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## Advertising

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### Synonyms

[Advertisements](#); [Research methods](#); [Data](#)

### Definition

Advertisements, which are widely available, can provide insights into the evolved preferences of target audiences and serve as a useful supplement to other methods in evolutionary psychology research.

### Introduction

Advertisements present an important source of data for evolutionary psychologists. Advertising is ubiquitous in our fast-paced, modern world, and people living in urban places are exposed to hundreds, if not thousands, of advertisements daily. Yet, little research exists that describes how advertisements can be prudently utilized. This chapter discusses how advertisers create content that strategically exploits consumers' values and preferences and how advertising content can provide

insights into various aspects of our evolved psychology.

### Advertising: More Than Meets the Eye

Advertising refers to a paid, mediated form of communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take action, either now or in the future. The selection of advertising content by advertisers and marketers is far from arbitrary, as marketers seem to know that advertising that appeals to people's intrinsic preferences or beliefs, such as their values, attitudes, and tastes, is more attention grabbing, influential, and persuasive (Yong et al. 2016).

As advertising tends to appeal to individuals' intrinsic preferences and values, the content of advertisements and commercials offers researchers an important source of empirical data. Advertisements exploit the intuitions or insights that marketers have about their target audiences, which allow researchers to infer particular psychological features of these target audiences.

### Advertisements Reflect Evolved Psychology

At a fundamental level, advertisements reflect evolved psychological preferences and present a window into human nature. The following

sections describe some important inferences that can be made of our evolved psychology from advertisements.

*Mate value traits.* Men and women prefer traits in a mate that can improve their own reproductive success. Because women's fertility declines as a function of age, men's reproduction is constrained by their access to reproductively valuable or fertile mates (Trivers 1972). In response to this adaptive challenge, men evolved to prefer physical features that signal youth, health, and fertility in sexually mature women, including firm skin, breasts, and buttocks, and a low waist-to-hip ratio (Buss and Schmitt 1993). In contrast to women, men face a slower decline in fertility across the life span, so identifying fertile partners is less crucial for women. Instead, because ancestral men varied in their ability to provide resources that aid the survival of women and their offspring, women, more than men, evolved to value a partner's social status, which is closely related to his ability to provide resources and protection (Buss and Schmitt 1993).

The content of advertisements provides a unique avenue to examine the validity of these mate preferences. More specifically, the theory of evolved mate preferences predicts that advertisements will tend to portray men and women according to their relevant mate value traits in advertisements, specifically senior and high-status men and young and physically attractive women. Indeed, a variety of studies analyzing a wide range of magazine advertisements, television commercials, and other forms of mass media have found that exemplary women are typically shown as being young and physically attractive and exemplary men as having high status (Saad 2004). Female characters in advertisements are more likely to be distinguished by their looks, such as being physically attractive and dressing provocatively, while male characters tend to be portrayed as demonstrating skill or having important occupational roles (Yong et al. 2016). The display of older age also appears to be more acceptable for men than women, as women are less likely to be shown on prime-time television with gray hair compared to men.

Another source of evidence for mate value traits can be found in personal advertisements, where individuals attempt to entice the interest of potential mates. One study analyzed over 300 personal advertisements in a respectable Californian singles digest and found that women advertised their appearance-related traits much more than men did, whereas men emphasized their status-related traits more than women did. A more recent study examined online personal advertisements and found that little had changed; men are more likely than women to exaggerate their income and social status, while women are more likely than men to misrepresent their physical appearance and underreport their age (sometimes both at the same time by using photos taken 10-plus years ago).

*Relationship duration preference.* Compared to women, who are required to invest heavily in the production of offspring because of internal gestation and postpartum suckling, men are physiologically required to make a relatively smaller contribution of only a few sex cells during sexual intercourse. Therefore, children carry much higher costs to women than men, especially in ancestral times when access to food and health care was scarce, if they result from sex with a partner who is unwilling or unable to provide resources and protection (Trivers 1972).

These differences in the costs of short-term, uncommitted sexual relationships meant that men, more so than women, could maximize their reproductive success by acquiring more mates. Therefore, men, more than women, evolved to have a range of psychological mechanisms that facilitate a short-term mating strategy and increase their access to a wider pool of sexual partners, such as proclivity for sexual variety and heightened sensitivity to cues of sexual receptivity (Buss and Schmitt 1993).

Advertisers indeed exploit this preference for short-term mating by depicting women, but not men, as attractive sex objects (Saad 2004). The presentation of sexually attractive and receptive females can make an advertisement more attention grabbing and influential. For instance, one study utilized a visual cueing task in which participants had to focus on a particular stimulus and

then shift their attention to a different point on the computer screen. Men had greater difficulty disengaging their attention to the new point on the screen when the initial stimulus was an attractive woman, while women did not experience this effect when the initial stimulus was an attractive man (Maner et al. 2007).

Presenting images of sexually attractive and receptive females in advertisements also increases men's cognitive disinhibitions and impulsivity (Yong et al. 2016). One study found that male participants increased their likelihood of discounting the future—regarded as a disinhibited, impulsive preference for immediate gratification—when exposed to pictures of attractive members of the opposite sex, while this effect was not found for female participants or participants who were exposed to pictures of unattractive opposite sex members (Wilson and Daly 2004). Disinhibition has consequences for reduced self-control and deficiency of deliberative decision-making and also has been shown to increase the likelihood of spending or acquiescing to persuasive messages. Indeed, in a study of loan advertisements conducted on a South African sample, advertisements that included a photograph of an attractive woman led to increased demand for the loan, and this effect was driven by male consumers. Thus, when attractive, skimpily clad women are recruited as models by organizers of car showroom events, advertisers are exploiting men's short-term mating psychology to make their messages more effective. These differences in the portrayal of the sexes have been found to span generations and time periods as well as across cultures, suggesting a consistent trend (Yong et al. 2016).

Advertisers have also historically taken advantage of women's preferences for committed, long-term relationships. For instance, it has been argued that appealing to the family ideal and the importance of love in advertisements can create the belief that shopping provides a solution and relief to these unfulfilled needs. Further research can be conducted to see if appeals to long-term relationships still persist in advertisements aimed at women today.

*Gains and losses.* Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) seminal prospect theory provides an important model for understanding human decision-making behavior under risk. Prospect theory stresses that gains and losses are evaluated relative to the status quo as a reference point. As our ancestors likely operated close to subsistence level as their status quo, resource losses often entailed a high chance of starvation and death. Thus, for most humans, resource losses generally loom larger than gains. By manipulating the "reference points" that enter decision rules or preferences, consumer choices can be influenced, and invoking potential losses is a particularly powerful stimulus for demand if it triggers loss aversion (Kahneman and Tversky 1979).

Various studies have found that loss-framed appeals in advertisements and persuasion messages tend to be more effective than gain-framed appeals when loss aversion was triggered. In a direct marketing field experiment to persuade people to use a particular credit card in Israel, people were approached and told that there are either "many disadvantages in using cash instead of ZionCard" (loss frame) or "many advantages in using ZionCard instead of cash" (gain frame). Indeed, loss-framed messages induced higher credit card usage than gain-framed messages (Ganzach and Karsahi 1995). Similarly, advertisers influence female consumers by exploiting loss aversion in intrasexual competition contexts (Yong et al. 2016). Advertisers often deliberately highlight women's physical shortcomings and insinuate that if women do not purchase their products and services, they will bear the consequences of retaining their physical flaws. Indeed, as early as the 1920s, advertisements for products such as mouthwash and soap have unabashedly stated that women who do not care about their looks (e.g., maintain good oral or skin hygiene) will fail to attract and retain a mate. The wildly successful cosmetic industry is a testament to the effectiveness of such advertising messages that play on female physical attractiveness and mate value, as women spend more than men on goods and services that enhance appearance (Saad 2004). During economic crises, while most industries suffer losses, beauty and cosmetic industries

(where females are the primary consumers) either are unscathed or may even experience a boom, as the number of financially stable men drops and intrasexual competition for such men intensifies (Hill et al. 2012).

*Status signaling.* Just as advertising can inform theories and hypotheses about evolved psychology, an evolutionary perspective may provide insight into how advertising has played a major role in shaping the materialistic values around which modern societies and economies function. In particular, advertisements may exploit a fundamental need for men and women to signal high social status to others. Having a high relative position in the local social hierarchy is evolutionarily important as it was linked to resource access and likely conferred survival and reproductive advantages in the ancestral past (Buss and Schmitt 1993). Social status is dependent not only on one's own skills and accomplishments but is ultimately something that is conferred by others. That is, others must see and acknowledge a person's standing in order for him or her to have a level of status. Given the evolutionary importance of status and the role that others' perceptions play, people may have evolved to display markers of their social status to others when possible.

In modern economies, advertising and product marketing have helped create a plethora of consumer avenues through which individuals can signal their social status—for example, widely recognized brand names in handbags, automobiles, watches, clothing, phones, schools, and holiday destinations are among the thousands of material products and services through which status can be signaled. Indeed, material luxuries are a highly viable means of status signaling underlying conspicuous consumption. Importantly, the status that individuals signal with each material purchase is only fleeting, as more and more people also acquire the same items, and product life cycles become increasingly shorter (Li et al. 2015). Studies have indeed demonstrated that advertising across television and print media has increasingly depicted and appealed to a materialistic lifestyle among consumers in cultures as diverse as the United States and Japan.

## Conclusion

In summary, advertisements present an abundant and convenient source of empirical data for evolutionary psychologists. By examining psychological traits in advertising content, researchers can make inferences about human nature and use advertisements to gauge the validity of evolutionary theories on human psychology. At the same time, an evolutionary psychological perspective can shed light on why advertising works and how it has contributed to the materialism that pervades modern society.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Conspicuous Consumption](#)
- ▶ [Intrasexual Competition](#)
- ▶ [Long-Term Mating](#)
- ▶ [Men's Mate Preferences](#)
- ▶ [Preferences in Long vs. Short-Term Mating](#)
- ▶ [Sex Differences](#)
- ▶ [Sexual Strategies Theory](#)
- ▶ [Short-Term Mating](#)
- ▶ [Social Status](#)
- ▶ [Social Status and Economic Resources](#)
- ▶ [Women's Mate Preferences](#)

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