

Sex and violence may not really sell products

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If there's one thing advertisers think they know, it is that sex and violence sell.

A new analysis, however, provides some of the best evidence to date that this widely accepted adage just isn't true.

Researchers analyzed the results of 53 different experiments (a so-called meta-analysis) involving nearly 8,500 people, done over 44 years. All of these experiments examined some facet of the question of whether sexual or violent media content could help sell advertised products.

When all the results are considered together, the overall conclusion, with some caveats, is that programs featuring violence and sex aren't the ideal context for effective advertising, said Brad Bushman, co-author of the study and professor of communication and psychology at The Ohio State University.

It's not that people don't pay attention to sex and violence in the media, Bushman said. In fact, an evolutionary perspective would say it is just the opposite.

"People are so focused on the sex and violence they see in the media that they pay less attention to the advertising messages that appear along with it," Bushman said.

"Advertisers shouldn't be so sure that sex and violence can help them sell their products."

Bushman conducted the study with Robert Lull, who just earned his Ph.D. in communication at Ohio State. The results were published online yesterday in the journal *Psychological Bulletin* and will be featured in a future print edition.

Their analysis included studies involving a variety of types of media, including print, TV, movies and even a few video games. They examined studies in which the ads themselves contained sex or violence and studies in which only the media surrounding the ads contained such content.

In all cases, the researchers had studied whether sex and violence affected brand memory, brand attitudes and people's intention to buy the products advertised.

They found that memory for brands and ads was significantly impaired in programs containing sex, violence, or both sex and violence.

Overall, people had less favorable attitudes toward brands that advertised in violent media compared to neutral media. Only one study examined attitudes toward brands in sexual media and that pointed toward less favorable attitudes as well.

And people reported less intention to buy brands that were advertised in media containing violence, sex or both, compared to the same brands in media containing no sex or violence.

But what about ads that themselves featured sex and violence? Here, the findings were not as clear-cut. Overall, memory for brands that featured sex and violence was not impaired.

But attitudes toward brands that featured sexual ads were significantly lower than those same brands in neutral ads. Only one study examined attitudes toward brands in violent ads and those results also trended

toward less favorable attitudes.

Overall, buying intentions did not depend on whether the ad contained sex or violence.

While these overall conclusions were clear, Lull and Bushman found several nuances in the studies they examined.

Memory for ads and buying intentions were both improved when the ad content and the media content were matching in terms of sex and violence. For example, violent ads worked best when they were paired with violent programs, Lull said.

"If a TV program prompts violent or sexual thoughts, an ad that prompts similar thoughts will be better remembered," Lull said.

Sexual ads didn't hurt brand attitudes and buying intentions overall. But the higher the levels of sexual content in the ads, the more negative the attitude people had toward the brand and the less likely they were to say they would buy the product.

Older people in the studies were less likely to say they would buy products featured in violent or sexual ads, compared to younger people.

Men's brand memory was more impaired than women's when watching media content or ads featuring sexual or violent imagery.

"This fits in with evolutionary theory that suggests males pay more attention to violence and sex than women do," Lull said. "Because they're paying more attention to this content, they are less likely to remember the ads."

Another interesting finding was that memory impairments and negative

attitudes toward brands featured in violent or sexual ads have actually decreased over the past decades.

This study can't say for sure, but one explanation is that people have started to become desensitized to sex and [violence](#) in ads, Bushman said

"Viewers are so accustomed to seeing violent and sexual [media content](#) that they don't respond as much today to the attention-grabbing impact as they did in previous decades," he said.

Bushman said he is continuing work in his laboratory to examine the effects of violent [ads](#) on memory.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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