Depicting Thin, Average, and Plus Size Models in Fashion Advertisements: Exploring Social Comparisons, Body Image Satisfaction, Purchase Intentions, and Memory

Jessica Ridgway, PhD, Florida State University

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Retailers are taking a stand to fight the traditionally thin ideal by incorporating plus or average size models in their advertisement campaigns. Lane Bryant's #ImNoAngel and Aerie's #AerieReal campaigns have gained increased attention by advocating for body-positive campaigns within the fashion industry. While this type of campaign is still considered novel, little is known about how this type of marketing strategy influences consumers. The aim of this experiment was to investigate how fashion advertisements containing traditionally thin, average, and plus size fashion models influence consumers' body image satisfaction, social comparisons, purchase intentions, and memory of the models.

Previous research has shown that the perception of body size and shape is closely linked to cultural ideals of beauty and can perpetuate the development of self-discrepancy (Jung, Rudd & Lennon, 2001). In fact, researchers have found that "women are less satisfied with their physical appearance after viewing ideal images in the media" (Jung, Rudd & Lennon, 2001, p. 173). In contrast, a study conducted by Peek and Loken (2004) found that women had more positive thoughts concerning their own bodies after exposure to advertisements containing plus-size models. As social comparison theory (citation, year) posits, women assess fashion images and observe the points of difference between themselves and the model (often a depiction of an ideal model) (Bissell & Rask, 2010). During comparison assessment while viewing a thin model, women often confirm their belief in the importance of being thin which leads to changed behavior in order to achieve their ideal (Bissell & Rask, 2010). On the basis of social comparison theory and prior literature, the current study explored levels of social comparison to thin, average, and plus size models to better understand the effects of various sized fashion models have on viewers' overall feelings towards their body. Additionally, purchase intentions (Kim & Damhorst, 2010) and recognition (Lang, 2000) were measured in order to understand the broad effectiveness of each advertisement on cognition and behavior.

An experiment was conducted to examine how different sized fashion models influence college women' (N=49) social comparisons, body satisfaction, purchase intentions, and recognition memory. A 3 (body shape: thin, average, and plus size) x 4 (images of models) x 15 (time) within subjects experiment was conducted. Prior to the experiment, 45 images of different sized fashion models were pretested on body shape size and attraction. The pre-tested yielded four images in each body shape condition all of which were also rated equally attractive. Thus, in the experiment, participants randomly viewed 12 images (4 in each body shape condition) for a total of 15 seconds. After viewing each image, women were asked questions pertaining to social comparisons, body satisfaction, and purchase intentions. After viewing the last image, participants completed a visual recognition task in which participants viewed a total of 24 models, each one at time. In order to control for a possible ceiling effect, the researchers blurred

the faces of the models. Twelve of the 24 images were models that participants viewed during the experiment (i.e., targets), and the additional 12 images (i.e., foils) were fashion models that did not qualify based on the pretest and that participants had not seen during the experiment. Participants were asked to respond "Yes" by pressing the left shift key to whether they had seen the fashion model in the experiment, and "No" by pressing the right shift key if they had not seen the fashion model in the experiment. Participants timed out on their responses if they did not answer either "Yes" or "No" after 8-seconds.

A single factor (i.e., body shape) repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine how body shape type influences social comparison ratings. A significant main effect was found, $F(2, 98) = 22.83$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .31$. Thin size models resulted in greater social comparisons ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 1.42$) followed by average models ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.26$), and finally plus size models ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.21$).

A single factor (i.e., body shape) repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine how body shape type influences body satisfaction ratings. A significant main effect was found, $F(2, 98) = 19.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .28$. Thin size models resulted in the least amount of body satisfaction ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.10$) followed by average models ($M = 5.82$, $SD = 1.13$), and finally plus size models ($M = 5.92$, $SD = 1.18$).

A single factor (i.e., body shape) repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine how body shape type influences purchase intentions. A significant main effect was found, $F(2, 98) = 74.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .60$. Thin size models resulted in the greatest purchase intentions ($M = 5.11$, $SD = 1.94$) followed by average models ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.53$), and finally plus size models ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.17$).

A single factor (i.e., body shape) repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine recognition memory of body shapes. A significant main effect was found, $F(2, 94) = 9.20$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .16$. Accuracy (i.e., saying yes to a target) was worse for thin models ($M = 83\%$, $SD = .20$) followed by average models ($M = 92\%$, $SD = 1.27$), and finally was best for plus size models ($M = 96\%$, $SD = .08$).

The results from this experiment indicate that plus size models, as opposed to average size and thin size models, results in females engaging in fewer social comparisons also resulting in increased overall body satisfaction. Moreover, plus size models are better recognized compared to average and thin size models. From a health perspective, depicting plus size models in the media likely promote women's overall well-being and are more memorable. However, if the goal is to sell products, then despite the positive effects found in this experiment with plus size models, depicting thin size models are likely to be the better strategy.

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