



Defensive reactions to slim female images in advertising: The moderating role of mode of exposure

Fang Wan^{a,*}, Tamara L. Ansons^b, Amitava Chattopadhyay^c, Jason P. Leboe^d

^a Asper School of Business, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3T 5V4

^b Stephen M. Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA

^c INSEAD, 1 Ayer Rajah Avenue, 138676, Singapore

^d Psychology, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3T 2N2

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ABSTRACT

Across three studies, we examined the impact of exposure to idealized female images, blatantly vs. subtly, on females' self-evaluations, as well as attitude towards brands endorsed by the models with these idealized body images, in marketing communications. We theorized and showed that blatant exposure can elicit defensive coping, leading to a more positive self-evaluation and a lower brand attitude toward a brand endorsed by a model with an idealized body image. When exposure is subtle, however, idealized body images lead to lowered self-evaluations and increased evaluations of endorsed brands.

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Introduction

Marketing communications are replete with idealized images of women, especially in products targeted at women. For instance, attractive female celebrities are routinely used in advertisements to endorse a wide range of women's products (Bower, 2001). Images of the "ideal female" also appear frequently in more subtle forms, such as the idealized female models who appear on one side of a magazine page, with the image of a product on the other side of the page, as in advertising for Skyy vodka. Thus, marketers must believe that these idealized images positively influence women's purchase decisions for these products.

Research on the impact of idealized female images, in advertising and other marketing contexts, on self-perception, however, provides inconsistent findings. On the one hand, viewing idealized female images can enhance women's body satisfaction and self-esteem (e.g., Henderson-King, Henderson-King, & Hoffman, 2001; Mills, Polivy, Herman, & Tiggemann, 2002; Myers & Biocca,

1992), which could potentially lead to more positive attitudes toward advertisements and products, associated with the female ideal (Kahle & Homer, 1985). On the other hand, exposure to idealized female images can result in negative moods (Hawkins, Richards, MacGranley, & Stein, 2004; Stice & Shaw, 1994), decreased body satisfaction (Hawkins et al., 2004) and decreased self-assessed attractiveness (Smeesters & Mandel, 2006), potentially leading to effects opposite to that sought by the marketer (Micu, Coulter, & Price, 2009).

It is, therefore, important to understand when we might expect positive effects of idealized body images in marketing communications on self-perception, and how that influences purchase decisions. We build on recent research attempting to address these questions in three ways: First we offer a conceptualization of how idealized images influence consumer response in terms of self-perception and product evaluation. We argue that a female viewer's self-perception and consequent effects on product evaluation depend on the degree of attention paid to an idealized female image in marketing communications during exposure. Following Tesser's (1988) theoretical speculation, we theorize that exposure to an idealized female image elicits a default negative affect stemming from an automatic upward social comparison with the image, leading to a more negative self-image. When the message recipient is consciously aware of the source of the decrement in self-image, a

* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Marketing, I.H. Asper School of Business, University of Manitoba, 181 Freedman Crescent, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3T 5V4. Fax: +1 204 474 7545.

E-mail addresses: wanf@ms.umanitoba.ca, fang.wan@ad.umanitoba.ca (F. Wan), tlansons@umich.edu (T.L. Ansons), amitava.chattopadhyay@insead.edu (A. Chattopadhyay), leboej@cc.umanitoba.ca (J.P. Leboe).

conscious and active, self-defensive process of self-repair takes place, with the message recipient denigrating the idealized images and, thus, improving their own self-image. Moreover, this denigration influences the evaluation of the advertised products associated with such images negatively—this has never been empirically examined before. In contrast, when message recipients are not consciously aware of the idealize source, the defense mechanism is muted, leading to a decrement in self-image, which in turn leads to greater acceptance of the endorsed product, as a means to attain the ideal (Kamins, 1990; Micu, Coulter, & Price, 2009).

Second, we test our theorizing about the elicitation of a defense mechanism when attention is directed at idealized body images, by examining a previously unexamined but important moderator: whether the idealized body images are presented blatantly or subtly. Identification of this boundary condition is important because (1) marketers use both blatant and subtle threats to the self, (2) it helps us test our conceptualization above, and (3) this boundary condition helps us resolve inconsistent findings in the extant literature, such as why consumers feel positive about their self-image and denigrate thin models when invited to contemplate the attractiveness of thin models (e.g., Bower, 2001; Duke, 2002), but feel bad about their self-image when exposed to attractive images in the context of a separate task (Richins, 1991).

Third, we are the first to experimentally explore the impact of active coping with the threat elicited by idealized body images and its consequent effects on product evaluations.

Differential effects of idealized images: A social comparison perspective

According to Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, individuals engage in self-evaluation whenever they encounter a comparative other. That is, information about the comparative other is used as a basis for assessing their self-view (e.g., Richins, 1991; Trampe, Stapel, & Siero, 2007). Whether the outcome of this social comparison process is positive or negative for one's self-view depends on the characteristics of the comparative other and the individual (Häfner, 2009; Smeesters & Mandel, 2006; Smeesters, Mussweiler, & Mandel, 2010; Trampe et al., 2007). In this research we suggest that *mode of exposure* can also influence the outcome, a factor that has not been considered previously but which is particularly important and relevant in the marketing context.

The moderating role of mode of exposure: Eliciting dual processes

In marketing communications, the mode of exposure to idealized images can be blatant or subtle. In the blatant mode, the message recipient deliberately attends to the idealized nature of the image and is consciously aware of the idealized image and its presence in the marketing stimulus. In the subtle mode, the message recipient does not deliberately attend to the idealized nature of the image and, as a result, does not consciously connect the idealized image to the marketing stimulus.

In previous research, when the experimental context did not draw attention to the idealized images, akin to our subtle exposure condition, an unconscious upward social comparison process resulted (e.g., Bargh, 1994, 2002; Bargh & Ferguson, 2000). In such contexts, the unconscious social comparison process is likely to lead to a reduced self-image, as reported, for example, in Richins (1991).

When attention is explicitly drawn to an idealized image, in addition to this unconscious comparison process, we suspect that there is likely to be a conscious process that might override, or at least obscure, the impact of the unconscious process. Building on the theoretical speculations of Duke (2002) and Tesser (1988) we suggest that when the viewer is consciously aware of the superior

features of an idealized image (e.g., their slimness) that threatens their self-views, the viewer makes a conscious effort to restore a positive self-view by employing defensive coping strategies (Tesser, 1988).

The use of self-defensive strategies in response to threat has been documented in the past. These strategies involve self-enhancement through the derogation of the comparative other that is the source of the threat (e.g., Gibbons & McCoy, 1991; Häfner et al., 2008; see also Baumeister, Smart, & Borden, 1996; Fein & Spencer, 1997). Thus, we hypothesize that when exposure mode is blatant, message recipients are likely to be consciously aware of the threatening features of the idealized image, and, thus, respond defensively and denigrate the idealized image, to boost and restore their self-views.

Product evaluation

Thus far we have considered the impact of idealized images on self-views as a function of blatant vs. subtle exposure mode. How will these effects on self-views influence the evaluation of marketing communications and products? When exposure is blatant, because consumers denigrate the idealized image to repair their self-view, the idealized characteristic in the image is likely to become associated with negative reactions. As a result, under blatant exposure, marketing communications that contain idealized body image cues are likely to be judged negatively. When exposure is subtle, however, endorsed products in marketing communications that contain idealized body images are likely to be judged positively, as in the absence of conscious awareness of the source of the reduced self-view the product is likely to be seen as a way to attain the ideal and restore one's self-view.

We test these hypotheses in three studies. Study 1 establishes that the mode of exposure to idealized body images affects self-perception. Specifically, blatant exposure to idealized slim body images leads to a more positive self perception compared to subtle exposure. Study 2, tests whether this observed effect in Study 1 is due to the activation of a self-defensive mechanism that denigrates the idealized slim body image, as we propose. Study 3 extends our research to a marketing context and examines whether the defense mechanisms thus far observed in response to blatant exposure to idealized slim body images leads to a more negative evaluation of products endorsed by marketing communications that contain idealized slim body images, but a more positive evaluation, when exposure is subtle.

Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to provide evidence that viewers when exposed to idealized slim female images blatantly, are likely to react defensively and report more positive self evaluations compared to those exposed to the idealized slim images subtly. In order to manipulate the blatantness of exposure, we devised two sets of instructions that were presented to participants prior to the presentation of the idealized images; one group of participants were told that they would complete an attractiveness judgment task, and another group of participants were told that they would complete a sunglasses evaluation task. These instructions were expected to alter how explicitly participants attended to the slimness of the idealized slim female images.

Participants and design

Thirty-seven Caucasian females who spoke English as their native language were recruited for Study 1 from Introduction to Psychology classes at a major Canadian university. The students received course credit in exchange for their participation.

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