

Use of the female image in media: A content analysis of magazine covers with presence in social media

Uso de la imagen femenina en medios: Análisis de contenido de las portadas de revistas con presencia en redes sociales

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Abstract

In order to determine the use of the female image on the covers of major magazines in Ecuador, an analysis of psycholinguistic content is carried out from two points of view: investigation of the types of sexual information in advertising based on the theory of Courtney, Whipple and Reichert and the relevance according to the Sperber and Wilson Model of the lexical-semantic nexus between the texts and the images referred to. Facebook covers were examined (n=392): in 45.7% there was at least one woman, in 18.1% there was at least one man and in 36.2% there was human absence. In addition, in 23.5% of the covers there was some degree of nudity and a 39.5% suggestion of eroticism. On the covers in which there was at least one woman, 82.7% were found to contain a suggestion of eroticism and the use of implicatures through ostensive stimuli was evidenced up to 79.5%.

Keywords: female image in media, magazines, sex in advertising.

Resumen

Para determinar el uso de la imagen femenina en las portadas de revistas de mayor tiraje del Ecuador se realiza un análisis de contenido psicolingüístico desde dos vertientes: indagación de los tipos de información sexual en la publicidad basado en la teoría de Courtney, Whipple y Reichert y la relevancia según el Modelo de Sperber y Wilson sobre el nexo léxico-semántico entre los textos y las imágenes referidas. Se examinaron las portadas en Facebook (n=392): en el 45,7% hubo al menos una mujer, en el 18,1% al menos un hombre y en el 36,2% hubo ausencia humana. Además, en el 23,5% de las portadas hubo algún grado de desnudez y un 39,5% de sugerencia de erotismo. En las portadas en las que al menos hubo una mujer se halló que un 82,7% contenía sugerencia de erotismo y se evidenció el uso de implicaturas a través de estímulos ostensivos hasta de 79,5%.

Palabras Clave: imagen femenina en medios, revistas, sexo en la publicidad.

1. Introduction

Human communication is a complex social fact that depends, among other factors, on cognition, culture, beliefs and communicative habits of the speakers or users of a language. In general, communication is structured under a principle of belongingness, in which the interlocutors seek to be appropriate to the communicative situation. Sperber and Wilson (1996) state that communication is successful not when listeners recognize the linguistic meaning of the expression, but rather when they deduce from it the “meaning” of what the speaker intends to express. Therefore, the belongingness depends on the interlocutors being implicitly in agreement in what they are trying to express and also remain in the same system of cultural and linguistic beliefs.

One of the aspects that advertising works is the communicative context and from the linguistic point of view is the pragmatics which takes on studying this context and explains how it works. Thus, one of the theories associated with the pragmatics realm is the Theory of Relevance by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1987) that advocates for an inferential model of communication and not just the traditional model of code, thought of as a process of coding and decoding. The inferential process is more integral and complex given that the techniques of pragmatic study allow the analysis of the semantics of the enunciated in a determined context.

In that sense, advertising takes on management of the polysemic complexity of language and make it of service to the market; it has the power to guide, intentionally, the thoughts of its audience, their social and cultural perceptions, stored in the “collective unconscious” to interweave with the semantic and pragmatic richness of the language. The perception of meaning thus becomes, in the advertising world, a metaphor of reality to induce consumption. In order to achieve this, advertising uses multiple types of appellations, that bring the consumer to create illusions, ideal or idealized situations that create consumption tendencies. One type of appellation is sexual which is often used in advertising directed towards the consumer (Percy & Rossiter, 1992). As a mechanism to call consumer attention, it is very common to see in the advertising of mass media the use of sexual stim-

uli (Hyllegard, Yan, Ogle, & Attmann, 2010). Some research has indicated an increase in the use of sexual stimulus directed at women (American Psychological Association, 2007). In addition, there is the use of more feminine models that appear with an evident degree of nudity and partners in positions that suggest sexual relations (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008). Some numbers that show this increase in the use of sexual appellations in different communication media are: 59% of music videos show women as sexual stimuli (Zhang, Dixon, & Conrad, 2010), 43% of women dressed sexy in magazine advertisements (Carpenter & Reichert, 2004) and 41% of women on TV wore revealing clothing (Downs & Smith, 2010).

But, what are the cultural values or perceptions that advertising influences on social media in Ecuador? Nowadays, is the feminine image the great ostensive-inferential mechanism that sells products and which has been abused? According to research carried out by Brito-Rhor, Rodríguez-Herráez & Chachalo-Carvajal (2019) in Ecuador, women showed a more feminist attitude than that of Ecuadorian men. In addition, the higher the degree of nudity used in the digital ad, the more negative the ethical attitude. In addition, there was a more noticeable negative attitude towards the advertisement that represented hostile sexism. Another study conducted with Ecuadorian women (Brito, 2019), concluded that there is a positive relationship with the type of sexual stimuli used (good/bad taste or more/less intense) and the intent to purchase. From here we take the central theme of analysis in this article being the fixed feminine image on Facebook covers.

We know that advertising evolves with the consumer. The times we live in are submerged in access to different information technologies, internet and social media. In fact, by March 2018, Facebook had over 2.2 billion active users worldwide, of which Ecuador had over 11 million registered users as of December 2017 (Facebook IQ, 2018). This universe of potential purchasers had to be fully taken advantage of, and therefore any company seeking to make its brand public has been forced to adapt and open new communication channels on social networks, that show as novelty higher interactivity with possible customers and higher immediacy

in responses as to their preferences and observations in regards to the product.

With the object of determining the use of the feminine figure in Ecuador's most popular magazines, an analysis of the psycho-linguistic content was performed using two perspective exploring the types of sexual information in advertising based on the theory of Courtney, Whipple and Reichert and the relevance according to the Sperber and Wilson Model of the lexical-semantic nexus between the texts and the images implied.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Sexual Appeal in Advertising

Rational advertising reveals the product's basic features, its special characteristics, and qualities. In addition, it aims to show the product, turning it into a metaphor of feelings and emotions based on the communicative context of the potential consumer. Quoting Sáez (2003), Martínez-Rodrigo and Sánchez-Martín (2011) state that advertising "proposes for us a way of understanding social values at play that will be a way of reasoning that is convenient to them in order to convince us that with the products we are going to comply with the ideological form that they instill" (p.471). Following this, one of the figures used and/or idealized to the extreme is that of the feminine image. On many occasions, advertising associates the feminine image with sexuality.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), sexuality is defined as "a central aspect of the human being throughout its life, which includes sex, identities and gender roles, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, reproduction and sexual orientation" (Molina & Tejada, 2017, p. 19). The word sex has various meanings depending on the field of research in which it is used. Sex researchers, social psychologists and marketing specialists define sexual information as sexual stimulus to which a sexual meaning is attributed (Reichert & Lambiase, 2012). On the other hand, advertising itself is an applied form of persuasion that aims to: inform, position, convince, reinforce and differentiate; to

reach various objectives like, for example, selling products and/or services, improve brand image, and educate the public, among others (O'Guinn, Allen & Semenik, 2012; Reichert & Lambiase, 2012). Furthermore, advertising has to be paid and disseminated via different media with the aim to persuade (O'Guinn, Allen, & Semenik, 2012). One type of marketing stimuli is the sexual one and it is defined as messages in different media containing sexual information. One of the purposes of using sexual stimuli in advertising is persuading consumers to buy a brand. Sex in advertising is the reflection of sexuality in the form of nudity, sexual images, insinuations, and double meaning (Carpenter & Reichert, 2004). Some global brands that use sex appeal as an advertising tool are Victoria's Secret, Dolce & Gabbana, Calvin Klein, Armani, Gucci, and Tommy Hilfiger, among others (Reichert & Lambiase, 2012).

According to the definition of sex and advertising, sex appeals are persuasive resources that contain sexual information which is integrated into the general message (Reichert, Heckler & Jackson, 2001). Sexual content in advertising is diverse; however, it could be defined as those stimuli within the advertisement that people interpret as sexual (Reichert & Ramirez, 2000).

The first examples of sexual stimuli used in advertising go back to 1850. Tobacco companies already used naked women on their boxes as a differentiating factor from other brands (Goodrum & Dalrymple, 1990). Over the years, it has become evident that use of eroticism in advertising has increased and is more and more explicit. Take, for example, the R&G Corsets advertisement that was censored by some periodicals in 1898; and if we compare them with the ads today, they are quite different in terms of sexual explicitness. The first brand to break the taboo of using ads in mass media, showing buttocks and penises was Calvin Klein in 1983 with its underwear campaign (Reichert & Lambiase, 2012).

A study carried out by Reichert and Lambiase (2003) revealed that sexual appeals are directed at both men and women. Nevertheless, a large number of ads with sexual content appear in men's magazines (12%) compared to those appearing in

women's (6%). Sexual appeals directed towards women focus on attraction, behavior, and esteem; while on the other hand, sexual appeals targeting male audience highlights "more and better sex". Additionally, images containing only men were very few compared to the images containing only women (45%) or couples (47%).

Commonly, the goal of applying the strategy of the creative message, using sexual stimuli in advertising, is achieving an emotional connection or association with the consumer (O'Guinn, Allen & Semenik, 2012). However, there is research that indicates both positive and negative effects in terms of the role sexual appellations play in advertising.

Sexual stimulus in advertising must be congruent with its own image, whether real or ideal, with the purpose of serving as a link between the spectator of the advert and the product advertised (Wilson & Moore, 1979). In addition, according to the Arousal Theory, an advert with sexual content, must cause emotional and physiological responses that can be detected by heart rate, breathing patterns, goosebumps, pupil dilation and eye movement (Wilson & Moore, 1979). To all these variables or characteristics of the consumer, one must recognize that we human beings have a value system, values that are molded by our culture and beliefs acquired from the environment in which we are raised and developed, and that certainly are going to mediate people's response to a sexual stimulus.

A successful ad works because it creates a connection between the product or service being promoted and some need or desire that the audience perceives (Reichert & Lambiase, 2012). These connections or links are called "apellations" that are usually: logical or rational and emotional.

A consumer's emotional response influences his or her attitude both towards the advert and the brand (Lee, Lee & Harrell, 2002). Research shows that an emotional appellation in advertising calls more attention and increases the attractiveness of the product, message, and remembrance of the brand (Hazlett & Hazlett, 1999). Advertisers use various appellations, positive and negative, in order to trigger an emotional response in the consumer (O'Guinn, Allen & Semenik, 2012). Over the

years, advertisers have used a variety of advertising appellations such as: fear, humor, sex, music, rationality, emotions, and scarcity (Baack & Clow, 2007).

Sexual appellations in advertising use sexuality in the form of nudity, sexual images, insinuations and double entendre. They are messages in different communication media, that contain sexual information, in order to increase the effectiveness of the advertising such as call attention and persuade people to buy the brand (Carpenter & Reichert, 2004; Reichert, Latour & Kim, 2007; Reichert & Lambiase, 2012).

2.2. Relevance Theory

The Relevance Theory that we use in this study to verify the psycholinguistic use in Ecuadorian advertising when using the feminine image stems from the pragmatic studies of Grice, specifically from the Cooperation Principle and its corresponding rules: aspect, amount, relation and mode (Grice, 1961). Sperber and Wilson (1996) start with their theory of the maxim of relation or of relevance that supports the inferential model as a cognitive process. This mental process, like any other biological process states Moya (2006), takes place:

Using an effort or a given energy spent on its execution, that effect of processing of an advert (productive and interpretative) is a negative factor given that the higher the amount of energy used, the lesser the degree of relevance it has (p. 33).

Therefore, a message is relevant in terms of directly proportional gradation, which is to say, it is more relevant when the cognitive processing effort is less and vice versa. We must add that the context is not always a given, but rather the interlocutor chooses what seems most relevant, which leads to a satisfactory interpretation (for both parties) and that implies the least cognitive effort. It is done in such a way that text and context intertwine in a macro-structure, that according to Van Dijk (1980) involves two cognitive functions that reduce and integrate the information and at the same time in-

tegrate and reorganize it according to its degree of relevance.

What is relevant within a communicative process? Wilson and Sperber (2004) clarify this point for us: "any external stimulus or internal representation that serves as input of a cognitive process could be considered relevant for a subject on a determined occasion" (p.239). This is such that all information that can be recognized as significant and that also implies a degree of low effort, will be relevant. For this point, Wilson and Sperber (2004) distinguish between explicatures, cognitive process in which in first instance, the meaning of an advert is decoded or understood, and implicatures, cognitive process during which the meaning of the advert is completed based on interlocutor's communicative context. These implicatures will be successful via what is called ostensive stimulus on which lies the presumption of optimum relevance, which is to say that it is legitimized by the receptor based on its context (cognitive, cultural or preference).

Advertising uses the implicatures given that seek to persuade and do it based on concepts that are "universal" or common to the communicative context of the market segment which it desires to reach and attract, which stimulates consumer behavior and produces reactions of high relevance with less effort.

3. Methodology

With the goal of determining advertising use of the feminine figure in the best-selling magazines of Ecuador: *Vistazo*, *Hogar*, *Cosas*, *Ekos*, and *América Economía*; an objective, quantitative, systematic, and psycholinguistic content analysis was conducted applying two perspectives: analysis of sexual stimuli reflected in nudity and suggestive eroticism and the relevance of the pragmatic-inferential nexus between the texts and the referred images.

For sampling the best-selling magazines in Ecuador, information was gathered from different digital directories listing all the magazines circulating in Ecuador. Then, we personally visited the main points of magazine sales to confirm that indeed they were at the point of sale and verify if there was some other magazine that was not listed in the

digital directories reviewed. Later, we visited the websites of all the magazines listed to get information on the average number of copies put on sale per year from 2012 to 2017. Once we had the name of the magazine and its respective number of copies sold or average annual circulation, we verified that they were present on the world's largest social network, Facebook, and then, the five most popular magazines were chosen that would make up a circulation of over 1 million copies annually. Table 1 describes the five magazines chosen for analysis in this study.

All the covers posted in Facebook by the magazines chosen from February 2012 to December 2017 were analyzed (n=392; *Vistazo* 131, *Hogar* 88, *Cosas* 73, *Ekos* 79 and *América Economía* 21). When there was a woman on one of the covers posted, we proceeded to analyze whether or not it had a sexual-type focus. Primarily, the quantity and type of clothing was analyzed: day-to-day, suggestive, partial nudity or undressed. We immediately analyzed the presence of any type of suggested eroticism like: physical beauty, visual contact, facial expression, posture and other erotic-sexual factors (Table 2). The covers were codified by two previously-trained people with master's degrees, experts in linguistics and marketing. Both worked independently and all discrepancies were discussed by the codifiers until agreement was reached.

4. Results and conclusions

After having conducted a content analysis of the 392 Facebook covers, the results are the following: 45.7% use at least one woman, 18.1% use at least one man, and 36.2% of the ads do not show a human figure (Table 3). In 23.5% of the ads, there is some degree of nudity and also 39.5% showed suggestion of eroticism.

On the other hand, there is the use of implicatures, which is to say non-conventional interpretation, via ostensive stimuli (notable use of the feminine figure) of up to 79.54% on the covers with the presence of at least one woman. From the aforementioned, there is a significant relationship between the chosen magazine and its preference to choose women, men as models, or neither. *Hogar* (82.02%) and *Cosas* (79.45%) use women in their ads much more

Table 1. Description of best-selling magazines in Ecuador

Magazine	Description
1. Vistazo	Ecuador's first magazine founded in 1957. For over 60 years, it offers journalism that is accurate, pluralist and head on. It gathers the most diverse points of view of the people and events of national and international notoriety. Coverage: Nacional Website: https://www.vistazo.com/ Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/revistavistazo
2. Cosas Ecuador	This international magazine arrived in Ecuador in 1995. For over 20 years brings glamour, art, and current events. If it's in COSAS, it happened! COSAS is found in Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Nicaragua and Ecuador. Coverage: Nacional Website: https://cosas.com.ec/ Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/RevistaCosasEcuador
3. Hogar	Women's magazine founded in 1964. For over 50 years, brings you the world of fashion, beauty, cooking, decoration, health and much more for today's woman. Coverage: Nacional Website: http://www.revistahogar.com/ Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/RevistaHogar
4. Ekos	Magazine on business, management, companies and technology founded in 1994. With an over 20-year history, you'll find strategic information and knowledge for effective management-level decision making. Coverage: Nacional Website: http://www.ekosnegocios.com Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/RevistaEkos/
5. América Economía	Since 1986, it analyzes business, economics and finances in Latin America. For over 30 years, it has influenced the region's decision-making executives. It is found in Chile, Peru, Mexico, Brazil and Ecuador. Coverage: Nacional Website: http://www.americaeconomia.com Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/americaeconomia/

Source: Author.

Table 2. Types of sexual information in advertising proposed by Reichert and Lambiase (2012)

Type	Descripción
1. Nudity (clothing)	Refers to the degree of nudity, to the quantity and style of clothing the models are wearing. Examples: revealing parts of the body like bust and/or legs, arms and muscular chests, tight or sexual clothing, mini-skirts, transparency, bathing suit, underwear and/or inferring nudity.
2. Suggested Eroticism	
2.1. Sexual Behavior	Individual or interpersonal sexual behavior. Examples: posture, flirtation, visual contact, hugs, kisses, body language, among others.
2.2. Physical Attraction	Level of beauty of the model's face, hair, physique and in general in his or her complexion.
2.3. Sexual Reference	Reference to objects or events that have a sexual meaning. In addition, facilitators for sexual messages such as music, lights, among other things.
2.4. Embedded sexuality	Content that can be interpreted as sexual on a subconscious level. Examples: words like sex, small images of genitals, body parts, among others.

Source: Author.

Table 3. Results of the types of sexual information in advertising

Magazine	Average Annual Circulation	Facebook		Gender		Sexual Information*	
		No. Fans	No. Covers	At Least One Woman %	Only Men %	Nudity %	Suggested Eroticism %
Vistazo	528.000	58.535	131	31,30	36,60	34,10	43,90
Cosas	240.000	383.731	73	82,20	12,30	83,30	96,70
Hogar	192.000	880.895	88	80,70	1,10	36,60	100,00
Ekos	60.000	91.226	79	5,10	11,40	25,00	25,00
América Economía	48.000	443.964	21	14,30	19,00	0,00	0,00
Total	1.068.000	1.858.351	392	45,70%	18,10%	50,80%	82,70%

*Analysis conditioned to the presence of at least 1 woman on the cover. Source: Author.

compared to the other three magazines whose percentages varied between 16.27% (*Vistazo*), 9.52% (*América Economía*) and 2.53% (*Ekos*). In the magazines in which at least one woman appeared, 82.7% of the covers were found to contain suggested eroticism; for *Hogar* it was 100%, and for *Cosas* it was 96.7%, in *Vistazo* 43.9%, in *Ekos* 25% and in *América Economía* 0%. At the same time, the feminine image is distorted, used as an ostensive stimulus in a way that is inadequate with the general meaning. On another note, the relationship shown among signified-signifiers-referent of the text that accompanied the images make the interlocutor of said covers infer a meaning different from the traditional, which accentuates the distortion of the feminine image. In the magazines *Hogar* and *Cosas*, there was excessive use of the feminine image as an ostensive-inferential stimulus. In other words, the magazine or emitter produces a stimulus with the intention that the reader or receptor receives a series of suppositions or implicatures that are not explicit. Therefore, observed on the covers of *Hogar* and *Cosas*, there was distortion of the feminine image in the signified-signifier-referent relation guiding the implicature towards beauty, eroticism, sensuality and luxury. On the other hand, the magazines *Vistazo*, *Ekos* and *América Economía* make very little use of the feminine image and when they do, it is done indirectly.

In Image 1, which represents the majority of the *Hogar* covers analyzed, the only word that accompanies the picture of the beautiful woman is *HOG-*

AR. According to RAE, "hogar" is a family or group of related people that live together. In this case, the traditional meaning of "hogar" does not coincide with what is intended to be communicated. The presence of a sexually objectified woman is shown via the inference of nudity (sexual dress: some nudity, little clothing and the style of dress). In addition, there is suggestion of eroticism via sexual behavior (visual contact and body language) and physical attraction (level of facial beauty, her hair, her physique and in general her complexion). The receptor could infer that the "hogar" would only be represented by a beautiful and sexual woman. This differs greatly from what a woman represents inside a "hogar" and therefore reinforces the distortion of the feminine image.

Image 1. Facebook cover of Hogar magazine (July 13, 2017)



In Image 2, which is found in one of the covers analyzed from the magazine *COSAS*, the text which accompanies the picture of a sexually beautiful woman is “I’m still that girl, but with many more dreams”. According to the RAE, the definition of boy/girl is said of a person that is not a boy/girl: that acts with little reflection or with naivety or is a woman that has not lost her virginity. It is in this case, the traditional meaning of girl also does not coincide with what is intended to be communicated. The presence of an objectified woman is shown by way of the suggested eroticism via sexual behavior (sexual gaze and body language) and physical attractiveness (level of facial beauty, her hair, her physique and in general her complexion). The connection between signified-signifier-referent of the phrase that accompanies the image makes the reader of said cover infer a meaning incomparable to the traditional, which highlights the deformation of the feminine image.

Image 2. Facebook cover of Cosas magazine (December 22, 2017)



The role of the woman in communication media is not only reflection, but also reinforces evidently sexist stereotypes in society. Gender stereotypes are “the structured system of beliefs on the characteristics —features, behaviors, attitudes, values and norms— that are generally thought to be natural or desirable in women or men” (Jato-Seijas, 2007, p. 160). One affected area is the labor market in which there is a differentiation in the professions in terms of gender. A large part of women’s jobs are found in sectors whose functions are related to the work that women do in the domestic environment and all stem from this (Navarro et al., 2016).

Use of sexual stimuli definitely calls attention. However, in order for this to be a tool that incentivizes the intent to purchase it should be used appropriately within the context. The higher the degree of nudity in the advert, people’s ethical attitude

becomes more negative (Brito-Rhor et al., 2019). It is possible that if it crosses the line, entering into sexism territory, its use is being abused and the brand will be compromised, causing undesired consequences.

The research’s findings on the use and effectiveness of the sexual appellations in the advertising industry are contrasted; however, there is an increase in the use of such stimuli of sexual character in different spaces of society (Brito, 2019). The importance of showing that the feminine image is still used and abused lies in a call to various industries to reflect in terms of their contribution to a society free of sexism and chauvinism. Gender discrimination must be eradicated and we must fight for a world of equal rights. According to the global report on gender inequality published by the *World Economic Forum* (2018), to date, gender salary inequality continues to be 32% and still has not closed. If the current trends continue further, global gender equality will be reached in 108 years in the 106 countries covered by the first edition of the report. The hardest gender gaps to close are the dimensions of economic and political empowerment, which will require 202 and 107 years to close, respectively.

Like any other research, this study has some limitations. A sample of magazines in Ecuador are examined. Therefore, results may vary depending on the country of study. In addition, sexual use of women in a digital environment is being researched, the results could also differ if the published magazine itself were studied. In terms of further research, we recommend exploring and comparing other magazines in different countries in both printed and digital format.

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