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Asian Marketing

For Levi's, Sex Sells in Some Nations In Asia, but It's Too Touchy in Others

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IN LEVI STRAUSS'S new television spot for Asia, a stunning young woman clings to a rugged young man in 501 jeans, displaying a generous stretch of her bare shoulders and upper back.

Except in Malaysia, Indonesia and a handful of Asia's other more-conservative markets. There, the woman bares less skin, and the lovers don't touch each other, although the intensity betrays the sexual attraction.

Such are the difficulties of marketing to a region as vast as Asia, from liberal Japan, where almost anything goes on TV, including nudity, to Malaysia, where ads can't show a woman's bare back.

For Levi's, struggling with competitors at home in the U.S. and in Europe, Asia's jeans market is becoming a lot more important. It's valued at as much as US\$3.6 billion, according to consulting firm Kurt Salmon Associates. That's enough that Levi's in the past year has started making commercials tailored specifically to the region. Previously, it imported ads from the U.S. and Europe, which didn't always go over well in some of Asia's more-conservative countries.

"Asia is a complicated continent compared with Europe," says V.R.M. Raju, a Levi's marketing executive in Singapore. "Sexiness in different markets has got different relevance."

Levi's has its hands full as recession drags on in Asia and competition rises around the globe from newer, hipper brands like **Tommy Hilfiger**. Privately held Levi's doesn't disclose results, but last year the San Francisco-based company said it would cut a third of its North American work force and close almost a third of its U.S. factories.

THE COMPANY won't say how much of its \$6.9 billion in sales last year came from Asia, but the market is clearly important. The Asian division employs about 1,800 people, or 6% of the company's work force, and operates two plants. Levi's says it has about 16% of the Asian market, and it expects that share to rise this year, although that news won't be nearly as good if the whole market is shrinking.

The Asian ad strategy underscores the challenges of using a touchy subject like sex to sell to different cultures. It's a problem faced by many global consumer-products companies. Clothing giant Calvin Klein, for instance -- known for ads featuring topless women -- doesn't use the raunchier images in some countries. "There's picking and choosing in certain markets," says David P. Ketchum, a Calvin Klein

marketing executive in Hong Kong. "The intent is never to offend."

Even images that would be innocuous in the West can be too provocative in Asia: One European shampoo-maker had to pull from the Malaysia market a commercial showing a hairdresser washing a woman's hair. The problem: the hairdresser was male.

"Any brand built on sensuality takes a risk in Muslim and conservative cultures," says Kim Faulkner, managing director at consulting firm Interbrand in Singapore. Although an advertiser can adjust some things, such as the cut of the clothing worn in the ads, she says, it can't tinker too much with the brand's image.

For Levi's, which builds its image largely on sexuality, edgy ad campaigns from the U.S. and Europe have sometimes been too much for Asian viewers. Several years ago, for instance, the company used a television spot from Europe showing a woman in Levi's getting into a taxicab and fixing her makeup. Then she starts to shave, revealing that "she" is actually a transvestite.

WHILE THAT ad ran in Asia's more-liberal markets, such as the Philippines, it didn't make it past government censors in Singapore and South Korea. And Levi's didn't even try to run the ad in Indonesia, considered even more conservative.

Likewise, another European spot that showed two men running with their hands shackled was deemed inappropriate for Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand.

In conservative markets, Levi's brought in less-suggestive ads, such as one that showed a male figure made of clay rescuing a woman from a burning building. But Levi's wanted to use a single campaign in all its Asian markets to help build a consistent image. So last year the company hired the Singapore office of London-based ad agency Bartle Bogle Hegarty to create ads specifically for its Asian audiences. So far, none of BBH's ads have run afoul of government regulators, Levi's says.

BBH's first campaign, launched late last year, showed a young boy at school watching a woman slip a note into the hip pocket of an older male student. Then the boy realizes the flirtatious woman is his teacher. "It's his first witnessing of a sexual encounter," says Adrey Low, account director at BBH. "He's flustered and embarrassed.

But BBH also took pains to portray the sexual references subtly, making sure the age difference between the older student and the teacher wasn't significant. The physical contact, too, was limited. "It wasn't raunchy, it was sensual," says Ms. Low. "It wasn't her hand on his bum; she slipped [the note] quite sensuously into his pocket."

In the latest campaign, on which Levi's is spending about \$10 million, a young man visits a female mystic, who instead of reading his palm "reads" the creases on his jeans. Then, in the scene tweaked for different markets, passion erupts between the young man and the mystic's bare-shouldered female assistant. Sparks fly between the two angry women, and the young man slowly departs.

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