

Does model body shape affect ad effectiveness?

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ABSTRACT

Advertisings usually display thin female bodies creating and following the beauty standards of the society. There exist several studies in marketing and psychology demonstrating the role of perceived body shape in modulating observer's responses. This study assesses the effects of models' body shape in advertisements on consumer's responses. The main finding here is that advertisements are more effective in the "thin model" compared to the "large model" condition for memorization, attitude toward the advertisement and purchase intention. However, both conditions were found to be equal in term of attitude toward the brand.

Key words

Advertising, model, body, memorization, attitude

Introduction and objectives

Body is a special class of visual stimuli due to the wealth of information it conveys. Mass media, as the great source of information and reinforcement of the beauty body shape ideal, have endorsed the thinness as the ideal appearance for women. This has led advertising in mass media to only portray models representing highly idealized images of physical attractiveness (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004; Boraua & Bonnifon, 2017). These standards may be compatible with social ideals (Haboush et al, 2012h) but it creates a dissonance in consumer's perception of his own body image provoking some psychological and behavioral disorders (Grab et al., 2008). Accordingly, the public health concerns encouraged the use of more diverse and natural models in advertising. Recently, some legislations (e.g. in France and the UK) have emphasized the change in mass media body image through regulations, airbrushing notification, and the reinforcement of model body size diversity (Janssen & Paas, 2014). In the last several years, advertisers started using non-idealized models in advertizing (i.e., Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty) including large size models instead of the thin ideal ones.

Based on a literature review, the current paper will investigate if the use of a large or thin model impacts advertising performance (decomposed in ad content memorization, attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intention) through two pathways: print and online ads.

Literature review

Shoenberger et al. (2019) showed that contemporary consumers fitting more and more into a plus-size body shape probably prefer advertising with plus-sized models. Furthermore, some research defines a “relief effect” that occurs when women feel more positive about their bodies after viewing average-size models (Dittmar and Howard, 2004; Anschutz et al., 2009). Shoenberger & al. (2019) reported that decreasing comparison between consumer and advertising model body leads to a positive advertising evaluation (Cornelis and Peter, 2017). Antioco et al. (2012) found that using large size models in ads can increase purchase intention. Also, Shoenberger & al. (2019) found that large size models generate more positive attitudes than slim ones. However, some studies’ findings suggested that large models may negatively impact advertising performance (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2011). These contrasted empirical evidences are not reassuring advertisers that including a more diverse range of body sizes in ads is an effective and marketable alternative to the omnipresence of thin ones (Janssen and Paas, 2014; Bissell & Rask, 2010). Advertisers may be concerned of the effectiveness of displaying large model in their advertising instead of the idealized thin model. The societal responsibility of advertising should respond to public health requirements but ensuring marketing performance. Ieva et al. (2018) recently found that there were no significant differences in advertising effectiveness when respondents were exposed to offline and online advertisements. We extended these studies by measuring the effects of body shape in offline and online ad on memorization, attitude and purchase intention.

Method

We conducted an experiment (N=121, aged 18-41 years, M=25.28, 60 female), in which we used a folder test procedure. This 12-page magazine contained three target advertisements for unknown brands. Their order of appearance was randomized. We implemented a within-subject design in each group featuring three conditions: thin shape model (TM), large shape model (LM), and a control condition where the ads were displayed with no model (NM). To avoid celebrity endorsement effect, we used two attractive but unknown models. All advertisements were inserted in the same position at the bottom right-hand corner of the pages. Three target advertisements (pages 3, 7, and 11 of the magazine) concerned food products (ice cream, yogurt, and orange juice). To avoid effects related to a prior exposure to the brand, we selected unknown brands in the country hosting the test that might be purchased and consumed by both men and women. Two distractive ads of well-known brands were also inserted to ensure that participants would not question the presence of unknown brands only. Participants were divided into two groups, each assigned to one condition. Group 1: printed magazine; Group 2: on-screen magazine (iPad pro 10.5). They were asked to evaluate a travel magazine. After participants consulted the magazine, a surprise memory task was proposed. Then participants were again exposed to the three target advertisements to complete attitude toward the advertisement, the brand, and purchase intention scales.

Findings

Memorization Measures

For the on-screen magazine group, participants recalled more elements of the ad content in “thin model condition (TM)” (2.45 elements) than “large model condition (LM)” (1.50 elements) (0.82 elements of the ad in the no model condition (NM) (control condition)) ($p = 0.00$). Also, they better recalled the product, and better recognized the product and the brand in the thin model condition compared to large model one. No difference in brand recall was observed between thin and large model conditions (see table 1).

The same tendency was observed for the print-magazine group. Participants recalled a total of 2.41 elements in LM condition and 3.93 in TM condition ($p = 0.00$). Also, they better recalled the product, recognized the brand ($p < 0.05$) and recalled the brand (marginal significance $p = 0.051$) in thin model condition compared to large model condition. No significant difference in product recognition was observed between thin and large model conditions.

Tableau 1: Memorization measures results

Variable	Thin model (TM)	Large model (LM)	<i>P</i> (2-tailed)
	M(SD)	M(SD)	
Ad recall*			
Print Ad	3.93 (2.45)	2.41 (1.90)	0.000
Online Ad	2.45 (2.07)	1.50 (1.63)	0.000
Product recall			
Print Ad	0.72 (0.49)	0.36 (0.48)	0.000
Online Ad	0.47 (0.53)	0.17 (0.45)	0.000
Brand recall			
Print Ad	0.18 (0.38)	0.07 (0.25)	0.051
Online Ad	0.1 (0.36)	0.08 (0.27)	0.252
Product recognition			
Print Ad	0.75 (0.43)	0.70 (0.46)	0.471
Online Ad	0.82 (0.39)	0.63 (0.48)	0.027
Brand recognition			
Print Ad	0.49 (0.50)	0.26 (0.44)	0.005
Online Ad	0.32 (0.46)	0.10 (0.30)	0.000

Attitude toward the ad (Aad)

In the print ad group, participants expressed a better attitude toward the ad in thin model condition compared to large model one ($p = 0.008$, see table 2). But in the online ad group, no difference was observed in term of Aad between the thin model and large model conditions ($p > 0.05$).

Attitude toward the brand (Ab)

In both print ad and online ad groups, there was no significant difference between the expressed attitude toward the brand in thin model or large model ads ($p > 0.05$).

Purchase intention (PI)

In the print ad group, participants expressed a higher purchase intention when exposed to thin model ad (49.98) compared to large model ad (39.52) ($p = 0.016$).

In the online ad group, participants expressed a higher purchase intention when exposed to the TM ad (29.85) compared to the LM (18.83) ($p = 0.00$).

Table 2: Aad, Ab and Purchase intention

Variable	Thin model (TM)	Large model (LM)	<i>P</i> (2-tailed)
	M(SD)	M(SD)	

Aad			
Print Ad	13.93 (3.39)	12.70 (3.32)	0.008
Online Ad	10.51 (3.41)	11.13 (3.08)	0.247
Ab			
Print Ad	15.18 (5.34)	14.49 (4.29)	0.407
Online Ad	13.60 (3.31)	12.78 (3.10)	0.176
PI			
Print Ad	48.98 (24.19)	39.52 (25.03)	0.016
Online Ad	29.85 (18.57)	18.83 (13.61)	0.000

Effect of media type

We can report that there was no significant interaction between the media type and ad recall in large and thin model conditions $F(1,119) = 2.89$, $p = 0.091$, $r = 0.15$. There was no significant effect of media type on product recall and recognition, $F(1, 119) < 1$, $r = 0.04$ and $r = 0.11$, and on brand recall and recognition, $F(1,119) = 0.348$, $r = 0.11$ and $F(1,119) = 0.017$, $r = 0.01$, indicating that in both large and thin model conditions participants memorization performance was in general the same whatever is the media type.

Another contrast looked for differences between Aad in thin model ad and large model ad comparing print ad and digital ad. There was a significant interaction effect between the media type and model body size condition, $F(1, 119) = 6.65$, $p = 0.01$. This indicates that the Aad in thin or large model ad differed according to the media type (print ad or digital ad). Print ad improved Aad in both thin model and large model conditions compared to digital ad.

There was no significant interaction between media type, and Ab and purchase intention in thin and large model conditions, $F(1, 119) < 1$, $r = 0.03$ and $r = 0.01$.

Discussion

The aim of this study is to examine the impact of exposure to advertisements featuring thin or large models through both digital and print media, on advertising effectiveness. By inserting a thin model in an advertisement, we first found a better memorization of advertising content. This result was particularly interesting because it was not obtained under forced exposure conditions but using a folder test method. Thus, participant's attention was not directed towards any advertisement by the experimenter or by the used experimental procedure. In other words, in a fully charged environment containing large amounts of information, such as in magazines, the presence of a thin model in food advertising enables stronger memorization of the product. This finding is in line with previous studies that show that thin models have a positive influence on the consumer's internal response (Buunk and Dijkstra, 2011).

Corroborating Halliwell and Dittmar (2004) study, we found that advertisements containing large model were just as effective as those containing thin model when effectiveness was measured in terms of attitude towards the brand.

However, we did not find the same effectiveness in terms of attitude towards the advertisement (specifically in printed ads) and purchase intention. The product category may explain this difference, i.e. they were testing on Beauty Care products, whereas we were investigating on food products. Participants may express the same attitude towards a food brand displaying a large or thin model because it will be perceived as an inclusive brand. Nevertheless, when they

evaluate a food advertisement and to express a purchase intention, they manifest a preference for the food product associated with a thin model. This could be related to the results food does to the body in general; for example, calories, fats, and health concerns.

The findings from this study show that the media type does not influence the effectiveness of advertising; except for Attitude towards Ad. Hence, Marketers and advertisers seeking to enhance Aad are advised by the results to use print media.

Conclusion

Advertisers are continually searching for conditions to increase attention value of their message. It is well-established in marketing to use models corresponding to beauty ideal in advertising with respect to the ideals of beauty of a society. The choice of thin models is expected to create a positive image that would objectively influence consumers to buy the product endorsed by the ideal model. As far as the food products are concerned, our results demonstrated a significant difference between thin and large model sizes in terms of memorization, Attitude towards the Advertisement and Purchase Intention.

“In a time when there is pressure to execute socially conscious Advertising” (Shoenberger et al, 2010), brands are displaying larger models to manifest their inclusivity and responsibility. However, this is not the ideal when advertising for the purposes of memorization, Attitudes toward ad, and Purchase Intention; as presented in the results. The race to satisfy the everlasting demand for companies to be socially responsible has neglected the rule of advertisement effectiveness in coherence with the Marketing objectives.

The results offer practical and methodological implications for the design of advertisements, and for experimental designs; in addition to serve practitioners to comprehend and utilize the right body size condition needed for their marketing and advertising objectives.

Limitations of this study offer opportunities for further research. First, our experiment was conducted using food products; it would be interesting to replicate it with other types of products. We only used female body; we can imagine a future study of the influence of gender and congruence model/reader. In this study advertising effectiveness was measured with a sample of slim body subjects; future studies can examine the body size effect on a sample with other variables, such as a large body size and own body size perception.

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