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International Advertising and the Use of the Sex Appeal: Acceptance of Sex Appeal in China

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**INTERNATIONAL ADVERTISING AND THE USE OF THE SEX APPEAL:
ACCEPTANCE OF SEX APPEAL IN CHINA**

Katie Hunt



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**INTERNATIONAL
ADVERTISING AND THE
USE OF THE SEX APPEAL:**


**ACCEPTANCE OF SEX
APPEAL IN CHINA**


By


Katie Hunt


A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of Requirements of the CSU Honors
Program


for Honors in the degree of
Bachelor of Business Administration
in
Marketing,
Abbott Turner College of Business,
Columbus State University,
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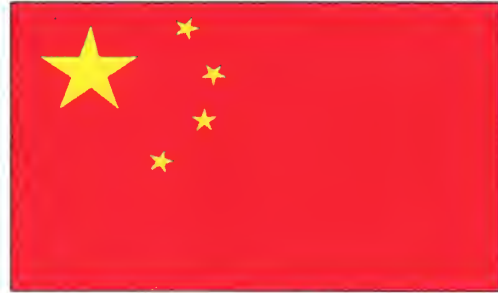
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Coordinator, Honors Program:  Date 5/6/03

**INTERNATIONAL
ADVERTISING
AND THE USE OF THE
SEX APPEAL:**



**ACCEPTANCE OF
SEX APPEAL IN
CHINA**

By Katie Hunt

凯蒂

Abbott Turner College of Business

Columbus State University

Columbus, Georgia

Date: April 21, 2003

A thesis presented on a study of the use of the sex appeal in advertising among different cultures, specifically the United States compared to China.

Gift
6-30-03

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	iii
List of Tables.....	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Sex Appeal in Advertising.....	2
What is Sex Appeal and Why Does it Work ?.....	2
How is Sex Appeal Used and Where Does it Work?.....	3
Negative Effects of Using Sex in Advertising.....	4
Chapter 3: Cultural Differences between the US and China Relating to Gender Roles and Perceptions of Sexuality	6
Feminine versus Masculine roles in China: Traditional and Modern	7
Modern Perceptions of Sexuality in China versus U.S.	9
Chapter 4: Cultural Differences between the US and China Relating to the Use of Advertising	11
Legal Issues in Advertising.....	11
Advertising Media (TV, magazines, newspapers, billboards)	13

Chapter 5: Current Acceptance and Effects of the Sex Appeals in	
Chinese Advertising.....	17
Chinese Acceptance of the Sex Appeals	17
Effects of the Sex Appeals in Current Chinese	
Advertising.....	19
Chapter 6 : Conclusion.....	21
References.....	22

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Levi's and "Nothing butt" advertisements.....	12
Figure 2: Big Picture of Sex Appeal in Advertising	22

LIST OF TABLES

Table I : Nudity in U.S. Magazine Advertisements –1973 and 1994.....	14
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

China is the most populated country in the world. With a population of over a billion people, it is an attractive market to many companies. However, China has traditionally been a market that was difficult to access due to its communist government and strict regulations. In 1978, China began changing the economy from a centrally planned system to a more market-oriented economy. By 2001, “China stood as the second largest economy in the world after the U.S., measured on a purchasing power parity basis” (World Factbook, 2002). China is a strong business partner with the U.S.; 21% of China’s exports come to the U.S. and China makes up 8.9% of U.S. imports (World Factbook, 2002).

To influence Chinese consumers to buy more American products, advertising must be used. Most American companies realize the importance of culture on advertising strategy, and many are concerned about how to advertise effectively in China. Will the same advertising methods used in America work as well in China? In particular, will sex appeal work?

Chapter 2

SEX APPEAL IN ADVERTISING

What is a “Sex Appeal” and Why Does it Work?

"It's just becoming impossible to get consumers to pay attention to individual messages because they're being bombarded by messages every day, everywhere they look. Enter the naked flesh. It stops us. We look" (Duke, 2000). We look because of the sex appeal, which is defined as the use of “physical attractiveness or personal qualities that arouse others sexually” (American Heritage Dictionary, 2000). Nudity causes arousal and gets our attention. Any advertisement that stimulates people sexually is using a sex appeal. There are many ways to use sex appeals, from models that are wearing revealing outfits to women moaning due to feelings of pleasure.

A theory derived from Sigmund Freud attempts to explain why a sex appeal attracts so much attention. Freud felt that sexual urges as well as aggressive instincts and drives were the primary determinants of behavior (Rice, 2001). Therefore, the sex appeal would assist people in relating an advertisement to their own behavior. Consumers can be motivated by symbolic and functional drives when making their purchase decisions. More than one study has “shown that two-thirds of all prime-time TV shows present an average of 5.2 scenes per hour that contain talk about sex” (Belch & Belch, 2001, pg. 113).

How is Sex Appeal Used and Where Does it Work?

Advertising using a sex appeal usually uses a visual medium, since a sex appeal is defined as the use of *physical attractiveness* or personal qualities that arouse others sexually. The most common media for sexual advertisements are print ads in magazines, newspapers, and billboards, along with television. What is and is not acceptable is not clear even within product makers and within market segments. “One magazine, for instance, will show breasts but not nipples. Another will show one breast, not both” (Duke, 2000).

Some advertisers will argue that sex will work with any product. “Scantly clad women have as much to do with selling spirits as they do with selling auto parts, but they long have been used to hawk everything from perfume and shampoo to frozen dinners” (Chura, 2001). However, sex in advertising works better when the sex appeal relates to the product, as with fashion clothing or perfume. These products can be easily related to sex, and, therefore, are more likely to be associated with the ad. For example, Clairol’s Herbal Essence shampoo continues a series of commercials with nearly orgasmic women washing their hair. This series began in 1995 and has been quite successful for Clairol (Krol, 1996).

Sex can also be successfully used in selling alcohol. “Jim Beam had a print ad showing buddies in a strip bar and bachelor party. Skyy vodka had an ad featuring a sunbathing woman reclining on a diving board and gazing up into a

man's crotch. Anheuser-Busch, known for having some of the best beer ads in the business, has one ad asserting, 'actually, size does matter'" (Chura, 2001).

Negative Effects of Using Sex in Advertising

Advertisements like the ones stated above do carry some risk in that they can offend people. "Advertising appeals that have received the most criticism for being in poor taste are those using sexual appeals and/or nudity" (Belch & Belch, 2001, pg. 771). Additionally, some people feel that they degrade women by portraying them as sex objects. Considering that "women may account for as much as 80% of all consumer purchases and are the target group for the majority of all advertising," degrading women could be costly to a company's bottom line (Advertising, 2002). Therefore, this segment is an important one to most marketers (Advertising, 2002).

An especially provocative sex appeal may cause a negative backlash on an unintended audience. The audience (women in particular) offended by the ads may not be part of the product's target market (Chura, 2001). Also, ironically, a sexually provocative picture might be too effective in that it may attract so much attention towards the sex object that it obstructs processing and recall of the ad's contents (Solomon, 2002). This suggests that advertisers should be careful to measure an ad's ability to generate brand name recall as well as its attention-getting ability. An ad's ability to gain attention is critical, but most advertisers would agree that brand name recall is the bottom-line minimum objective for the ad.

Many factors influence the cultural values, lifestyles, and behavior of a society. “The overwhelming amount of advertising and its prevalence in the mass media lead many critics to argue that advertising plays a major role in influencing and transmitting social values” (Belch & Belch, 2001, pg. 775). In a sense, advertising may help to “teach” culture. Ji and McNeal (2001) described it as “a mirror that reflects the culture in which it is embedded; a channel through which the members of a society may learn about their culture” (pg. 79). Therefore, it can be argued that ads are part of culture.

Chapter 3

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE US AND CHINA RELATING TO GENDER ROLES AND PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUALITY

In America, we often hear “sex sells,” but another culture may react differently. For example some French critics “complain the advertising industry is making sex boring” (Solomon, 2002, pg. 241). Would sex also sell in a culture that is more conservative, less self-serving, and looks more to one’s “inner beauty,” like that of China.

The perception one has of sexuality comes from a chain of feelings. This chain begins with a woman’s perception of herself. This perception is derived from many things, two being gender and marital roles. Both gender and marital roles can influence one’s view of sex.

In general, it is believed that Chinese views on marriage and sex are quite different from those views in the US. A conventional Chinese belief “equates a perfect marriage with personal self-worth and achievement” (Higgins 2002, pg. 77). Traditionally, marriage was seen as a family business and was arranged by the parents in accordance with the social hierarchy; women were perceived as housebound, submissive, second-class citizens (Higgins, 2002). Women could be bought and sold by their husbands and fathers, similar to slaves (Higgins, 2002). Traditionally, divorce in China had to be sanctioned by the family and

the employer (Higgins, 2002, pg. 76). This made it very difficult to get a divorce; consequently, the divorce rate was extremely low.

Feminine versus Masculine roles in China: Traditional and Modern

Chinese marriage views have changed over time. Many researchers have suggested that a “new liberal attitude to sexual behavior has developed among urban young people who all expect to choose their own marriage partners and to marry for love” (Higgins 2002, pg. 76). Modern views of marriage in China show greater individual freedom and choice and an increasingly equal relationship between men and women. Although, marriage remains a solemn and important event for most Chinese people, China’s divorce rates have risen considerably in recent years.

In a study including 37 countries, the single most valued trait in all societies was “mutual attraction love” (Higgins 2002, pg. 76). In that same study, men wanted a mate who was young, healthy, and beautiful, while women valued earning capacity, ambition, and hard work in a mate. “As a collectivist society, the Chinese emphasize interpersonal bonds and have a greater awareness of, and responsiveness to, the needs of others than those from more individualist societies, such as the United States, where independence is valued and there is less concern for others” (Higgins 2002, pg. 77).

One researcher found that women generally are defined by the presence or absence of a man in their lives (Glasser, 1997, pg. 88). Women are portrayed in one of four ways: single and looking for a husband, housewife-mother,

spinster, and widowed or divorced. Another researcher (Hoban, 2002) has suggested that “single women have always been portrayed and depicted in the Chinese mass culture in a negative and nasty way.” This depiction has “influenced the lives of many women, and at the same time was completely untrue, and these images, some of them 150 years old, are still being played out and the ideas are just being recycled” (Hoban, 2002). According to one researcher (Hoban, 2002), “it’s a lot easier to justify the life of a single woman now than in the past because people have more sexual freedom, they have economic freedom, they can get a mortgage and they have high-powered jobs” (Hoban, 2002). It appears that women are more on an equal path with men than ever before in China. One researcher stated that, “today women feel equal to men and have the competence and ability to compete with men” (Saywell, 1998, pg. 40).

One Chinese editor, Chen Xiaochuan, feels that “a misleading condition exists in the media regarding gender roles” (Woman’s International Network News, 1998, pg. 57). It seems as though only female models are used in the advertisements for washing machines and detergent. Does this truly reflect society? Do men do washing and cooking at home? If the ads are not truly reflective of society, they are displaying “both prejudice against women and injustice to men” (Woman’s International Network News, 1998, pg. 57).

In this receptive and vivid world, women’s roles are diverse, “yet the media always ask the same question to successful women: If you have to choose

between your career and family, what will be your decision” (Woman’s International Network News, 1998, pg. 57)? The question is rarely, if ever, asked of successful men. Therefore, it can be concluded that society believes men are capable of being simultaneously successful with their careers and families, while women are only capable of achieving one. This conclusion is illustrated when, as a female scholar in Jiangxi Social Science Institute wrote, “women in ads play one of three roles - woman as cleaner, woman as career-oriented, or woman as sex object (Advertising, 2002). Too often women are portrayed in ads - whether targeted at men or women - in sexist, demeaning or stereotyped ways (Advertising, 2002).

Modern Perceptions of Sexuality in China versus U.S.

Views on sex can vary a lot from culture to culture and time period to time period. Traditionally, China was very reserved about sex; “for married couples to make love more than once a week was regarded as an unhelpful diversion of energy” (Beck, 1999, pg. 585). But, as one researcher pointed out, “women are starting to reject their traditional role as ‘asexual’ beings or passive sexual objects at the mere disposal of men. They tend to be more active in sex” (Beck, 1999, pg. 585). Due to this increase in activity, there is a new found emphasis on the value of quality of an individual’s sex life (Beck, 1999, pg. 585). The increase in sexual activity and quality of sex has spurred new shops in China named “health supply” or “medical equipment” centers. These centers sell unique assortments of condoms and lubricants, along with various sex toys

(The Economist, 1997). The loosened attitudes toward love and sex of Chinese youth keep such stores in business. However, “older generations see sexual freedom as a threat to social stability” (Javin, 1991). For example, the older generations have set rules that make having sex in a college dormitory possibly resulting in expulsion (Higgins, 2002, pg. 77). These attitudes are reminders that marketers must be aware of the differences within a culture due to what is commonly called generation gaps.

Chapter 4

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE US AND CHINA RELATING TO THE USE OF ADVERTISING

Legal Issues in Advertising

Long considered a “corrupt capitalist practice”, China first permitted advertising in 1979 (Glasser, 1997, pg. 86). Since China was such a large market, companies worldwide were interested in how to tap in to the potential profits. Companies were concerned about the best way to advertise to a country that was restricted for so long. Just fifteen years later, the final document from the U.N. World Conference on Women in Beijing stated, “it’s time for governments and others to make the media straighten up and stop exploiting women and stop pornography” (Hernandez, 1995, pg. 22). According to Dana Bullen, Executive Director of the World Press Freedom Committee, this suggestion was intimidating to advertisers because “in a country where a free press does not really exist, suggestions by government take on a much more coercive meaning” (Hernandez, 1995, pg. 23).

The United States did not have the legal restrictions like that of China; however, the Women’s Rights Movement in the 1970’s and 80s did affect the advertising industry. For example, in 1971, Levi-Strauss “published an advertising poster depicting firm, curvaceous, and naked female buttocks with the outline of the company’s trademark double-stitched pocket drawn on the right cheek and adorned with the Levi’s logo” (Heller, 1999, pg. 16). This ad

was displayed at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London with the caption “the sexual liberation of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s and a period when denim jeans were synonymous with youth and rebellion.” The caption goes on to state that by the 1980’s, due to the growth of the women’s liberation movement, this imagery was no longer acceptable. Levi’s turned to other marketing strategies (Heller, 1999, pg. 16). In the Fall/Winter 1998 issue of *Sportswear Consumer*, Pure Playaz used the same motif Levi’s had used close to three decades earlier (Heller, 1999, pg. 16). Pure Playaz’s headline for the ad is “Nothing butt..,” with a similar double-stitched pocket and the “PP” logo on a naked cheek (Heller, 1999, pg. 16). The ads are shown below.

Figure 1: Levi’s and “Nothing butt..” advertisements



Advertising Media (TV, magazines, newspapers, billboards)

Advertising uses many mediums; the most common mediums for the use of the sex appeal are television, magazines, newspapers, and billboards. The highest percentage of media advertising expenditures in the United States is print, holding 58 percent (Wiles, Wiles, & Tjernlund, 1996). Print advertising includes magazines, newspapers, and billboards.

Two studies were conducted concerning the values of American advertising, one study in 1973 and one in 1994. Magazines were the medium of study both times for many reasons. They provide high quality, lasting images and a strong visual impression of the models in their advertising (Wiles, Wiles, & Tjernlund, 1996). Both studies used all ads of one-half page or more in which images of people could easily be identified; ads were taken from one issue of each magazine from February/March editions of 1973 and 1994. Even though the same ad was published in more than one magazine, each appearance was counted as a qualifying ad. Here are some of the results of the studies. In both studies, the female body was used to a greater extent than the male body to sell products. The study conducted in 1973, found that 18 percent of ads in which the body could be distinguished show nude or half-nude women as compared to 4 percent for men. However, the study in 1994 showed a much lower percentage of nude or half-nude models (over the age of 16) by U.S. advertisers than 20 years ago. The results from 1994 ads reveal only 4.2 percent of U.S. women were portrayed as half-nude and 1.7 percent were nude, as

compared to 1.9 percent half-nude and no nude males. Both sets of results could be biased toward greater levels of undress by women models because most of the magazines used in this study target women. Products of a personal nature, such as bath products, sometimes use partially dressed models and thus may increase the proportions in these studies. Percentages of the magazine ads from both studies with nude or half nude women and men are presented below, in Table I. The nudity in the magazine ads in 1973 reflects the “sexual liberation of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s”, whereas the limited nudity in the 1994 ads could be an effect of the Women’s Liberation Movement (Heller, 1999, pg. 16).

Table I
Nudity in U.S. Magazine Advertisements –1973 and 1994

Year of Study	Total % of nude or half nude women	Total % of nude or half nude men
1973	18	4
1994	5.9	1.9

The table above represents two studies conducted to find the percentages of half nude or nude men and women in magazine advertisements (Wiles, Wiles, & Tjernlund, 1996).

While the above study demonstrated a decrease in the **number** of nude advertising, a few current advertisements are being labeled “obscene.” Mr. Allison, the publisher of the Dallas lifestyle magazine named D, insisted that 70,000 copies of the September D be destroyed due to two advertisements that were, as he said, “obscene” (Nordlinger, 2000). The magazines were already en route to newsstands, but Mr. Allison was adamant that all 70,000 copies be taken to a recycling center. “One of the ads in question is a Gucci ad featuring

a woman on her knees, legs parted, tugging at her very short dress so as to suggest that something naughty has just happened. Though we cannot see the face of the man standing near her, we have no trouble noticing that he is happy to see her. The image encourages us to participate in the salaciousness of the scene by imagining what came before” (Nordlinger, 2000). According to Mr. Allison, “The women who work in my office were uniformly grateful. I’ve received notes, pats on the back...(members of the community) whom I haven’t talked to in years,” stopped him to express their support. The publisher from San Francisco magazine offer praise, “It was an expensive decision. One that was made without self-interest. I admire someone with so much courage of his convictions” (Nordlinger, 2000).

Procter and Gamble is also concerned with the sex in advertising and the companies they associate with. The company has formed a “sex task force” to examine their policy toward sexually explicit magazine articles and magazine cover lines (Kerwin & Neff, 2000). Approximately 75% of the money P&G spent in magazines last year was placed on women’s fashion and beauty titles, especially for its Cover Girl, Oil of Olay and Pantene brands, which have notably shifted focus from TV to magazines. In fact, P&G’s magazine spending was up 15.8% to \$45 million in the two months ending Nov. 30, according to Competitive Media Reporting. A magazine executive, who asked to remain anonymous, said the sex appeal in advertising is consistent with what’s happening on TV, where programs such as HBO’s “Sex in the City” and

Fox's "Ally McBeal" have set new standards of acceptability for frank sexual talk. "Advertisers have to be realistic about what appeals to this demographic" (Kerwin & Neff, 2000). Concerning TV, P&G traditionally has steered clear of programs with controversial sexual content, such as NBC's "NYPD Blue." "Last year, P&G joined other advertisers, such as Johnson Sr. Johnson, in launching Family Programming Awards to recognize 'family friendly' programming" (Kerwin & Neff, 2000).

The Wall Street Journal is a company that is being selective with which advertisements it will print. The Journal rejected an advertisement promoting the recent Victoria's Secret Wall Street cyber-fashion show, because the ad, featuring Tyra Banks, was a bit too revealing (Noack, 1999). Victoria Secret submitted a more conservative ad featuring another model and the Journal ran it. Other newspapers were more than willing to run the ad with Tyra Banks. The ad also appeared in *The New York Times* and *USA Today* (Noack, 1999).

Chapter 5

CURRENT ACCEPTANCE AND EFFECTS OF THE SEX APPEALS IN CHINESE ADVERTISING

Chinese Acceptance of the Sex Appeals

In Europe, the sex appeal, specifically nudity, is used to a great extent in advertising campaigns. US advertising campaigns are progressing in that same direction (Duke, 2000). The U.S. is not the only country moving in that direction; some Chinese advertisements use sex appeals. In a study using a sample of 1,000 out of more than 5,000 specimens from 10 TV stations in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenyang and Lanzhou, one-third of TV advertisements exhibited sex discrimination (Liming, 1998, pg. 21). The findings were mainly manifested by misusing images of women to solicit customers and promoting male supremacy which could be attributed to advertising campaigns using a sex appeal.

Advertising is not only used to sell goods; it communicates an image of a brand or company. Ads offer visualizations of individual identity as well as a sense of belonging to certain groups, cultures, and lifestyles (Johansson, 1999, pg. 377). Advertisers choose images already present in the culture to create ads they hope will sell products. Their choices of images of women in the media are more a result of social creation than the product of media reflection or distortion (Glasser, 1997, pg. 87).

Chinese models in ads express shyness and subordination through their body language and are often portrayed in a childish way, made to act like little girls (Johansson, 1999, pg. 379). In comparison, Caucasian women are not portrayed as subordinate. They hold their bodies erect and their heads high. They look powerful, self-confident, and satisfied with themselves. To sum up, ads with Caucasian and Asian women, respectively, present two contradictory sets of female images: the Asian women are made subordinate and childish and the Caucasian women take on certain 'masculine' qualities. Here women are doing things with men. Portraying women together with men is rare in ads with Asian models but more common in ads with Caucasian women (Johansson, 1999, pg. 380).

Sex appeals are used in Chinese advertising. For example, a water heater ad shows a Caucasian woman wearing only a short, translucent top, apparently ripped to pieces. Taken from the back in semi-profile, the picture leaves her naked buttocks almost fully revealed. Just in front of her, a strong jet of water comes flushing up from the ground. The woman's head hangs back as if in great passion, while her eyes are closed and her mouth wide open. The caption printed above the woman reads 'With Qianfeng ("vanguard", the brand name) in the house there is happiness' (jia you qianfeng le zai qizhong) (Johansson, 1999, pg. 381).

When young Chinese women were asked why so many ads had Caucasian women in them, the response was they are beautiful. Chinese women felt that

Caucasian women are sexier than them. They explained that they think long ago Chinese women had an inner beauty no one could match, but now white women “have all the charms of sex and love” (Johansson, 1999, pg. 381). “The Western female body is made into a stereotype of strength, sexuality, and promiscuity that can be consumed and cannibalized without any fear of losing belief in the traditional virtues of Chinese women” (Johansson, 1999, pg. 382).

Effects of the Sex Appeals in Current Chinese Advertising

Even with China’s patriarchal tradition, the notion of gender equality promoted by the Chinese Communist Party was put to the test in cooperation with the extensive changes and changing conceptions of the role of mass media (Glasser, 1997, pg. 87). Gender equality in China is still a work in progress. Gender ideology socializes women to assume a subject position that makes them oblivious to the fact that they are exploited as sex objects or cheap labor (Glasser, 1997, pg. 87). This raises heat to the questions: are media molders of social structure or reflections of it, and are media agents of social change or reinforcers of the status quo (Glasser, 1997, pg. 85)?

American theorists challenge the notion that the media are passive reflectors of society. They point out “the active role media and the media producers play in the creation and recreation of the social roles of women” (Glasser, 1997, pg. 87). Symbolic representations are made of American

society, but not literal portrayals. It is felt that the American woman is beautiful, but a moral threat (Johansson, 1999, pg. 384).

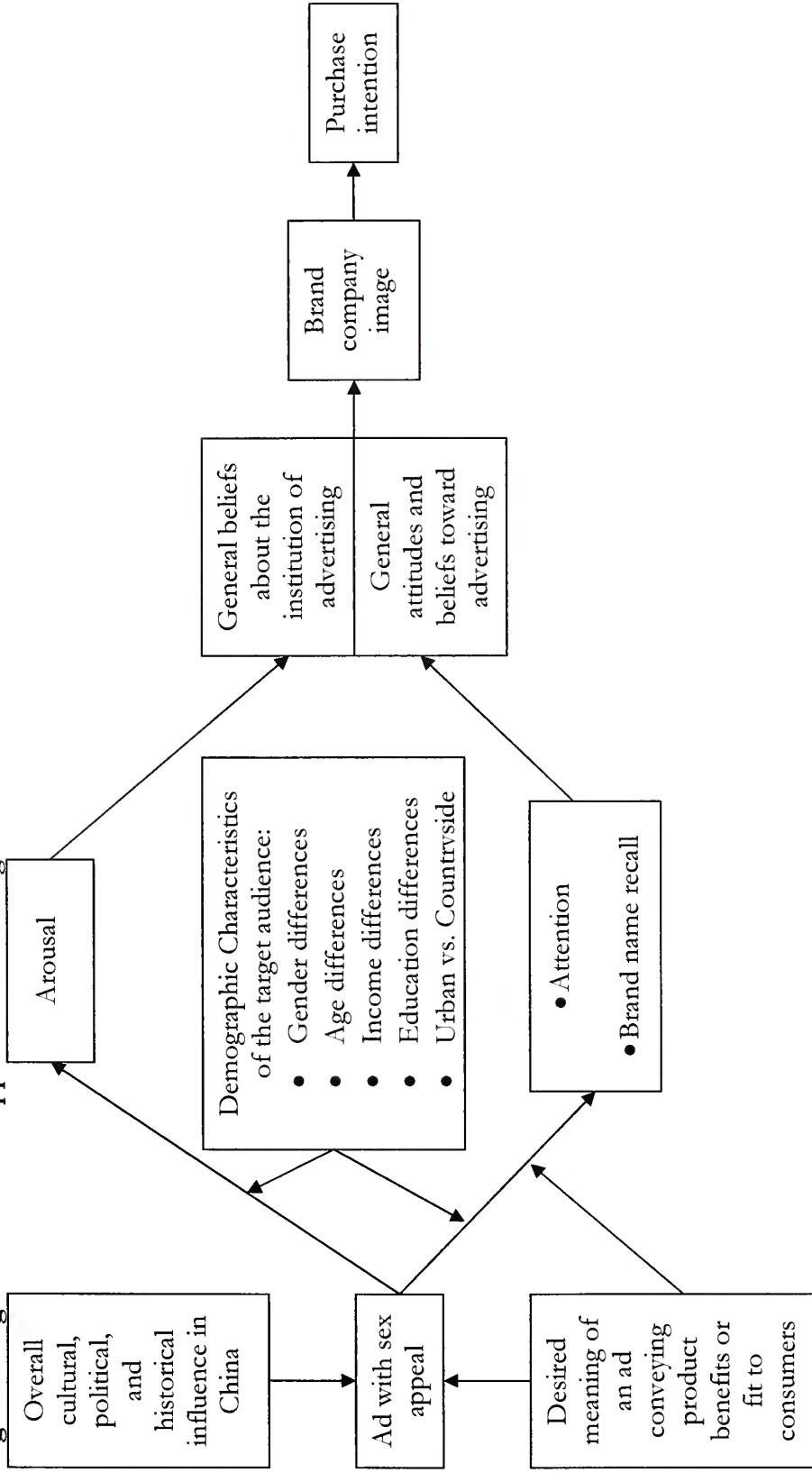
Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

A sex appeal is used in advertising for three main purposes: to arouse, to gain attention, and to assist brand name recall. As shown in Figure 2, there are many factors that should be considered when developing an ad with sex appeal. Within each factor there are aspects that should be considered. Such as, when considering cultural influence, gender roles and perceptions of sexuality are vital considerations.

Perceptions can be very different depending on the culture. Modern American culture reflects equality between men and women. Modern Chinese culture reflects a **growing** equality between men and women. Currently, Caucasian women are used in Chinese ads that use a sex appeal. As equality increases in China and sexual liberation comes to a peak, Asian models may be used in ads with a sex appeal. Since the sex appeal method is not always accepted, advertisers should look for other strategies to gain attention, and brand name recall. Regardless of the method being used, pretesting is essential for international marketing campaigns.

Figure 2: Big Picture of Sex Appeal in Advertising



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