

Should advertisers use skinny models?

by Dirk Smeesters, Thomas Mussweiler and Naomi Mandel

The size of the models you show in advertising affects how consumers feel about themselves and your products. A woman's body image is an important source of her self-esteem, yet approximately 50% of girls and young women report being dissatisfied with their bodies.

Among the many forces believed to play a role in this is the thin ideal dominating the media. The images we see of women in the media today are thinner than the majority of the female population. Frequent media exposure may cause consumers to cultivate unrealistic perceptions about the prevalence of desirable attributes, such as wealth or physical ideals. Indeed, abundant exposure to thin media images has lead to the commonly held belief that the thin ideal is normative and central to attractiveness.

To test these perceptions we examined how advertisements containing thin or heavy models influence the self-esteem levels of overweight and underweight people as determined by Body Mass Index (BMI). Overweight individuals represent a significant and growing segment of consumers. Approximately 59% of Americans and 40% of Europeans are overweight or obese.

If exposure to thin media images can result in low self-esteem and eating pathologies among women with an

average BMI, it is possible that overweight women will be even more vulnerable to these effects. Furthermore, although underweight consumers comprise only 2% of the American population, they are often victims of eating disorders, and therefore might also be especially vulnerable to thin media images.

In our experiments the first hypothesis we wanted to test was if the extreme thinness of models affected women's self-esteem. We learned that images of extremely thin models leads to a negative effect for most consumers. Specifically, people with moderate or high BMI think that they are too dissimilar to models of this size. They think that the divide between their own self-perception and weight and that of the models they see is too great. This then leads to negative self-esteem in the consumer.

At the other end of the scale, we found very positive effects came from the use of moderately thin models in advertisements; models that are still thin, but healthily so and whose weight

is perceived as being more realistically attainable by the public. We believe that the use of such images could help inspire people to reach their ideal BMI and size, as they are able to envisage that with some effort on their part – through exercise and diet, for example – they can be of a similar size or weight to these models. Such images also have a directly positive effect on consumers' self-esteem.

We also conducted the same tests using moderately heavy models, similar to the women used in the famous Dove soap campaigns, and obese models; both being sizes that you would not typically see used in advertising campaigns. Our results showed that obese models have a positive effect on self-esteem, except for consumers with a high BMI. For most other people, comparing themselves to obese models makes them feel better because they don't perceive themselves as being like them. However, the effect of moderately heavy models (the 'Dove models', if we can give them that name) is for most consumers (except for those with a low BMI) negative and leads to a decrease in self-esteem. This effect is an important finding and goes against the perceptions that many marketers have about the size of models that should be used in campaigns.

This complicates the campaign used by Dove because the point was to



inspire people and make them feel good. Our view is that people had a positive reaction to the campaign because it received so much media attention and had people talking. Dove was using 'real' people and the public said that this is what more advertisers should be doing, and rightly so.

However, there is often conflict between what people say and what they feel. On the surface the reaction to the Dove campaign was positive. But, when you scratch a little deeper you find that the responses are different.

We know this because we tested for it. We found that the images in the Dove campaign left people with lower self-esteem and had a negative effect. Other researchers have confirmed this, and it is an important finding.

There are always groups of consumers for whom certain types of models have a negative effect. In the main those groups comprise people who are overweight themselves, so anything that triggers a feeling of being heavy provokes negative self-esteem. But, there could be a positive effect from advertising models for most people, and here we are referring to those who are underweight or have a normal body mass. Plainly speaking, if marketers and fashion houses used moderately thin models with body masses that are more readily attainable by the majority of the public, instead of the anorexically

thin types that seem to be so favoured by this sector, then the effect on the self-esteem of consumers would be positive. Expose this large section of the population to extremely thin models and the effect is negative.

Consequences for brands

Taking our research further, we are exploring to what extent these effects alter people's attitudes towards the products and brands they see advertised. What we're finding is that consumers exposed to models that provoke negative self-esteem transfer these emotions to the product. This is particularly true for fashion advertising, with clothing, jewellery, and suchlike.

The continual use of very skinny models by marketing agencies leads to multiple negative effects on the consumer's self-esteem, which in turn hurts the brands because of the negative perceptions it fosters.

Conversely, where the models in advertisements create a positive reaction and consumer self-esteem is increased, then higher purchasing intentions of the product and brand are generated. This, of course, is exactly the desired effect.

So, brand marketers should look to use healthy looking, moderately thin models. The public want to see models that they can associate directly with, or who are of a size that is deemed

The effects of media images on consumers

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- Exposure to moderately thin models increases self-esteem (except for consumers with a high BMI).
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- Exposure to extremely heavy models increases self-esteem (except for consumers with a high BMI).

attainable. The use of moderately thin models can engender a positive effect on the self-esteem of consumers. This in turn can lead to a positive effect on their perceptions of the product and brand being advertised. There is also a halo effect here: when people say "I feel good" then everything else around them also seems good. ■

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