

WHEN THE MAGAZINE GIRL BEGS 'COME HITHER,' THE (FEMALE) READER YAWNS

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GAINESVILLE, Fla. --- For female magazine readers, sex doesn't sell so much as it...bores.

So conclude three University of Florida advertising professors in a new study that gauged young women's emotional responses to ads featuring beautiful women from Vogue, Allure and other women's magazines.

The hotter the model's attire or look, the more it left the women, well, cold, say UF's Robyn Goodman, Jon Morris, and John Sutherland. What the 100-plus college-age women surveyed in the study found far more appealing than provocative sex kittens were natural, pretty-in-an-everyday-way types, a look the researchers describe as wholesome.

"What we found is the way that the industry and the way that consumers are looking at beauty are totally different," said Goodman.

The study -- which won the top paper award in the advertising division at last month's Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication conference in San Francisco -- is partly of interest because it clashes with the sex-drenched conventions of glossy magazine advertising. According to Goodman, it also brings to light a looming disconnect between generally male executives of companies seeking to market their products and the female consumers they're trying so desperately to reach.

"If you look at most of the Fortune 500 companies, who are they run by? Men," Goodman said. "So, you're their advertising agency and you're pitching these ideas to these men. Well, men have a very specific idea of what's beautiful."

The situation is similar when it comes to fashion photography. "Most of the high fashion photographers are men," she said.

The researchers launched the study with the original goal of determining what sort of models epitomized six different types of beauty -- "classic feminine," "sensual exotic," "trendy,"

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etc. — that had been identified as advertising archetypes by earlier researchers.

Some 258 women looked at an identical set of photos, and then rated the models for how well the six types described each. All of the photos, which included celebrities like Uma Theron and Lindsay Lohan, had appeared in fashion magazines aimed specifically and uniquely at female consumers, including Vogue, Cosmopolitan and Allure.

Analysis of the numbers soon revealed that the six types collapsed two much more general categories – in a nutshell, sexy and wholesome. “When Uma was rated high ‘classic beauty,’ she was also rated high ‘cute’ and high ‘girl next door,’ so there’s not six types, there’s really only two,” Sutherland explained.

The researchers then had 127 women give their emotional responses to the models that best fit these two descriptions.

The results were unambiguous. The more lustful the models’ expressions and spare their attire, the more the women’s emotional reaction showed them to be bored or uninterested. The more the models smiled naturally and appeared to display a minimum of skin, the more appealing and the women found her reflecting feelings of joy and appreciation. And since the emotional response was gathered using a non-verbal technique, the women did not have direct insight into the outcome.

The researchers said the results may indicate that sex has become so commonplace as an advertising theme that consumers, or at least female consumers, are simply no longer interested and somewhat cynical. The study’s results are all the more intriguing because the young age of the survey’s respondents, they noted. They agreed the results would likely have been even more pronounced had older women been surveyed.

What’s the message for advertisers? First, that sex isn’t a guaranteed sell. “I think advertisers would say if you show a woman a sexy picture, many of them will want to emulate it, but I think this research shows that’s not true,” Morris said.

Second, that while sexual themes may be appropriate for some products and publications, it’s important to think more broadly and field test potential ads with consumers.

“Instead of taking the obvious or the easy route I think you really need to think about who your audience is, who you are trying to attract and what your brand image is,” Goodman said. “And if you’re saying ‘which direction should we go,’ error on the side of wholesome or classic beauty.”