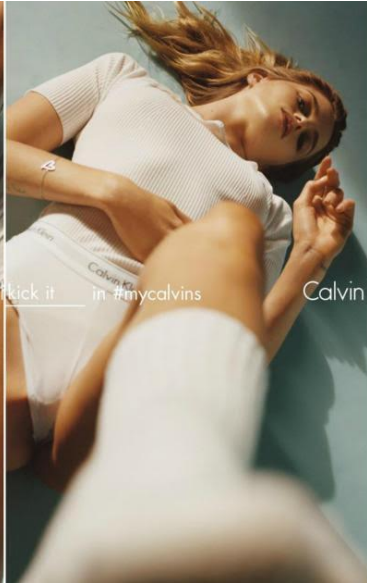
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## Appendices

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- 1. Appendix 1 - visual examples of commercials used for the online questionnaire.**









**ENDURANCE.** BY EQUINOX.

EQUINOX.COM

IT'S NOT FITNESS. IT'S LIFE.



 An advertisement for MAXI-MILK. The top half shows a muscular man in black shorts climbing a rock face, holding a can of MAXI-MILK. The text "MILK for REAL MEN" is overlaid on the right. The bottom half shows a product shot of a MAXI-MILK can with the text "BUILDS LEAN MUSCLES" and "HIGH PROTEIN o ZERO FAT".
 

**MILK**  
for  
**REAL MEN**

**BUILDS LEAN MUSCLES**  
HIGH PROTEIN o ZERO FAT

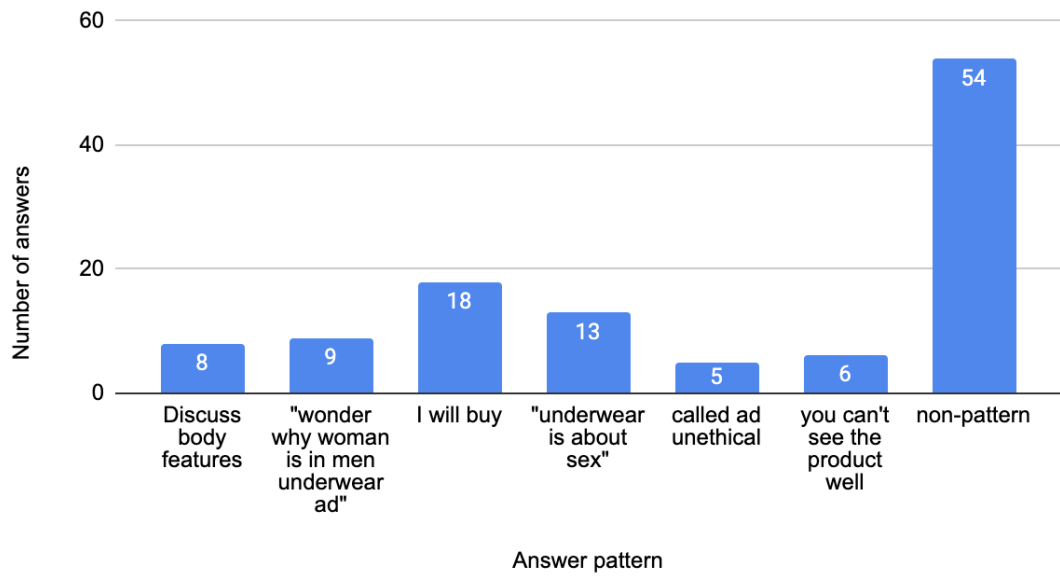
**MAXI-MILK**

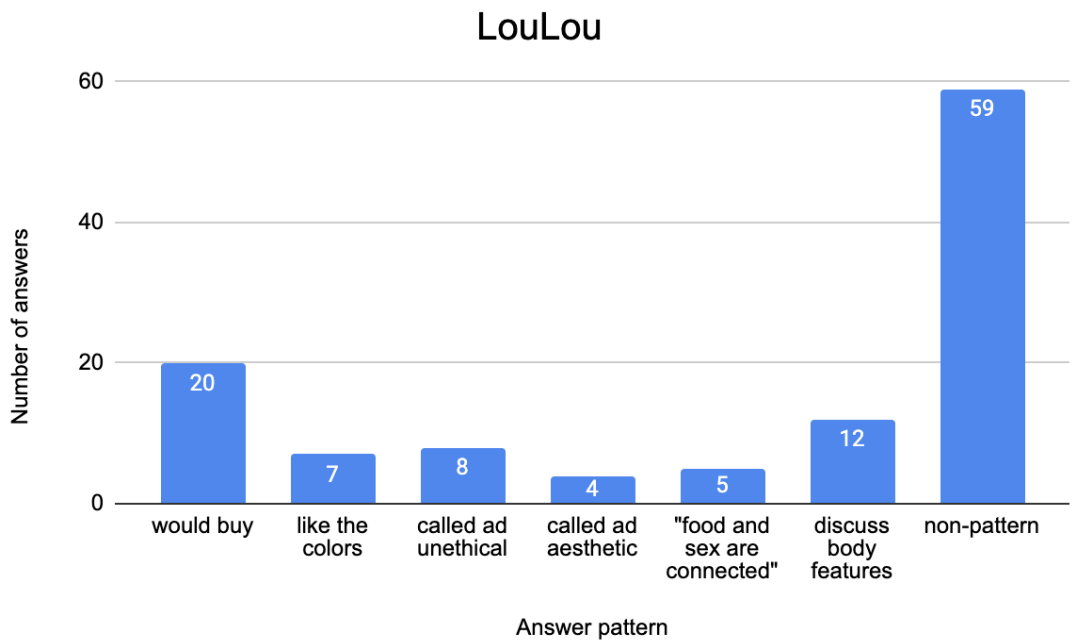
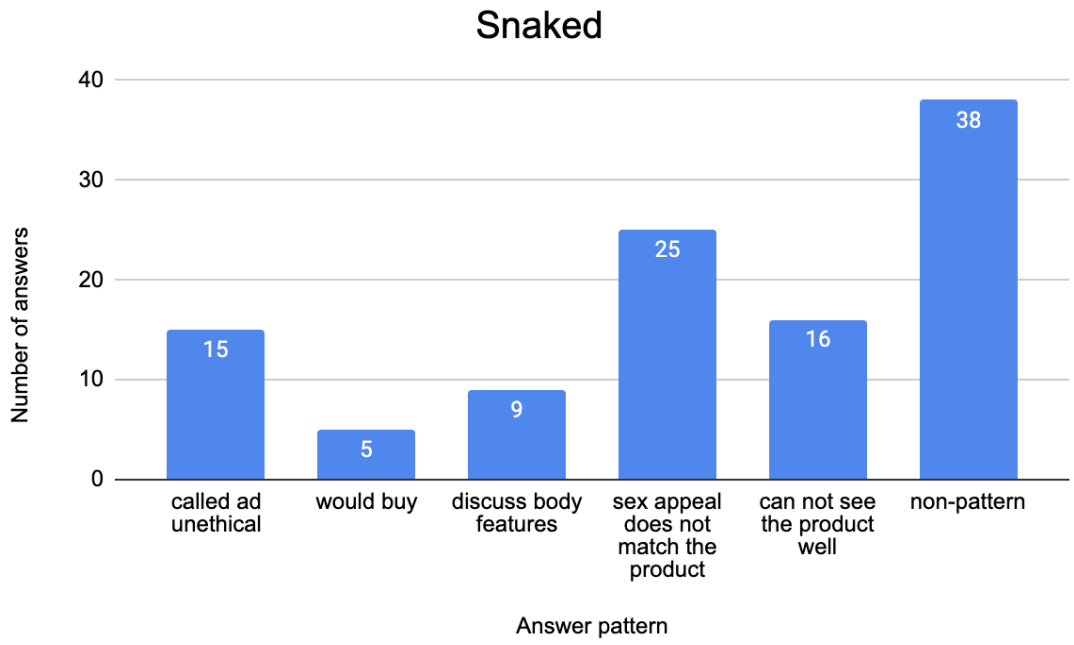
**REAL NUTRITION WHEN YOU NEED IT**  
Whether you're halfway through a workout, or halfway up a mountain, if you need a quick fix on the go, grab yourself a MAXI-MILK. It's got 30g of high-quality protein, 25g of carbs, and it's also loaded with free fat blends. It's great at building lean muscles and helping you do nearly things.  
facebook.com/maximilk



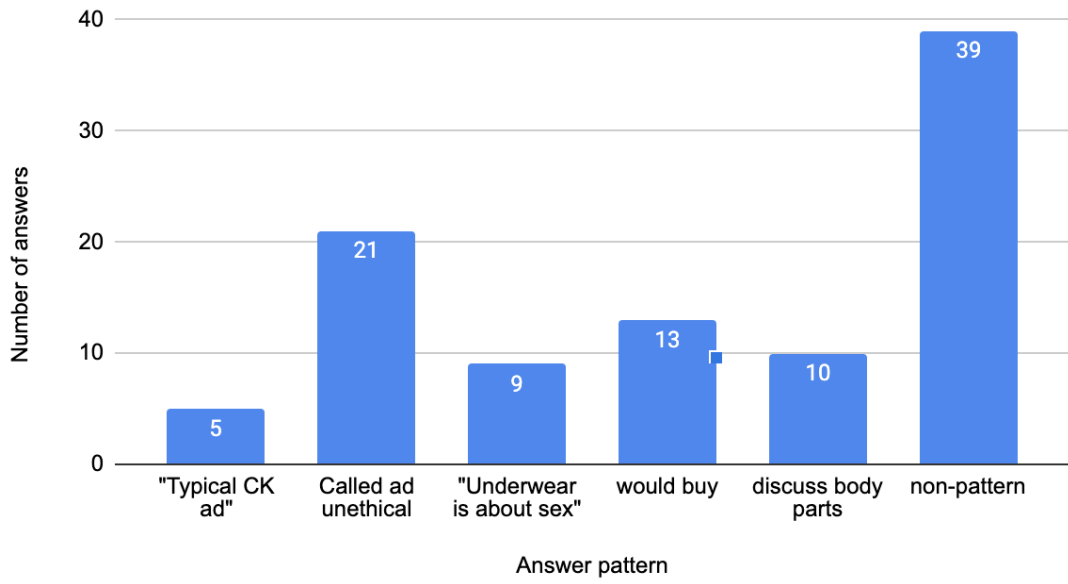
2. Appendix 2. - The patterns of answers.

Homine

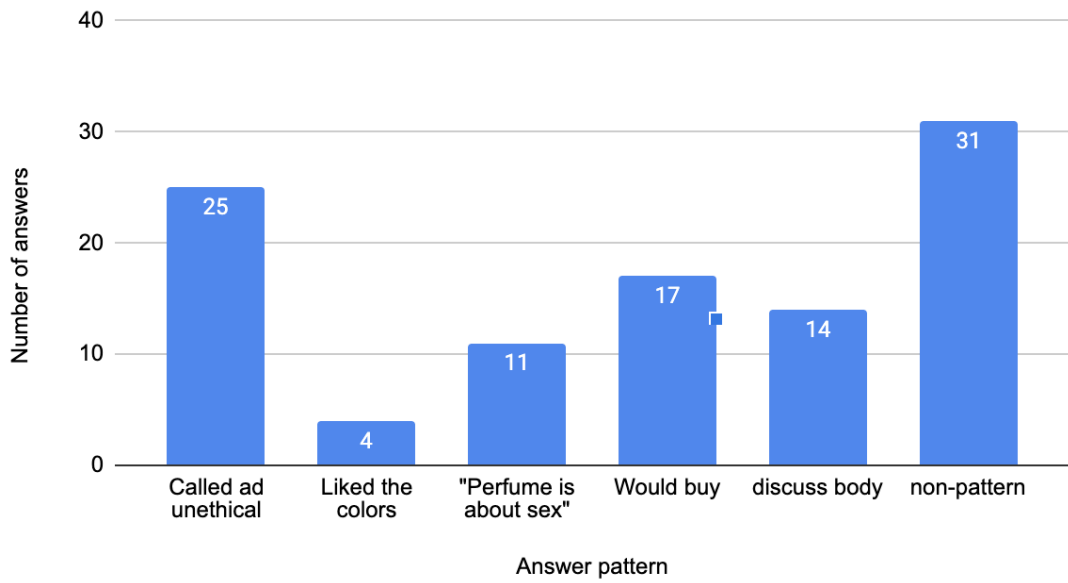




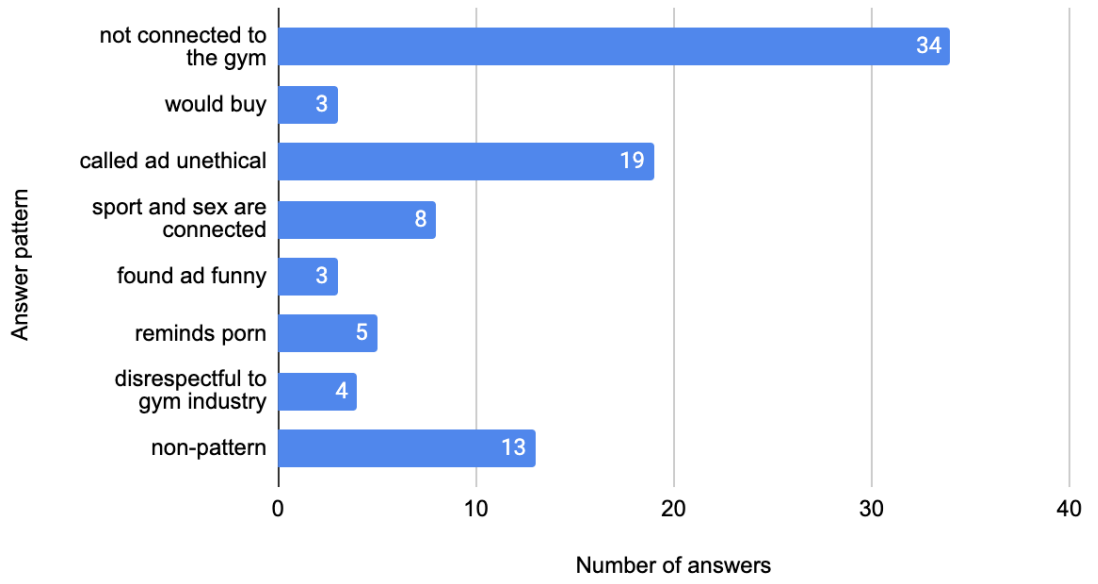
## Calvin Klein



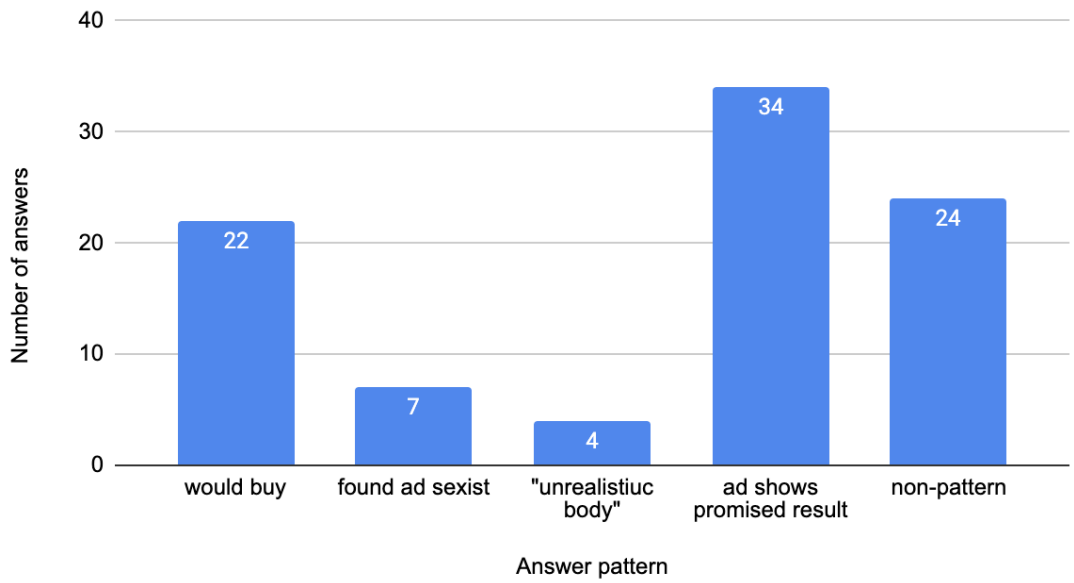
## Tom Ford



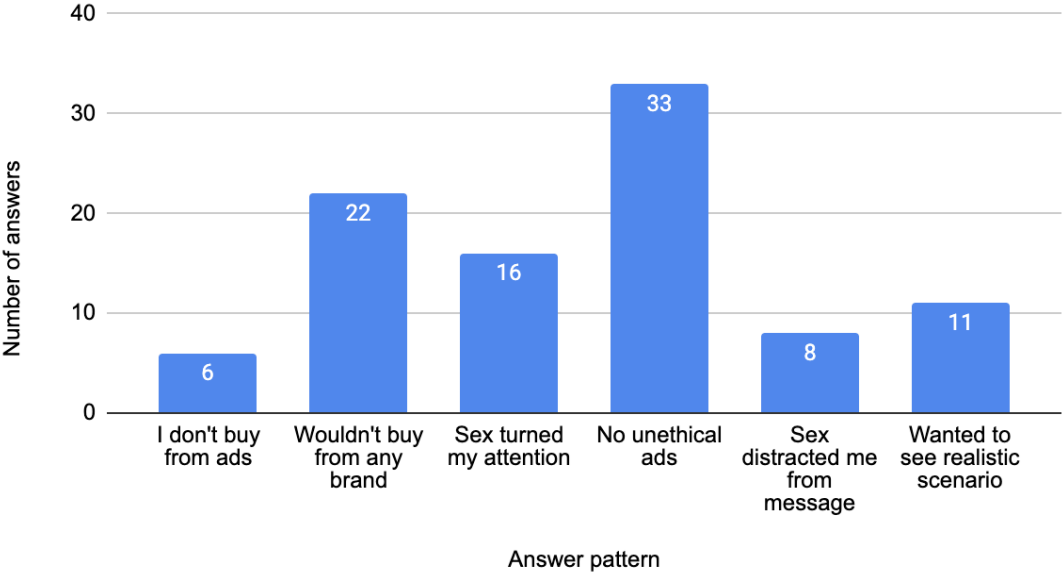
## Equinox



## Maxi-milk

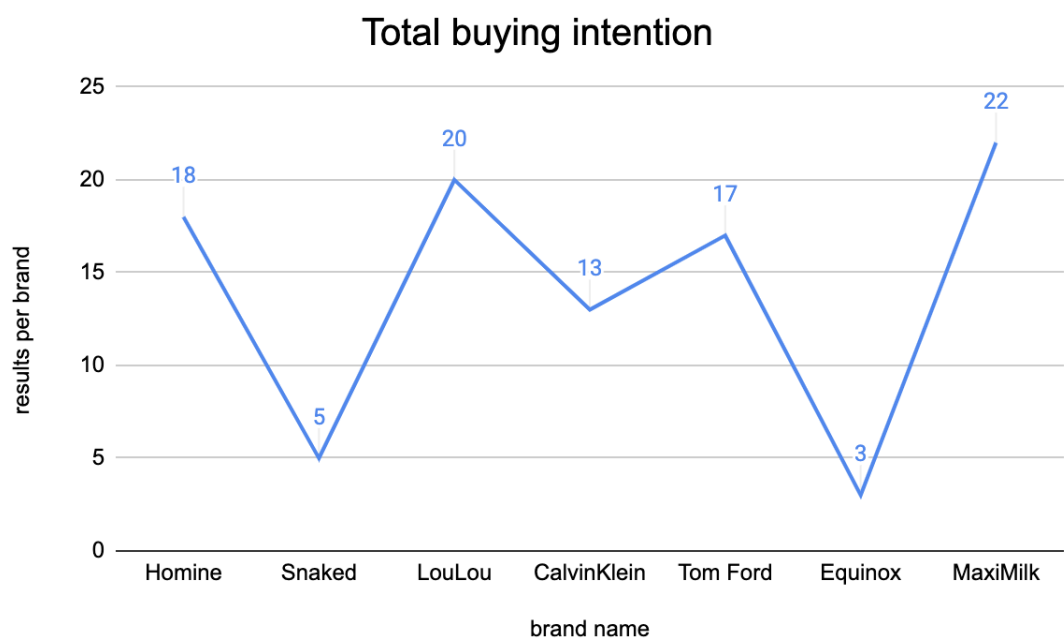
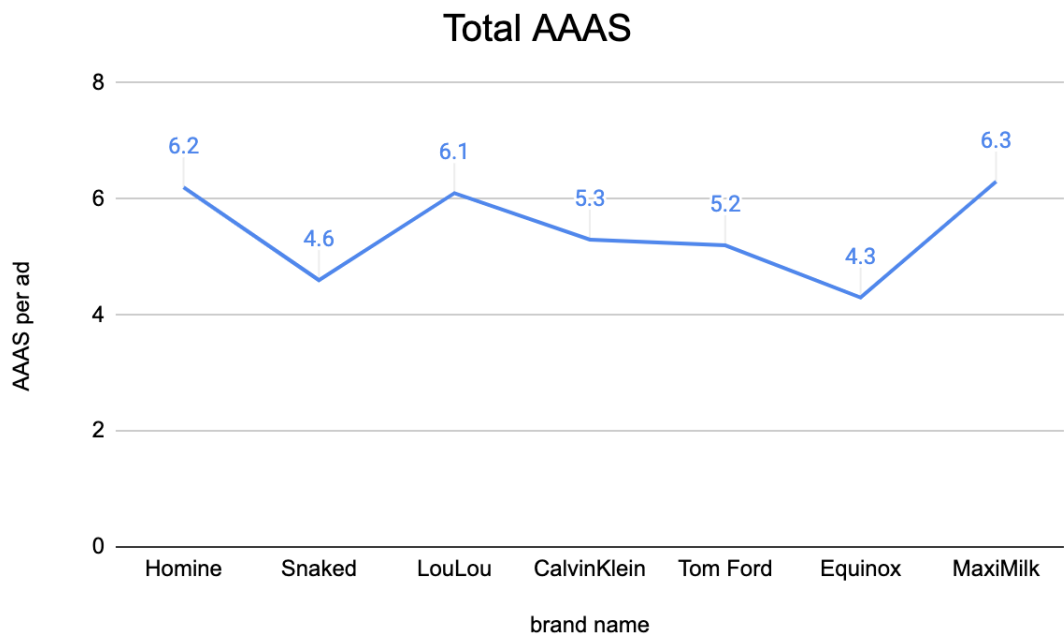


### Other patterns





### 3. Appendix 3. - introduced terms.



### 4. Appendix 4. - Interview with a SMM manager of a Ukrainian sex store “Candor place”. (translated from Russian)

**Interviewer:** First of all, can you please describe what are your responsibilities as a SMM manager of the store?

**Interviewee:** My task is to ensure growth of the audience of our brand followers on Instagram, develop content strategies, control content creation process and set target advertising if possible.

**Interviewer:** Is Candor present on other social media platforms?

**Interviewee:** No, only Instagram. We also have a Facebook account, but it was previously developed with a purpose of setting target advertising.

**Interviewer:** And can you please share your experience with setting target advertising? Did you face any limitations (counting the specifics of the business)?

**Interviewee:** Yes, unfortunately, the current policies of Instagram make it impossible for our business to use target advertising in a way that we would like to do. Our type of content gets under censorship even though it does not contain any explicit sexual content.

**Interviewer:** I see. Can you please describe your approach in terms of content strategies for your business?

**Interviewee:** Right now we try to have a sort of artistic and delicate approach in terms of visuals. It is important for us to promote the topic of sex as a normality and sensual process of everyone's life. We use a lot of minimalistic images and try to show the beauty of the human body. We also see our mission a lot in educating people about sex through discussions and destroying of false stereotypes regarding sexuality, intimate health, gender roles and sex itself.

**Interviewer:** Interesting, and as far as I remember, your initial content strategies were more graphical (sketches of couples, separate images of the goods on a plain background) why did you decide to change?

**Interviewee:** Yes, you are right. That was another attempt for a delicate approach that we tried to achieve through sensitive design images. But eventually we made a decision to make a rebranding and change of our brand identity to underline our uniqueness, our mission of promoting sex store as a place that helps you to understand yourself, but not some cliché vulgarity .

**Interviewer:** After rebranding you started to use more images of body parts in your content that included a direct sex appeal. How did your audience respond to that and did it affect the sales of the store?

**Interviewee:** Yes, absolutely, we noticed an increase in sales after the change and also our engagement rate grew accordingly.

**Interviewer:** Ukraine is a quite conservative country with a high percentage of religious people who are consequently more concerned about ethics. Have you faced any kind of criticism in terms of the sensitive content you choose to post?

**Interviewee:** No, we were lucky not to have any. We explain it with the relevance of content for the type of business. Since people understand "where they come to", they do not see any contradiction.

**Interviewer:** That's understandable. And what is in your opinion the future content trends for the industry? Do you think that with the spread of such ideologies as feminism and concerns about inequality there will be less interest in sex appeal?

**Interviewee:** No, we actually believe in the opposite. We think that with the spread of democratization of ethics, there will be even more acceptance of sex appeal.

**Interviewer:** All right, that would be all my questions, thank you very much for your time and the answers!

## **5. Appendix 5. - Interview with a SMM manager of a Ukrainian sex store "Candor place". (Original Russian)**

**Интервьюер:** для начала, не могли бы вы описать, каковы ваши обязанности как SMM-менеджера магазина?

**Опрашиваемый:** Моя задача - обеспечить рост аудитории подписчиков нашего бренда в Instagram, разработать контент-стратегии, контролировать процесс создания контента и по возможности настроить таргетинг рекламы.

**Интервьюер:** Присутствует ли Candor в других социальных сетях?

**Опрашиваемый:** Нет, только Instagram. У нас также есть учетная запись в Facebook, но ранее она была разработана с целью настройки целевой рекламы.

**Интервьюер:** Поделитесь, пожалуйста, своим опытом настройки целевой рекламы. Сталкивались ли вы с какими-либо ограничениями (с учетом специфики бизнеса)?

**Опрашиваемый:** Да, к сожалению, текущая политика Instagram не позволяет нашему бизнесу использовать целевую рекламу так, как нам хотелось бы. Наш контент подвергается цензуре, даже если он не содержит более сдержанные кадры сексуального характера.

**Интервьюер:** Понятно. Не могли бы вы описать свой подход с точки зрения контент-стратегий для вашего бизнеса?

**Опрашиваемый:** Сейчас мы стараемся использовать своего рода художественный и тонкий подход с точки зрения визуальных эффектов. Для нас важно продвигать тему секса как нормального и чувственного процесса в жизни каждого человека. Мы используем много минималистичных изображений и стараемся показать красоту человеческого тела. Мы также видим свою миссию в том, чтобы

информировать людей о сексе посредством дискуссий и разрушать ложные стереотипы относительно сексуальности, интимного здоровья, гендерных ролей и самого секса.

**Интервьюер:** Интересно, насколько я помню, ваши первоначальные контент-стратегии были более графичными (эскизы пар, отдельные изображения товаров на простом фоне), почему вы решили поменять подход?

**Опрашиваемый:** Да, вы правы. Это была еще одна попытка тонкого подхода, которого мы пытались достичь с помощью чувствительных дизайнерских изображений. Но в конце концов мы приняли решение провести ребрендинг и соответственно изменить айдентику нашего бренда, чтобы подчеркнуть нашу уникальность, нашу миссию по продвижению секс-шопа как места, которое помогает вам понять себя, а не какой-то пошлый магазин-клише.

**Интервьюер:** После ребрендинга вы начали использовать больше изображений частей тела в своем контенте, которые включали прямую сексуальную привлекательность. Как ваша аудитория отреагировала на это и повлияло ли это на продажи магазина?

**Опрашиваемый:** Да, безусловно, мы заметили рост продаж после изменения, а также, соответственно, вырос уровень нашей вовлеченности.

**Интервьюер:** Украина - довольно консервативная страна с высоким процентом религиозных людей, которые, следовательно, более озабочены этикой. Сталкивались ли вы с какой-либо критикой в отношении конфиденциального контента, который вы решили опубликовать?

**Опрашиваемый:** Нет, нам повезло, их не было. Объясняем это актуальностью контента для вида бизнеса. Поскольку люди понимают, «куда они пришли», они не видят никакого противоречия.

**Интервьюер:** Это вполне понятно. А каковы, по вашему мнению, будущие тенденции в области контента для отрасли? Как вы думаете, с распространением таких идеологий, как феминизм и озабоченность неравенством, будет меньше интереса к сексуальной привлекательности?

**Опрашиваемый:** Нет, мы действительно верим в обратное. Мы думаем, что с распространением демократизации этики признание сексуальной привлекательности будет еще больше.

**Интервьюер:** Хорошо, это все мои вопросы, большое спасибо за ваше время и ответы!