



A Brief Semiotic Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

“Sex Sells.” - Any person involved even peripherally with advertising

This paper covers just a tiny corner of an immense universe - modern advertising. Specifically, we'll be talking about the use and influence of sex in a small number of print advertisements. These ads appeared in magazines from around the world, and from cultures where “sexy” carries several meanings.

What I hope to do is show the reader a series of advertisements, and deconstruct or decode them, bringing each element that makes up the ad into the foreground of the viewer's awareness. Most of the “hidden” meanings in the advertisements aren't hidden at all, but merely make up the background or peripheral message of the advertisement. Much as the way a magician redirects his audience's attention away from what they could plainly see, advertisers often manipulate elements of an advertisement so that you're looking at another part and ignoring the impact that the “background” element has on your perception. We want to be fooled, and advertisers are supreme prestidigitators.

By the time we're done, I hope that the reader is cognizant enough of the content of various advertisements that they will be more offended by the ads where people have their clothes on, than the ones where the models are nude. By then, the reader of this paper should recognize the many subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which their attention is being directed and their emotions manipulated.

Let's define some words and terms before digging too deeply into this analysis. In no way are these definitions “the right ones,” or “the only ones.” These are simply the meaning I have for them when using them within the context of this paper.

Sex: I'm speaking of any physical representation of the human body -or facsimile thereof- alluding to the physical attraction between people. This isn't limited to the idea of pre-, post- or during coitus, but advertisers often lay out that trail for the observer to follow.

Sexy: Showing off the body, or part(s) of the body, in a manner meant to entice another person's physical interest. There are entire bodies (allusion definitely intended) of work concerning human physical attraction, and they cannot begin to be duplicated here.

Physical Attraction or Interest: We're not talking higher love here. This is meant to imply everything from “I want to hold your hand” to actual sexual intercourse. That's a long line of alternatives, but with advertisers one usually leads down the path to the other.

Sign: As explained by Charles S. Peirce, one of the founders of semiotic science, a sign is the whole relationship between something perceived (the representamen), the concept this something encodes (the object), and the meaning taken from that (the interpretant) by someone observing. Peirce believed that, without an observer, there was no sign. (“If a representamen falls in the forest. . .”)

SIGNS

With advertisers, a picture is never simply a picture. It has a meaning on beyond simple illustration. These are no mere snapshots, lucky-I-was-there images from the daily lives of subject and photographer. They are carefully staged, crafted to elicit emotional responses from the viewer.

Each element of the picture signifies something, is intended to capture a part of the overall meaning and enhance the overall experience for the observer. The advertisement, then, becomes a sign.

As a simple example, imagine driving down the highway and seeing a big metal plate painted yellow. On it is an arrow which starts off straight, then bends toward the right as it reaches the point. There are black letters on the yellow background, making up two words: “Bear right” they say.

As each of us has known from childhood, this is a sign. The letters -symbols- on the sign, make up words to which we’ve attached meaning. The arrow itself is a form of icon, or pictographic representation, intended to give us the idea that just as the arrow does, we should be heading off towards our right.

The yellow background on a traffic sign, in our culture, is a convention for “caution.” That is, most of the people in our society have come to the common agreement that, in this context, this color on a roadway sign has the specific meaning that the observer should take care.

But isn’t “bear” a word sign for a type of animal? Well, yes, but used in this context it has another meaning which takes the place of several words. In this case, “bear” indicates the concept, “Keep your vehicle pointed towards. . .” which certainly is shorter, and much easier to read at speeds over a mile a minute.

What does all this have to do with sex in advertising? Advertisements, as interpreted by the people looking at them, are signs. (Possibly “signs of the times,” if we give way to cliché.) Ads are no different than traffic signs; the creators intend for someone to see them, and to derive certain sets of information from them, whether that meaning is “Watch out, you need to keep your vehicle pointed to the right,” or “Buy our lingerie and your man won’t be able to keep his hands off you.”

Additionally, according to Peircean semiotics, signs have three degrees: firstness, secondness and thirdness. In the case of photographs, or the drawing of the curving arrow, the element of firstness is Iconicity. That is, the image is made to imitate the referent visually - an icon of it. An arrow bending to the right imitates the way the highway bends, and a picture of a woman in lingerie is a representation of what the model looked like in the studio the moment the camera was taking her picture.

The secondness of a picture is its relation to other things, either in time or space, or in relation to someone/something else. This is its indexicality. So the arrow on the traffic sign shows that, compared to the direction you’re headed now, the road will be heading to your right. The woman in lingerie? Perhaps the picture indicates how the viewer could look after purchasing the lingerie and putting it on.

Signs as cultural concepts exhibit their quality of thirdness. In speaking of the road sign or the advertisement, the whole of the signs are more than the sum of their parts, or symbols. Symbols impart much more than simple information, calling up emotional responses from members of a culture who see them. In our culture, the yellow road sign may elicit a different response from a novice driver than from someone who’s been driving for 20 years. The novice, unsure of his skills, may slow down below the posted speed limit and creep around the curve. The veteran driver, having come this way every morning for three years, simply turns the wheel gently in the direction he wants to go, maintaining his current speed. In our culture, it’s acceptable to show a scantily clad woman waiting in the bedroom for her lover. The same advertisement shown in another culture -say, hidden in an Amish prayer book- would elicit outrage and indignation. In our culture, this could be an affectionate woman who wishes to spend intimate time with her lover. In Amish culture, this is a wanton woman with mortal sin on her mind.

QUALIFIERS

The advertisements discussed below are from magazines purchased in New York City in April, 2001. The interpretation of the advertisements is necessarily done from the perspective of the culture in which I am immersed - United States, early 21st century. The interpretations are also colored by my personal experience with advertising as both a consumer and producer.

Magazine ads, “slicks” in ad parlance, are different than other types of print ads. A black and white newspaper ad for the same product in the same country would be different, and be perceived differently, if not just because of it’s different look but because of where it’s being seen, and it’s relationship to things around it. A scantily clad woman in a magazine full of them is so much filler. The same ad next to a story about the latest killings in the Middle East is a shocking juxtaposition. And on a bus trundling through downtown New York, it’s difficult to see the whole thing at once, especially if you’re stuck in traffic next to the bus.

From my understanding of the different cultures from which these ads are drawn, I believe I’ve made a reasonably accurate interpretation of each of them. However, every interpretation is individual, and new meanings are created by each person who takes the time to view the ad, depending on what elements of the ad most effect them.

A final word regarding subliminal elements of advertisements: bullshit. If an element registers with you, then it’s not subliminal. If it doesn’t register, then you don’t decode the ad with that element. There have been many ads over the years that had subliminal elements attributed to them: the word “sex” in the ice cubes of a whiskey ad, the penis and scrotum on Joe Camel’s face, the bare knees of the Land-O-Lakes maiden substituting for her breasts, ad infinitum (again, allusion definitely intended). Several studies have been done on subliminal advertising, and none of them showed conclusive evidence that a “hidden” element in an advertisement registered below the conscious level of the observer. The observer may register that element and simply choose to leave it’s influence in the background. Selling via hidden messages remains unproven.

DECONSTRUCTION

Finally, the naughty bits!

For the most part, I consciously stayed away from the classic (read, stereotypical) women's fashion magazines. Because of the products their advertisements tout, these magazines are filled with overtly sexual images. What are they trying to sell us? Good question - let's take a look.

This pair of advertisements appeared in a fashion/photography magazine from the Netherlands. Appropriately, it's called Dutch. The advertisement (it's really only one, even if each page is textured to stand alone) appears in the same layout as in the magazine.

An important element of any photograph is distance or, in semiotic parlance, proxemics. That is, how close are we to the personal space of the subject in the photograph? As you can see in the photo on the left, we're pretty damn close! With the lense of the camera taking the place of our eyes, we find ourselves quite close to an intimate moment between two people. What makes it intimate? The male hands not only touching what almost every culture on earth sees as one of the very personal spaces of the body, but with the fingers actually slipping inside the frilly underwear.



The picture on the right is framed in what cinematographers call a medium shot; that is, we're not tight up against the face or other body part of the subjects (a close-up), and we're not so far away as to see their whole body surrounded by the space which they're occupying (a long shot). This is close enough to see the girl's wet blouse, and her breasts tantalizingly revealed through it, but not too much of her surroundings. Those are still a mystery.

Let's move back to the first picture and take a close look at the elements in it.

The background appears to be grass or some other ground plant, which would imply that the two people are laying on the ground. The shiny surface of the greenery, along with the grass clippings sticking to their skin

and the transparent quality to her clothing infers that the couple has somehow gotten wet very recently. How do you get wet, rolling around on the ground? Well, it could be raining. Also, people sweat when engaged in intense physical and/or emotional efforts. And we're focused on a wet area very near their pelvises. . . The mental leap the viewer needs to take here to assume we've interrupted these two about to have sex has been narrowed as much as possible by the advertiser.

In the photo on the right, the couple is now standing, facing the camera. The man is hidden behind the girl, but still reaching around, one hand on her hip, the other within intimate distance of her pubis. Her shirt is wet, slightly opened at the collar, but her nipples are obvious through the thin, wet fabric.

By the tilt of her head, and the open mouth, we're supposed to infer that she's been engaged in some strenuous activity. Her wet hair, not at all neatly coiffed, is hanging in her face. She's holding the man's arms to her, not trying to remove them.

The background is still in darkness. The implication is clear: we've interrupted this couple in a dark, secluded spot about to have very consensual sex.

Oh! We can't forget that this is an advertisement, so the name of the clothing company is written in a box across her midriff.

So, what exactly is it that this ad is selling? Wet clothing? By assembling the visual parts of this advertisement, let's put the text of the message into words.

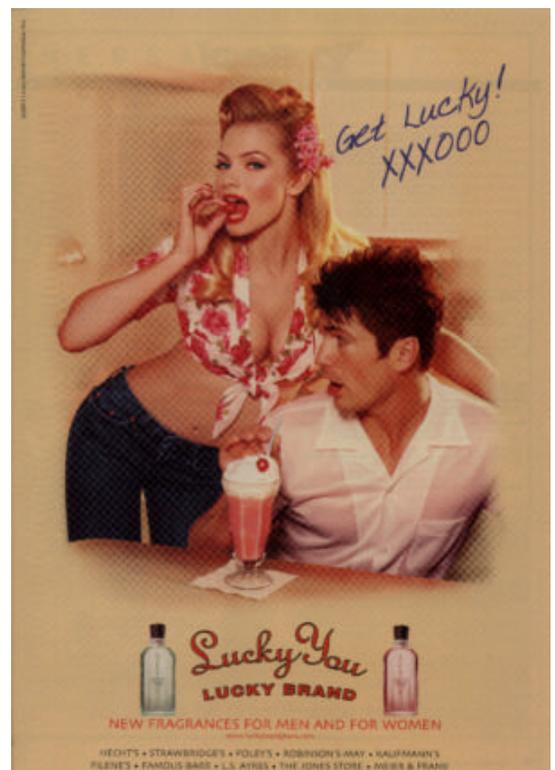
"Women who buy our clothes are irresistible. If you wear our clothes, you will have spontaneous sex with a faceless stranger in the woods during a rain storm." Talk about explicit sexual fantasies!

So, if most of the text of the advertisement is not about their clothing, what are they trying to sell? The fantasy, of course. The feeling you'll get while wearing their clothing. They are adhering to the axiom of salesmen from the turn of the 20th century: "Sell the sizzle, not the steak."

Sex is an obvious choice to sell anything that's seen as intimate. That is, anything which can go on or in the body, used within a person's intimate space, is fair game for advertisers to link with sex. What can you sexualize besides clothing? How about perfume and alcohol?

These two ads from an American magazine use words to help convey their intent to the viewer. The first one, seen on the left, issues the imperative "Get Lucky!" This is among other things a slang term for having sex, as in "I'm going to get lucky with my girlfriend tonight." In our male-dominated culture, this has typically been seen as an aggressive male attitude.

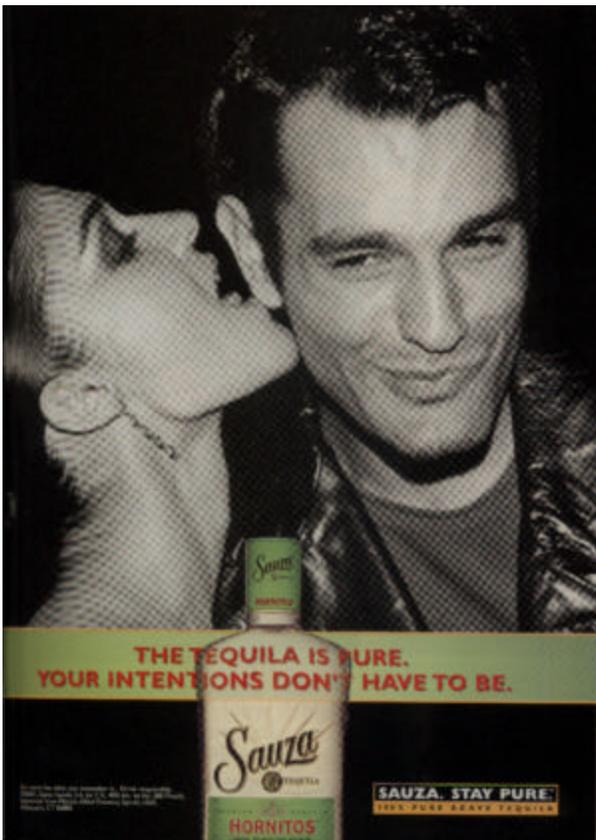
In this ad, however, we see that role reversed. The woman, dressed provocatively in hip-hugging jeans and shirt tied up over her stomach, is leaning over the man eating a cherry she's taken from his milkshake. The implication being that she's a sexually experienced woman who will take this boy's virginity - a milkshake is usually seen as the drink of immature boys, and a "cherry" being the slang term for virginity. The flower (again, slang for virginity) in her hair could also be a one she's taken



from another boy. She's literally showing off her past conquests.

The woman's top is open, revealing a large amount of cleavage created by the breasts she's "pushed up" by tying the shirt up around them. The "boy" has no choice but to stare at her breasts (poor fellow!) because she's pushing them in his face, which is wearing an expression of surprise. Interestingly, while an open mouth is indicative of surprise, it's also what a baby (a very young boy, perhaps) does when breasts are put into his face, and what a grown man also might do to his lover. With the woman's large, bouncy breasts, the "boy" seems caught between "milkshakes" and ages. He can stay as he is, or move backwards and forwards in age simultaneously by putting his mouth on her breasts.

What product is being advertised? New "Lucky brand" fragrances for men and women. But again, the text of the message has little to do with the words in it. The ad seems to be saying, "Boys who wear our fragrance will attract sexually experienced women who will deflower them. Women, if you wear our fragrance you'll live the fantasy of initiating a young boy into sex."



We move from something you put on your body, to something you put in it - alcohol. Even the most primitive societies realize the inhibition-loosening qualities of alcohol, and many fertility rituals around the world take place after the participants get drunk.

On the left, we have an ad for Sauza brand tequila. Every college student knows, if you want to get messed up quick, drink tequila. The words in the ad tell the viewer, "The tequila is pure. Your intentions don't have to be." If that weren't enough of a clue, we're shown a woman licking -or whispering into- the ear of a ruggedly handsome man. Again, like the first clothing ad, we're in intimate space with this couple.

The man is obviously pleased by whatever the woman is saying or doing. She's been drinking tequila because her inhibitions are going (or gone), and her intentions seem less than pure. He's probably also been drinking (all of this is implied, of course), and is thinking of taking her up on her impure offer. What's she offering him? Well, at this distance, she's not trying to sell him insurance.

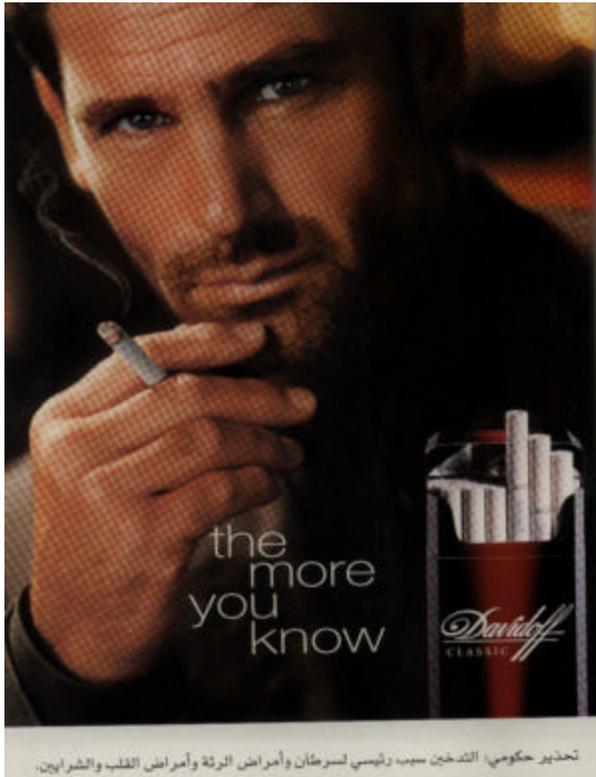
Let's take a look at a couple more ads touting products for use in intimate space, this time from a Saudi Arabian magazine.

This time, we're looking at ads for perfume and for cigarettes, both products of intimate use. The perfume ad is attempting a sultry, sexy, mysterious look, with the model looking directly into our eyes. We've been caught staring at her.



In societies in the Middle East, attitudes toward clothing and the body are much more conservative, although Saudi Arabia is one of the most progressive. This ad, from a news-type magazine, shows this woman, her face uncovered and her head bare. No only her head, but her leg as well, and it's crossed over the other one. "If it weren't for that leg," the viewer might be saying to themselves, "I could see right up her dress!"

The cigarette ad brings us a close-up of a ruggedly handsome man, smoking his choice of tobacco. (An interesting aside: although the words in the ad read, "The more you know," there is no health warning on the ad, since it's not required by the Saudi government. An American looking at this ad, where dire health warnings are required in tobacco ads and on the products themselves, might think: "The more you know. . . The less you want to smoke!") He's thinking about something important because he's got his fingers posed in a pensive gesture on his chin. Perhaps he's considering buying some perfume from the previous ad.



The advertisements appear in a magazine which carries the cover above. The model on the front is blonde, looking directly into the camera, and thrusting her breasts forward in a move that might suggest she's offering herself to the magazine reader.

By western standards, all this is fairly tame. However, this needs to be seen in context. The next photo, also from the same magazine, shows a typical family from the region.



As you can see, the models look nothing like the “typical” members of the society, in either dress or facial features.

The Japanese have sexual fantasy woven throughout the fabric of their culture. The cover of a new bilingual Japanese/English magazine called Eat, dealing with the world of food, is shown below.

It may seem a bit of a stretch to bring in the slang meaning for the word “eat” -to perform oral sex- when there’s a fully clothed woman on the cover, and all she’s doing is sniffing a flower.



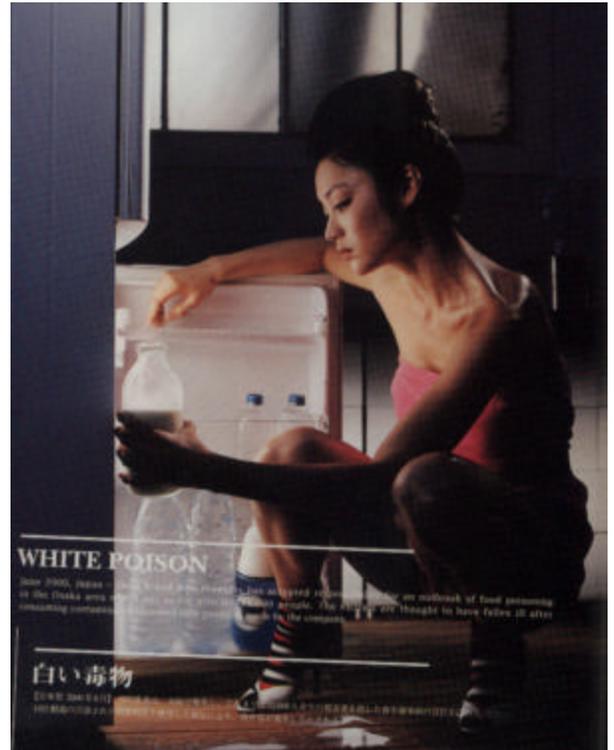
However, the woman is dressed as a geisha, or pleasure woman. Although a true geisha was (is) much more than a mere prostitute, learned in all the arts and in the ways of keeping home and man (literally the man who owned her) in harmony, she was also taught to be an expert at “pillowing,” or having sex. And if you look carefully, you’ll notice the geisha is not sniffing the flower, but has bitten off a rose petal and has it between her lips. Again, the overt sexuality for Japanese culture of having a professional pleasure woman nibble on a very phallic object is extremely arousing.

Another photograph, this time from an article (the photo can be seen as an advertisement for the words, inducing the viewer to quit turning pages and read the text), is illustrating a passage about contaminated milk. The woman is squatting in front of a small refrigerator holding a half-empty bottle of milk. Her head is tilted down -an erotically charged pose of submission in Japanese culture- exposing the long line of her neck. She’s wearing very fetishistic clothing, including a tube top and shorts (imagistic of a young, innocent girl - also a very erotic portrayal for the Japanese) and high heels.

The model's legs are spread open, and a white liquid (milk, but obviously representing semen) is puddled on the floor between her legs. She is not looking at the camera, allowing us the fantasy of being voyeurs (again, a hot-spot of erotic pleasure in modern Japanese culture) at what is obviously a very sexual display.

What is it that the picture is trying to illustrate? That contaminated milk can be hazardous to your health? I don't believe so. So what are these photos attempting to sell?

The most obvious answer is also the correct one. Both are trying to sell the magazine! The cover is selling sexual innuendo to the people who see it on the magazine rack, attempting to get them to pick it up - if not to buy it, at least to look at it. The second picture is attempting to sell you on reading the article. Of course, in order to read the article, you'll have to buy the magazine. And if you don't buy the magazine for the brilliant investigative reporting, you can always cut out the picture and use it as fodder for masturbatory fantasies.

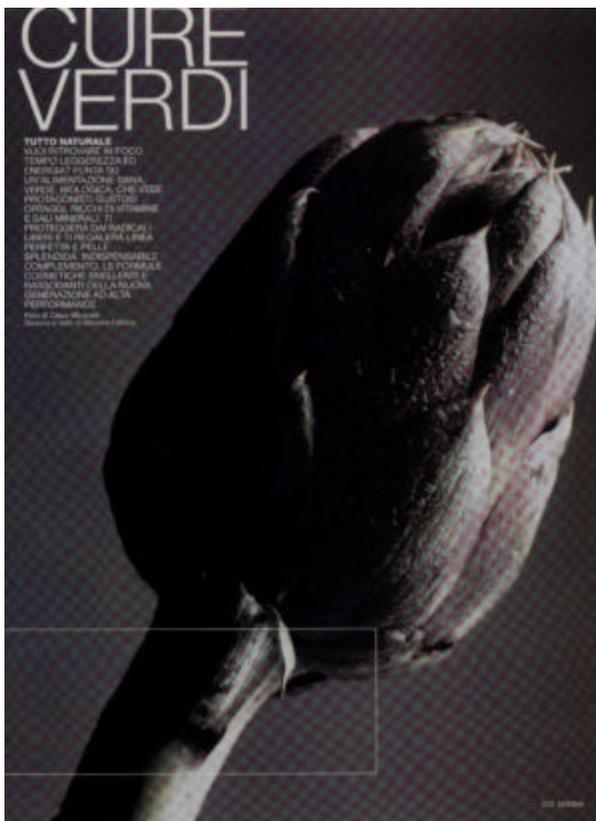


The last series of photographs we'll examine here are from an Italian health and fashion magazine. I said at the beginning of this section that I was going to stay away from the obvious fashion ads which use overt sexuality to advertise body products, and I intend to keep my word.

These illustrations are from an article where the title translates as, "Healthy Green." It's essentially about how eating green vegetables can keep your body in good shape, and keep you healthy.

Although the pages I've chosen for illustrative purpose have little of the article's text on them, this multi-page expose has at least 500 words of in-depth reportage covering green vegetables and healthy bodies.

What better to illustrate the healthy benefits of the artichoke to the left, than a healthy young body that echoes the form of the artichoke.





And how could anyone know the health benefits of a bundle of asparagus without a model whose form is similar to a spear of that wonderful stuff?



Sometimes a nude body has no hidden agenda. Sometimes the advertisement is blatantly honest: “Look, we’ve got naked people on display. Come look!”

CONCLUSION

This has been a very brief overview of how some societies around the world use sex as an integral element in advertising. Sometimes the product being sold is tangible, like alcohol or cigarettes. Sometimes what's being sold is an idea or feeling you're supposed to get from the product you actually purchase, like with the clothing or perfume ads.

Sometimes, sex is something that's offered simply as an enticement, with no hidden meanings.

Any essay like this one is necessarily a subjective one, both to write and when it's read. Why did I chose the magazines I bought? Why did I choose to show you the pictures I included? What were the pictures I left out?

A semiotic analysis is a snapshot, a brief and narrow glimpse of an otherwise monstrously huge part of a culture's signifying order. It can't be anything but a snapshot, data and conclusions frozen in time. Hopefully, what I've done here is to give the reader an idea of how sex and implied physical attraction is used to market products in American society, and in other societies around the world.

If I've piqued your interest, and left you with a number of questions about the use of sex in advertising, then I consider my job done well. After all, the title and cover picture sold you on picking up this essay, and the other pictures kept you reading it to the end.

The next time you look at a sexy ad, just remember to ask yourself, "What is it that I'm being sold on?" By picking it apart the way we did here, you just might be surprised at the answer.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Scott Lyall". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, sweeping flourish at the bottom.