The Nature and Influence of Idealized Images of Men in Advertising
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Recent studies have shown that exposure to idealized advertising images can negatively affect individuals' self-esteem. Richins (1991) argued that "advertising generates social comparison, at least in some instances" citing a series of studies which "demonstrated that satisfaction was lower among subjects exposed to idealized advertising images." Richins' work is a significant contribution since it was the first consumer research to document that exposure to highly attractive images can negatively affect individuals' self esteem. She raises an extremely critical issue when she suggests that her study demonstrates "the need to look beyond measure of attitude toward the ad to study the impact of advertising more fully" (p. 82). A fact that Richins gives little attention to, is that the implications of her study may or may not be generalizable to men, since her subjects included only women. As Bristor and Fischer (1993) argue, it is debatable whether knowledge claims from single sex samples can ever be generalized without additional research involving the opposite sex.

Given the research issue at hand, such generalization is particularly problematic. There is considerable evidence that idealized images of beauty such as Richins studied are more constraining upon women than they are upon men in contemporary North American culture (Wolf, 1990).

This study begins an exploration of the extent to which idealized images of men in advertising affect men. It is not possible, however, to simply replicate Richins' study, since it is unclear what may constitute an idealized image for men which is analogous to images of beauty directed at women. While studies find "American television commercials teeming with attractiveness-based messages" it appears that the messages "tend to link (at least implicitly) women and attractiveness" (Downs and Harrison 1985, p. 17).

Given that idealized images of physical beauty are not so strongly linked with men, the first question this study seeks to answer is what images are portrayed as desirable for men. An analysis of the seemingly desirable images of men portrayed in the advertisements contained in two men's magazines is presented to address this issue. The second question addressed, which directly parallels Richins work, is whether male college students compare themselves to models in ads. The results of two all-male focus groups on this topic are presented. Our results suggest not only that the idealized images of men and women in advertising differ, but that men's reactions to these images may be at variance with women's.

REFERENCES


