"Real" vs. "Perfect": Re-conceptualizing Women in Advertising

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Abstract

With increased rates in depression and body dissatisfaction in college-aged women, researchers have been analyzing possible catalysts to this social issue. Although many factors can contribute to these increasing statistics, many studies have been conducted regarding how the media portrays women and its overall effect to the general population's self-esteem and body positivity. This study will look at how models in advertising – particular models representative of the population versus models that reflect society's thin ideal – can have a possible effect on the body image of viewers and consumers. Closely intertwined with gender stereotypes and feminism, the study calls for an answer to why women view themselves poorly and works towards a solution to diminish the problem.

Introduction

Advertising is one of the biggest methods of mass communication utilized by companies to increase product recognition and overall company revenue. It can be highly pervasive and has the potential to influence many aspects of society. Companies can utilize many different methods to increase advertising results, however some of these methods can impact society negatively. This study will analyze possible negative externalities associated with advertising efforts, particularly those pertaining to body image.

This area of research stems largely from research on gender roles and bias in advertising and how it can affect both men and women (Grau and Zotos, 2016). As researchers tried to understand these effects further, they found that common themes among women in advertising was the use of advertising strategies that portrayed society's idea of a "prefect" woman – women with flawless skin, flat stomachs and symmetrical features (Dittmar, 2009). This glorification of

thinness, often associated with gender stereotypes and depictions of women as sex-objects, yielded consistent attitudes of negative body image, body dissatisfaction and perceptions of being unattractive in women, especially younger women, whose views and beliefs are still developing and not deeply rooted (Parsons, Reichl and Pedersen, 2016).

When interpreting reactions to advertising efforts directed at women, research on socioeconomic backgrounds of women also became relevant, such as careers (Dittmar and Howard, 2004), whether or not they associated with the term feminist (Lavine, Sweeny & Wagner, 1999), and whether the women had any previous history of body dissatisfaction.

Lit Review

Research regarding body image and self-worth as a reflection of the media has really only arisen in the past 20 years or so. Due to this increasingly popular topic of conversation, many companies have taken a new perspective on body and gender in media. These views can be produced by one of two ways: mirror image and mold image. Mirror image demonstrates that advertising should reflect what companies see in society and real life. In the case of this argument, advertisements should reflect "real women" in real life, such as women who have body types that reflect those seen in the general population. The other side of the spectrum is mold image, which states that society will view media and shape their values to what they see, meaning women and consumers will attempt to change their looks to match the women in advertisements (Grau & Zotos, 2016). In order to begin analyzing the effects of advertising on body image, it is important to first take an in-depth look at gender roles in advertising and how they are perceived by the consumers.

Stereotypes in advertising are prevalent, whether consumers notice them or not. These stereotypes include, but are not limited to women playing the stay-at-home mother role, women in cleaning commercials, or men in typical humor roles. As Grau and Zotos state (2016), "Stereotypes become problematic when they lead to expectations about one social category over another or restrict opportunities for one social category over another" (p. 761). Many companies attempt to challenge these stereotypes, such as Dove. Their Real Strength campaign showcases the softer side of men as fathers (Nikolla, 2015). One study analyzed advertisements for depiction of men in regards to the relationship of gender roles from 2003-2008; the results conclude that campaigns such as Real Strength are well received by consumers (Fowler & Thomas, 2015). Likewise, Always, a popular tampon brand, launched their "Like a Girl" campaign that promotes the change of stereotyping of women by men and women alike. Launched during Super Bowl XLIX, one video features children and teens discussing the phrase "like a girl" and why it is used as an insult. The advertisement becomes so powerful because it challenges viewers to consider what may be contributing to gender stereotypes, even seemingly harmless phrases used in everyday life (Berman, 2015).

An in-depth study of gender roles conducted by Feiereisen, Broderick and Douglas (2009) conceptualizes men to make decisions based on their individuality and activity traits and women on their emotional traits. They propose that consumers react to advertisements based on two factors: schema and congruity. Schema relates to how the person identifies with gender and what role gender plays in their self-identification. Four gender traits are high masculine/low feminine, high masculine/high feminine, low masculine/high feminine, and low masculine/low feminine. The congruity framework consists of how people associate a product or advertisement with their gender identification. For instance, women are traditionally more concerned about

physical appearance and therefore respond to advertisements based on improving their appearance (Feiereisen, Broderick & Douglas, 2009). However, a metrosexual male that has a gender identity of high masculine/high feminine might also respond in the same way because of these traits associated with femininity.

Understanding this research is integral as it is intertwined with the topic of body image. As stated by Parsons, Reichl and Pedersen (2016), media is "used for the exploration of developmental issues pertaining to curiosity, education, identity and sexuality" (p. 208). In her analysis of media's effects on consumer well-being, Helga Dittmar (2007) conceptualizes media as a "cage within" meaning that consumers are powerless and often unaware of advertising's suffocating nature in regards to identity (p. 199). Therefore, media can influence how girls and women grow and become comfortable with their bodies.

The environment women are associated with can also influence their perceptions of advertising. A study conducted by Dittmar and Howard (2004) revealed that women working in professional environments not associated with appearance, such as teachers, were more likely to show more positive body images when showed advertisements with real rather than perfect women. On the other hand, women that work in appearance based industries, such as fashion magazines, were less likely to be affected by these factors. Similarly, it could be argued that women that identify as feminists may be less susceptible to be influenced by gender stereotypical or sexually objectifying advertisements. Henderson-King and Stewart (1994) revealed that feminists traditionally have more body satisfaction and more positive body images because they reject advertising's and other media's ideals of the perfect woman being one specific body type. As Landrine and Klonoff (1997) state, "[Feminism] provides women with a schema for understanding sexist discrimination as an aspects of the reality of gender than a response to

women as individuals" (p. 113). Therefore, women who identify as feminists should be more inclined to recognize gender biased advertisements and, therefore, be more likely to ignore them. However, one study's results reveals that feminists were equally as likely to show signs of body dissatisfaction due to advertising with gender biased themes, such as perfect women (Lavine, Sweeny & Wagner, 1999). This demonstrates that even deep-rooted values can be penetrated and altered by gender-biased and demeaning ads. In addition, another study showed that women who had no history of body dissatisfaction were affected in the same ways as women with a history of body dissatisfaction when viewing sexist advertisements (Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008).

Parson, Reichl and Pederson (2017) present ideas regarding representation of disability in *Gender Ableism: Media Representations and Gender Role Beliefs' Effects on Perceptions of Disability and Sexuality*. Although talking about disability, these ideas can be related to body image because of the aspect of underrepresentation. According to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, collected the years 2013-2104, over 66% of the United States population is overweight or obese ("Overweight & Obesity Statistics", 2017). Thus, this large percentage of the population is underrepresented in advertising. Even women who are of average, healthy weight aren't properly represented, as the average female model in the media industry is over 20% underweight (Bocage-Barthélémy, Selimbegović & Chatard, 2018). While companies may use underweight models as a mold image technique (Grau & Zotos, 2016), studies have been done that indicate the usage of normal-sized, healthy models are just as effective in gaining consumer attention and overall revenue (Dittmar & Howard, 2004).

Rationale

The issues surrounding body image are important to discuss and analyze because of the negative effects that poor body image can have on women. If research in this area continues to grow and become more relevant, advertising companies might be inclined to pursue other techniques and methods. Acceptance and awareness of the issue may encourage these companies to re-conceptualize the ideal of the perfect woman used in advertising.

Studies indicate that depression among teens is increasing at a rapid pace, and it has been theorized that a cause of that is poor or negative body image. One study went in depth to draw connections from poor body image to depression. By collecting data on how depressed and non-depressed individuals (depression determined by an assessment) perceived their own attractiveness and how others perceived their attractiveness, they were able to determine that depressed individuals a.) are less satisfied with their bodies than non-depressed people and b.) will have distorted body images, meaning they rated themselves as being less attractive than other's rated them (Noles, Cash & Winstead, 1985). This correlation between self-perceived attractiveness and depression make studies in this area even more pressing, as depression is a major cause of suicide, especially in teenagers (Minkoff, 1973).

Keeping these issue in mind, this study continues the trend of proactive research to determine how women perceive themselves after viewing specific models in advertising. The following experiment proposes that women will have an overall more positive body image and less body dissatisfaction after viewing advertisements promoting women of all different body types, as opposed to women with only one body type, particularly women perceived by society to be perfect.

Research Design

        The research instrument utilized in this study is an experimental design which will contain a pretest and posttest. This instrument is effective for the hypothesis (advertising with "real" women will change the way consumers feel about body image) because it needs some sort of treatment given to the participants for a before and after analysis. Simply administering a survey with no treatment would be ineffective because there would be no consistency in the advertisements they have or have not seen. Two different women could have completely different responses because they simply have not been exposed to similar advertising techniques. There could be a number of reasons for this, for example, the watch different channels on the television. Therefore, it is important to conduct a research design so there is a level of control in regards to the specific advertisements they view.

Variable Specification

        The variables for the experiment are quite simple. The independent variable, which will be manipulated by the researcher, is the type of advertisement the groups are exposed to – i.e. women conceived by the media to be "perfect" and women conceived by the media to be "real" (Michela Marzano-Parisoli, 2001). Therefore, the variable that will be effected by this change in type of women, or the dependent variable, is how the women feel about their own personal body image after viewing the advertisements (Dittmar, 2017). There will also be a control group to measure the reactions of participants who are not given a treatment and compare those reactions to the other groups.

        To verify that the study is valid, there must be manipulation to the pretest, to ensure that participants will not be predisposed to what the study is about based on the questions. For this reason, the pretest includes questions about body image, as well as questions about other issues.

The posttest, however, only contains questions pertaining to body image. In addition, the advertisements will be consistent in the category of women's advertisements – i.e. clothing, lingerie, or perfume. This will ensure that the women will not respond differently because they are responding to the product, only the women. Lastly, to ensure validity and diminish extraneous variables, the ads will be of the same medium such as magazine or television, and they will be centered around the woman's body/appearance.

To ensure reliability, the pretests and posttests will be consistent with each participant. The pretest contains questions such as, "What type of medium do you usually view advertisements?" This will not change the medium they will view in the experiment; it is simply to stray focus from the actual purpose of the study: body image. The debrief will also avoid mentioning the true purpose of the study.

Elements and Sampling Method

The study is geared toward college aged women; therefore, the participants should be enrolled in college or college aged. Ideally, the sample would contain women of all shapes and sizes to represent the general population of women in America. Appropriate representation is crucial because, as previous research states, underrepresentation in media is a key cause of body dissatisfaction (Parson, Reichl and Pederson, 2017). Getting samples from each weight group will obtain more well-rounded results. The best way to obtain this representative sample would be to go to a college campus, GCSU for example, and set up a table. A building that held many core classes would be ideal because of the variety of students that visit the building and would be accessible for the survey. There would be all different types of students with different majors and different backgrounds to participate in the study. If a table was set up, one way to incentivize the students to stop at the table would be to offer some kind of food or drink in exchange for them to

put their name on the mailing list. Another way to obtain a large sample is to ask sorority members to participate in exchange for a donation to their philanthropy. This would generate participation from a large group of women from all different backgrounds.

Procedure

All participants will be asked to meet at the specific meeting location where they will be debriefed that the study they are participating in is analyzing the effect advertising has on college-aged women. After debriefing, all participants will be administered a pretest containing both questions about body image, as well as other filler questions. Afterwards, they will be split into random groups and assigned different classrooms. The treatment will consist of three different groups. Two groups will be given a treatment (group A and B) and the last (groups C) will be the control group and will receive no treatment. Group A will be shown various advertisements that features women that are portrayed as "perfect" or the media's definition of the word. These women will all be skinny, have flawless skin and photo-shopped to give them the look of unattainable beauty. Group B will be shown advertisements that contains women of all different sizes. The women shown should be an accurate representation of the weight and shapes of the women in real life. Group C is the control group and will see advertisements not containing people. This way increased or decreased body image will not be an effect of the advertisements and the control group can serve as a benchmark for comparison. After the treatment is given, a posttest will be administered to all groups asking about their reactions to the ads and how they now feel about their body image. The posttest will reveal if the ads had any effect on body image, and because of the pretest, it will allow researchers to analyze a more longitudinal timeframe. Participants will then be thanked and, once the data has been analyzed, the participants will receive an email with the study as well as a contact if they have any

complaints on how the study was conducted. The actual experiment should be only one day, if administered correctly. However, to ensure accurate results, the experiment could be done more than once, and therefore would require more than one day.

Resources

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Appendix

<u>Pretest</u>

1. In regards to beauty, what products interest you? (check all that apply)

__Makeup
__Skincare
__Haircare
__Casual Clothing
__Athletic Wear
__Business Clothing
__Formal Clothing
__Perfume
__Lingerie
__other, please specify: _____

2. In regard to the previous question, which product interest you the most?

_____

3. What medium do you view advertising on the most? (circle one)

    a. Television
    b. Radio
    c. Internet (non-social networking sites)
    d. Social Networking Sites
    e. Other: _____

4. On a scale of 1-5 how often do you compare yourself to others after seeing an

    advertisement? (1 being never, 5 being very often)

    1   2   3   4   5

    Never   Sometimes   Very Often

5. On a scale of 1-5, how comfortable do you typically feel with your body? (1 being very
    uncomfortable, 5 being completely comfortable)

    1   2   3   4   5

    Never   Sometimes   Very Often

6. On a scale of 1-5, how well do you feel that diversity is displayed in advertising? (1 being
    not well at all, 5 being very well)

    1   2   3   4   5

    Not well at all   Somewhat well   Very well

7. How strongly do you associate yourself with the word feminist? (1 being very weak, 5
    being very strong)

    1   2   3   4   5
    Very weak   Neutral   Very strong

8. How many times a day would you say you interact with an advertisement? (circle one)

a. 1-5
b. 5-10
c. 10-15
d. 15-20
e. other: ____

9. Would you say you buy products based on advertising efforts or the product itself? (circle one)

a. Advertising efforts
b. Product itself

10. Which beauty company's advertising efforts stand out to you the most?
   _____

11. Age:

12. Major:

13. Ethnicity:

   a. White
   b. Hispanic/Latino
   c. African American
   d. Asian
   e. Other: _____

14. Are you employed?

   a. Yes
   b. No

15. If yes to the previous question, what industry?
   _____

<u>Posttest</u>

1. After viewing the advertisements, do you feel more, less or the same amount of body confidence than before viewing? (circle one)
   a. More
   b. Less
   c. Same amount

2. After viewing the advertisements, do you feel more, less or equally feminine than before viewing? (circle one)
   a. More
   b. Less
   c. Equal

3. On a scale of 1-5, how often did the ads make you feel like you weren't good enough? (1 being never, 5 being very often)

1	2	3	4	5
Never		Somewhat often		Very often

4. How well did the advertisements incorporate the following social elements using the scale below? (1 being not well at all, 5 being very well)

	Not well at all		Somewhat well		Very well
Ethnicity	1	2	3	4	5
Weight range	1	2	3	4	5
Age	1	2	3	4	5
Disability	1	2	3	4	5

5. Do you feel that you would be better incentivized to purchase products from ads using "real women" or ads using "perfect" women? (circle one)

   a. Real
   b. Perfect

6. How strongly do you feel that companies in the ads used body image of consumers to take advantage of them? (1 being not strong at all, 5 being very strongly)

1	2	3	4	5
Not Strongly		Somewhat strong		Very strongly

7. Which product from the advertisements you viewed interested you the most and why?
   _____
   _____
   _____

8. On a scale of 1-5, how empowered did the advertisements make you feel as a woman? (1 being not at all, 5 being very empowered)

1	2	3	4	5
Not Empowered		Somewhat empowered		Very empowered

9. Do you perceive yourself in the same way as before you saw the advertisements? (circle one)
   a. Yes
   b. No

10. If you answered no to the above question, explain.

_____
_____
_____