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## A semiotics view through objectification of females in tourism related advertisements

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**Abstract:** Females take place in advertisements for different reasons and using them as sexual appeal content is one of them. Like all other industries, advertisers use females in advertisements and this causes the objectification of female which brings some negative consequences such as stereotypes against women and approve of violence against them in the tourism industry. It also marginalises women out of society by creating a perception as they belong to men and men's pleasure by serving them. There are numerous researches about this topic. However this research aims to explore the existence of objectification of females in tourism related advertisements by investigating hotels' picture galleries which are setup to promote hotels to their potential customers. Since nudity and sexuality are subjective terms, contents from literature and two different image sets are used to strengthen the discussion of this paper. Findings present how females become objects of sexual appeal in 5-star hotels' images.

**Keywords:** female objectification; nudity in tourism; sexual appeal in tourism; tourism advertisements; tourist images; semiotics.

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## **1 Introduction**

Men take advantage of women in patriarchal societies intentionally or unintentionally and women have long been believed to have the role of being a wife or a mother to serve her man or family. This has begun to change through last century after women began to take part in work life and gain her own living. Nevertheless perceptions with deep roots do not change fast and women today still struggle to find their deserved place in society.

Advertisements generally reflects societies since they target to communicate with them. Hence it is possible and actually quite common to find traces of gender stereotypes against women in advertisements. Moriarity (2000) says advertisement is a process of conversation with consumers about a product and it can be described as a mass communication event with a complex structure. However the problem about communication is the noise of rivals aiming the same consumer audience and attributes about attractiveness and appeals take place in that point. Sexual appeal is a common tactic to attract customers which is successfully used by advertisers by tens of years with especially nudity. Nevertheless this success comes with a price of gender stereotypes and objectification of females as sexual objects. Many cases has been researched about this phenomenon since it became common to use females for sexual appeal in advertising (Ganahl et al., 2003; Reichert and Carpenter, 2004; Frith et al., 2005).

No different than other industries, advertisers use same approaches to communicate with their customers and to get beyond their rivals in the tourism industry. This paper aims to investigate how females become object of sexual appeal in tourism related advertisements. As Nelson and Paek (2005) state in their research about nudity of females in TV commercials, advertisements are cross-cultural subject and need to be analysed among cultural norms and boundaries to better understand the effect of them. Before understanding their effect, it is necessary to explore their existence in a cultural perspective and therefore this research is designed with a semiotics approach. Nevertheless, most of researches were conducted by using content analysis about this subject. However, it is believed to be more useful to make an exploratory and interpretive research to fulfil the gap in literature of tourism industry and advertisement related to it.

## **2 Advertisement and sex appeals in it**

Advertisement is a message that spreads through different channels and tools to motivate consumers to purchase products or services (Çardaklı, 2008, p.23). Commercials go way back in history to promote marketing efforts and to achieve goals about profit. This is why advertisement campaigns play a vital role for companies in an era of free market and 'sacred' consumerism (Elden, 2013, p.135). Şener (2007, p.2) brings it further back stating social and economic needs of human triggered civilisations even before Christ to make advertisement efforts unintentionally, simply and in a featureless way unless printing press were invented in 15th century. No surprisingly, tourism commercial means advertisement efforts about tourism products and services in order to place or promote a touristic brand, product or service to make profit. Also, tourism is criticised in its 'mass' form in many ways and Korstanje (2012) states that mass tourism has some negative side effects on culture.

Researchers have understood the importance of visual images in advertisement efforts long ago (Scott, 1994) and so advertisement-makers do. Tendency to use male and

female in a commercial as a visual content can be dated back to 19th century (Reichert, 2004, p.11). Sullivan (2008, p.66) states the importance of visualisation in communication as defending visual contents are universally long standing messages.

It is common for advertisers to use sexual appeals in advertising to attract more attention for brand and to address emotions of consumers (Latour and Henthorne, 1994; Şener and Uztuğ, 2012). Emotional attractiveness as impetus for purchasing includes emotions such as joy, hope, happiness, excitement, anger, regret and nostalgia and also aims to provide some feelings as sexuality, humour and admiration-like feelings (Yılmaz, 2007). Sexual appeals might make it easy to remember a message or a brand in a commercial, because they are attention grabbing contents (Shimp, 2007). Marketers use sexuality in advertisements since modern marketing era has begun (Sivulka, 2003). Although using sex appeal in advertisement is a well-known phenomenon, using overt sexuality in wide range of commercials keeps this topic fresh in advertisers' and researchers' book (De Barnier and Valette-Florence, 2006).

Some features of sexual appeals in advertisements are; physical attributes (behaviours, attitude and voice of model), visual attributes (camera angle, recording effects etc.), distance (physical distance between models and interaction), voyeur (impression of desire to have sexual intercourse with viewer) (Reichert and Ramirez, 2000). A positive feeling in a sexually attractive commercial means positive attitude towards the brand advertised (MacInnis and Jaworski, 1989). Men are more prone to give positive reactions than women to advertisements with sexual appeal contents (LaTour and Henthorne, 1993). Marketing researches on sexual appeal attractiveness do not necessarily involve only for purchasing behaviour but also contribute to experts about how to use this temptation in their favour (Reichert and Lambiase, 2003, p.2).

Sexually attractive figures and images take place themselves in advertisements recently and they usually target young audiences and especially Y generation (Reichert and Carpenter, 2004; Loroç, 2006). Early findings about advertisements targeting young audiences are still an ongoing phenomenon. Ibroscheva (2013) says advertisers still use sex as a commercial sale tool by lack of creativity or professionalism or just believing the thought "sex sells". An opposing claim about that is advertisement makers have no secret agenda about using suggestively or overt sexuality in advertisement and they simply use most effective message to target audience (Saad, 2012).

There are many researches about advertising including sexual appeals or gender stereotypes defining and defending different aspect of this complex communication process involves cross cultural brands or consumers. According to Johansson (1999), western oriented commercials including female figures symbolise anything that Chinese females cannot have such as self-confidence, attractiveness and being equal to male partners. On the other hand Chinese women are visualised as childish on those commercials. Nelson and Paek (2005) states an advertiser in an authoritarian government might not freely use nudity or foreign models in advertisement. However their colleagues in France or Thailand would have more freedom to use nudity or any models to fit in message.

There are quite researches emphasising nudity in advertisement is harmful for both product and the image of the brand (Peterson and Kerin, 1977; Alexander and Judd, 1979; Richmond and Hartman, 1982). Consumers might refuse the message of the advertisement due to moral ethics and this will change their attitude toward the brand negatively (Şahin, 2014, p.93). Religious factors might be another reason for a consumer to ignore or even worse, boil over about the advertisement including sexual appeals

(Putrevu and Swimberghek, 2013). Theologically speaking, using sexual appeals in advertisement is not attractive to viewers and has negative side effects (Gould, 1994).

It is a pity that females are still used in commercials as a sexuality object and this causes the myth of defining females a tool for male's pleasure (Capella et al., 2010). Some marketers stay away using suggestive sexual appeals in advertising due to it would trigger public constitution to restrict the delivery of such commercials (Luk et al., 2017). Another power of advertisement and especially the ones with sexual content is the ability of defining a phenomenon. Once a stereotype is made and sent among audiences, it becomes a norm in time (Cranny-Francis et al., 2003, pp.142–143). As another view, using nudity related to the product has positive impact on attitude toward the brand while there is no significant difference between genders (Chang and Tseng, 2013). Putrevu (2008) also states that sexual images would be useful for audiences for lower or intermediate interest about the product.

Nudity is a way of giving information that is presented in advertisements. It has a range of partial nudity to being completely naked which is highly irregular in advertising. Most advertisement include partial nudity or showing the model from the side or behind perspective (Reichert, 2003). Sexual appeal means to explicitly display male or female body which evokes sexuality (Richmond and Hartman, 1982). Nudity and gender effects human life socially beyond being natural processes (Abbott, 2004, p.82). Advertisers use mostly female naked and well shaped bodies (Shields and Heinecken, 2002). Nevertheless, patriarchal and old-line communities refuse to tolerate nudity in advertisement just like they do in social life (Hatfield and Rapson, 1996). People now give tremendous importance to their looking by taking care of their bodies and this effects relations between society (Öksüz, 2012). Advertisements describe the portrait of sexy women as healthy looking, athletic, having a high self-esteem and confidence with partially nude clothing and female nudity is way more common than males in advertisements (Karaca and Papatya, 2011).

### **3 Objectification of women as sex-appeal in advertisement**

There is a relation between violence against women and media content about sexual objectification of women according to many researches (Bronstein, 2008). Stern (1991) defines using sexuality in advertising as commercial pornography. After using female sexual appeal content in advertising with Asian female models in Australia, cases occurred about prostituting and trafficking of Asian women in Australia to please men (Street and Norma, 2016).

Defining women with sexual concept and claiming that what is important about women is their sexual behaviour (like in pornography) will result as repulsing women out of society and even from being a human (Jhally, 1987, p.138). By cultural and ideological view, pointing only women's sexual-appeal side means exploiting females and leaving the control and rulership to men without audit (Aytekin, 2018) and this leads to rape myth discovered by social sciences instructors which emphasise harassment of women sexually against their will (Boddewyn and Kunz, 1991).

Nevertheless, interpreting the message of an advertisement is a subjective process and anything regarded as sexually offensive might be read innocent or interesting by another person or another culture (Sverdrup and Sto, 1992). There is opposing idea about usefulness of objectification of females sexually stating that women are highly restricted

by intimacy in society and it may free them by showing women nudity is no taboo so women will have more space of freedom in daily life (Giddens, 1992).

While using women figure in advertising, one should avoid stereotypes against women (decorative woman, traditional woman etc.) since it would cause negative perception towards the advertisement (Theodoridis et al., 2013). Gender stereotypes are common beliefs related to behavioural and psychological aspects of women and men (Browne, 1998) which became a problem for advertising in 1970s (Wolin, 2003). Advertisements are criticised to use gender stereotypes such as unrealistic forms of women in shape or in social life (Furnham and Mak, 1999) which causes women to lose confidence to stand against gender inequality and also lower their expectations about that (Plakoyiannaki and Zotos, 2020). According to a stereotypical pattern, women are usually weak, dependent, emotional and nutritive while men being powerful, independent and stubborn as opposite (Meyers-Levy, 1988). There are also common patterns of stereotypes towards women as housewife (taking care of housework, children and husband), trophy (a beautiful woman is a success for her man), sexual object (nudity and seductive looks, sexually appealing), object of beauty (youth, lovely face) used in advertisements (Middleton et al., 2020).

#### **4 Method**

This paper aims to investigate use of females as sexual appeal objects in tourism advertisement interpretively. Hence a semiotics/semiology approach is used to construct this research with gathering and analysing data. It is arguable to use semiotics approach in an advertising analysis since most of researches which are similar to this use a basic or detailed content analysis approach. Nevertheless this is not a generic paper nor it is not an inductive research and it is believed to be more suitable to use semiotics approach to enlighten and disclosure the investigated topic. Korstanje (2017) spotted a possible obstacle about researches on tourism field that, researchers mostly concentrates on structured questionnaires or interviews, but tourists might or might not know the exact reasons for their behaviours.

Language, gesture, documents, art and religious have all some signs of a certain meaning to communicate and the system of those signs is named as semiotics. Since it is used for both creating and delivering meanings, semiotics is also called as structure of meaning (Echtner, 1999). Although it is not the subject of this paper, there is a debate about the using of words semiotics and semiology which might be necessary to mention to better establish the methodological foundation of this research. Semiology is known for the elder version of semiotics that was put forward by Ferdinand de Saussure which is also often associated with European point of view. Semiotics was first expressed by Charles Sanders Pierce to analyse both verbal and nonverbal meaning of signs and most researchers claim they are both pretty much the same.

Although semiotics is a qualitative approach, development of semiotics researches benefited from some earlier quantitative-perspective researches which are more likely to adopt content analysis.

Langholz-Leymore (1975, p.21) says there is no standard structure of a research but there are several structural scales to measure nudity or sexual appeal levels to investigate signs. Triandis (1995) used a five level scale similar to likert system as 0 point means no nudity and fully clothed models, 1 = partially sexy looking, 2 = suggestively sexual but

mostly clothed including miniskirts etc. 3 = partially clothed but mostly nude with sexy looking with underwear only or bikinis, 4 = complete nude or just underwear.

Another structural approach by Reichert and Ramirez (2000) have different dimension about sexual appeals and physical attributes dimension would fit for his research which concentrates clothes (half naked, completely naked or tight dress), attractiveness (beautiful model, nice looking), body (cleavage, naked legs or back). These two structural approaches guided to analyses of this research to strengthen the validity of judgement.

Antalya destination -which is highly popular in Mediterranean region and in Turkey- is chosen for gathering data and only 5-star hotels are taken into consideration. This paper concentrates on images that take place on websites of some 5-star hotels. To provide being objective, hotels were completely randomly selected. Halal or romance concept hotels are left out of search due to halal tourism approach has restrictions about female nudity and on the contrary romance concept hotels highlight it. 21 hotels in different spots of Antalya were viewed by researchers but only 6 of them are analysed because others had no visual gallery on their website or there were no figure of females to analyse. Six images with objectification of females are shown and discussed in findings according to semiotics approach and in addition to that 6 other images that includes females without sexually objectification to better understand the point of view of researchers.

## **5 Findings and discussion**

Six images from 5-star hotels located in Antalya are analysed in semiotics approach which have objectification of females as sexual appeal. There is also another set of 6 other image from same hotels which have no objectification sexually to compare the emphasise of nudity or sexuality perspective. There are numbers in a suitable corner of each image to clarify discussion about them.

Figure 1(1) is a sign of a young woman standing by a pool in a lovely sunny day. Signifier here is a young beautiful female with blonde hair and a white bikini. She seems highly healthy and athletic. She is the focus of the image that all other people behind her seems blur. What is signified here is a sexy and confident looking female enjoying her vacation separated from others as being 'one'. There is a contrast between tan skin and white colour of bikini which evokes freedom and purity. This image is quite similar to common belief stated by Marshment (1997, p.19) "women in tourism brochures are almost always in swimsuits".

In Figure 1(2), a young female and a male laying on lounge with a glass of drink, probably champagne, on their hands (sign). Young woman wearing a white bikini and sun glasses, she seems confident and comfortable. Her skin looks tan and her legs are smooth. She is the primary focus of the image and male partner in image stays in rear (signifier). Image tells a sexy looking female having her vacation with her male partner, she is confident while eyes-on-her with white bikini just like in first image that evokes freedom and purity(signified). Small (2017) states that woman body in pools and beaches are always under surveillance.

It is seen a young female is getting message by a male in Figure 1(3) (sign). Surrounding seems like a hotel or a holiday village garden, female is laying on massage table topless and male masseuse is touching female gently (signifier). It seems quite

comfortable and pleasing laying on massage table half naked. There is an indirect message of freedom and courage because a female is getting massage in a public place (it is clearly seen that it is not a massage room, there are other people behind in and outdoor place). There is also meaning of superiority since female is getting the massage by a male (signified).

**Figure 1** Sexual appeal images (see online version for colours)



In Figure 1(4), a woman is sitting on the floor of a Turkish bath (hamam) with towel around her and some fruits (sign). Female is young and looking fit as usual. She has no clothes and completely naked but a towel covering some parts of her. She looks directly to viewers' perspective (signifier). It is a sexy and sexually attractive activity to be in bath with authentic surrounding enriched with fruits. The sitting position evokes orient culture with preferring the colour of blue in towels that usually represents calming and cool. An image to make others jealous who are not there (signified).

Another young female is laying on a bed with bikinis and enjoying her time while raising her legs up in Figure 1(5) (sign). She is young and pretty, wearing sun glasses and a black bikini, her skin looks tan, there is a bottle of drink, probably fruit cocktail near her. There is a ring in her finger and white teeth are impossible to ignore (signifier). She seems sexually attractive with her bikinis and raising her legs up are intentional for posing. Although it is arguable, her smile and looking through viewers' perspective might be considered as suggestively inviting.

There is again a young female in Figure 1(6) sitting on a tub having a lovely time in an authentic and romantic bath (sign). She is partially naked and image shows her from back. At least it can be assumed she is topless, looking behind naïve. She has a glass of drink, champagne most likely, some flowers around tub, towels, candles and perfumes or shampoos around her (signifier). It is pleasing and sexually attractive looking to be in a tub with romantic and relaxing surrounding. The element of contrast can be seen in different aspects to emphasise authenticity such as wooden covering of a bath which is unusual due to nature of material, wall ceilings with black, white and grey colours (signified).



In Figure 2(1), a group of young females and a male are standing and sitting together looking at a female while she is talking (sign). All females are dressed up according to a lovely warm day of summer or spring. There is no nudity suggestively or overtly. Male is holding a bottle of champagne and each females are holding a glass of it. They all look smiling while one female is looking like giving a speech in a place like balcony (signifier). People can have good time here with friends or family members while enjoying their view of green garden and blue sea (signified). There is no suggestive meaning of sexuality even so putting the woman in the centre of the image.

**Figure 2** Non sexual appeal images (see online version for colours)



In Figure 2(2), a female and male sitting on a table talking and ordering food or drinks in a restaurant most likely (sign). A young female with blonde hair dressed properly for a nice dinner perhaps, and a young male holding menu paper and prefers wine seemingly and considering his options from menu. A stylish looking young female is also standing in rear, she might be another customer just entering the restaurant or she might be a waitress giving her customers space and time to think about their order (signifier). Friends or couple having good time with a neat surrounding without harassment (signified). No sexual appeal content in it.

There is a young female choosing and collecting fruits into her plate in Figure 2(3) (sign). The female is young, wearing casual dresses proper to surrounding and holiday without nudity. She seems having pleasant time around. Fruit booth (meyveci) is written on the plate (signifier). It is a healthy hotel with fruit buffet in an authentic surrounding (signified) without any sexual connotation. Contrast of colours create a charming surrounding.

There is young female with her son probably, taking meal from food buffet (sign) in Figure 2(4). Female looks young and the boy seems confident around her and letting her fill his plate. It seems like a buffet breakfast concept (signifier). Female is signified as mother in this image, helping and guiding her son (most likely) with healthy and delicious foods which suits with the stereotype about woman being a nutritive and caretaker for her family. Image is inviting for young females with child/children suggestively telling it is a suitable place for families (signified).



In Figure 2(5) two females are sitting on a table for lunch while a waiter is serving them (sign). The conclusion of 'lunch' comes from daylight and there is no artificial lighting. Both females are young and seems beautiful and dressed proper for a nice lunch. Meals are already served and waiter is pouring probably wine for females (signifier). The place is suitable to have good time and lunch with friends by neat service and surrounding (signified) and there is no connotation of sexuality. Also both women in white clothing represents being clean and neat.

Two females taking care of a baby girl while having appetiser in terrace (sign) in Figure 2(6). Both females are young, they are smiling and enjoying being with baby girl. There are soft drink in front of them looking like fruit cocktail. There is also a plate of fruit. Females are wearing bikinis but they are not highlighted (signifier). It is a nice place to enjoy time with family or friends and even for a baby. Healthy appetisers and drinks are served there in pool bar (according to wearing bikinis). This image also fits to stereotypes towards women about their role as housewife who takes care of children and plays a nutritive part (signified).

All the images in Figure 1 includes sexual appeal by objectification of females according to semiotics perspective of researchers which is supported by literature. Complete or half naked visualisation, looking sexually inviting suggestively and posing to show off a nice body leads to objectification of females as sexual appeals. On the other hand, Figure 2 shows it is not necessarily an obligation to emphasise onto sexual attractiveness of a female to promote a facility or services. Females can be described while eating, having good time with friends and male partners and even with bikinis without objectification them as sexual appeal.

One can argue that it is inevitable to picture females with bikinis or at least partially naked poses in a sea-sun-sand concept hotel. However, concentrating solely on females with suggestive looking or focusing on their bodies are main reasons for this paper to come into existence. Figure 1(2) is a good example for focusing female body leaving male behind with slightly blur focus. Females, males and children can enjoy their time in holidays with doing entertaining things such as dancing, swimming, playing or making extraordinary poses but Figure 1(5) is an interesting and questionable way of showing a female on a hotel promotion image. Further comments will be explained in the next part but simply saying, focusing on females and their bodies will have a high chance of getting a conclusion of "we have lovely and sexually attractive females here" which is an annoying result with consequences.

## **6 Conclusion and implications**

Objectification theory tells that women are only exist for others' consume and they have no self-being (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). This itself explains the consequences of using females as sexual appeal objects in advertisements. Stankiewicz and Rosselli (2008) found out in their research among 1988 magazines that females are used as sexuality appearances in male magazines. There is also an example of objectification of females in a cosmetic surgery advertisement as sexual attractiveness (Hennink-Kaminski and Reichert, 2011). Another early research in Australia showed women take place in advertisement as a housewife or as a sexual appeal object (Wyndham, 1983). Another critical finding tells that men who watch commercials with female nudity tend to approve violence against females and rape myths (Lanis and Covell, 1995). One other finding

which can be considered as opposite to that is masculinity has no direct impact on perception of gender stereotypes (Odekerken-Schröder et al., 2002).

Findings tell that females are showed both alone or with female and male partners while objectification as sexual appeal in images especially with complete or partial nudity. Poolside or bath places are most common to picture female half naked. There are some cheats separating images from almost being pornographic such as covering some parts of body. Another trick to objectification is to manipulate images as technically focusing on female body as leaving background behind by light or blur. The message to viewer females is “you can be as sexy as this model looks, all you need is to come here and enjoy our facility and experience it” and the message to viewer male simply “there are sexy females here” which brings us to discussion of objectification. On the other hand, females take place in tourism as subject rather than being object, it is beneficial for them according to research paper investigates rural impacts of tourism that brings the benefits of being empowered and confident (Xiang et al., 2015)

Sexual appeal in advertising has some negative side effects beside gender stereotypes as Şener (2007) says it is a fact that nudity in advertisement might not be welcomed by some and in addition to that some audience might misunderstand the message of the advertisement effort. Kitsa and Mudra (2019) claim that using females as a sexual object also affect women’s mental health negatively. Also, it is highly possible to fire up the prejudice toward women about the perception of sexual object which might led to offensive and even aggressive behaviour toward females. This will surely bring many negative impacts reaching beyond the impacts within tourism activities such as damaging equilibrium between males and females in social life. On the other hand, Bandyopadhyay (2013) comes forward with an interesting view as what happens when Eastern male tourists visit West – a place to be perceived with females having no moral values according to media – increasingly from their native countries where many western tourists visit for sex tourism motivation (not necessarily for solely with this motivation). Surely, this is a possible problem requiring to be answered and to be avoided before further damage is done.

## **7 Limitations and suggestions**

This paper’s main aim is not to discuss objectification theory or its consequences and thus there is limited information about this phenomenon. An enlarged research including both explorative and explanatory approaches might fulfil the gap to establish the subject. This paper is designed as an interpretive research and further research is needed to achieve inductive results.

After sociological discussions about the woman in daily life, various researches are made in the name of marketing and management fields and one can argue that using females as a sexuality object is a well-established topic with solid theoretical framework. Nevertheless, social and cultural phenomenon are everlasting changing and the lack of current literature is both a limitation for this paper and also a suggestion for furthers researches with current social facts.

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