Contrast Or Assimilation Effect As a Result of Upward Social Comparison With Idealized Images: the Role of Mode of Exposure and Priming

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The purpose of this research is to investigate how idealized images in advertising affect young women’s self perceptions within the framework of social comparison theory. In particular, we propose that social comparison process can take place via either an implicit or an explicit route. An implicit social comparison, when taking place automatically, can lower viewers’ self-perception and body satisfaction and lead to a contrast effect. However, when taking place within the scope of viewers’ attention and awareness, an explicit social comparison will allow viewers’ to engage in conscious efforts to boost their own self-esteem through counter-argument, leading to an assimilation effect. We tested these propositions with three experiments.

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Contrast or Assimilation As a Result of Upward Social Comparison with Idealized Images: 
The Role of Mode of Exposure and Priming

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The popular use of highly attractive women in advertising has received some support from consumer research in terms of its positive impacts on product evaluation, ad evaluation and purchase intention (Belch et al. 1987; Kang and Herr 2006). However, this line of research is increasingly challenged by the mounting research evidence that exposure to idealized images in advertising media elicits upward social comparison, resulting in negative mood (e.g., Stice and Shaw 1994), decreased body satisfaction (see review Groesz et al. 2002), decreased self-assessed attractiveness (e.g., Smeesters and Mandel 2006) and even increased problematic eating patterns (e.g., Harrison 2000) among young women. At the same time, other researchers have documented that idealized images of female models can enhance women’s body satisfaction and self esteem (e.g., Myers and Biocca 1992; Mills et al. 2002; Henderson-King et al. 2001). Our understanding of the processes and boundary conditions of positive and negative effects of idealized images on women’s self perceptions has an important marketing implication: if the idealized images in advertising are detrimental to women’s body and self esteem, how can products and brands endorsed by idealized female images be successfully marketed at and received by female consumers (Bower 2001)? Therefore, consumer researchers need to re-scrutinize the impact of idealized images on young women and resolve previous research discrepancies.

The task of this research is to examine the boundary conditions of positive and negative impacts of idealized images on young women. Whereas most research attention has been devoted to the negative effects of idealized images on self evaluations among young women (see review, Groesz et al. 2002), we are interested in examining the mechanism and processes that gives rise to other observations that exposure to idealized images can enhance self perceptions (e.g., Henderson-King et al. 2001; Meyers and Biocca 1992). Employing the framework of social comparison theory, we propose that social comparison process can take place via either an implicit or an explicit route. An implicit social comparison, when taking place automatically, or outside viewers’ awareness, can lower viewers’ self-perception and body satisfaction and lead to a contrast effect. However, when taking place within the scope of viewers’ attention and awareness, an explicit social comparison will allow viewers’ to engage in conscious efforts to boost their own self-esteem through counter-argument. Such an explicit social comparison, therefore, will lead to more positive self-perceptions and enhanced body satisfaction, resulting in an assimilation effect. We tested these propositions with three experiments.

The first experiment explored the role of mode of exposure to idealized images in triggering differential social comparison processes. To induce either implicit or explicit social comparison, participants were asked to engage in one of two tasks while being exposed to idealized images. Participants in the implicit social comparison group were led to believe that they were participating in a study that examined peoples’ natural intuition about the types of sunglasses that are most suitable for different face shapes. In contrast, participants in the explicit social comparison group were asked to rate the attractiveness of each of the women. In line with our predictions, participants in the implicit social comparison group reported lower evaluations of their weight related body traits compared to participants in the explicit social comparison group.

To further explore this finding, our goal of Experiment 2 was to examine whether participants’ evaluations of their weight related body traits could be modified by inducing either a positive or negative interpretive frame. We expected that altering the interpretive frame would not influence the participants in the explicit social comparison group since they would be able to shield themselves from the impact of the interpretive frame by being consciously aware of, therefore combating the negative impact of threatening upward social comparison. In contrast, we expected that the participants in the implicit social comparison group would be influenced by the interpretive frame, leading to a contrast effect when the interpretive frame is positive, and an attenuated contrast effect when the interpretive frame is negative. In line with our expectations, we found that participants in the explicit social comparison group were unaffected by the interpretive frame. However, participants in the implicit social comparison group were affected by the interpretive frame: their self-perception was more negative when the content of the priming task biases them to interpret characteristics of the idealized females positively than when the priming task encourages a more negative interpretive frame. Thus, our results suggest that after explicit exposure to idealized female images, participants are able to insulate themselves from the negative impact of these idealized female images, whereas after implicit exposure participants are not able to shield themselves from negative impact of these female images, but are influenced by inducing either a positive or negative interpretive frame.

To account for the differences found for the participants in the explicit and implicit social comparison groups in Experiments 1 and 2 we speculated that participants in explicit social comparison are more aware of the upward social comparison process and tend to engage in counter-arguments to insulate themselves from the negative impact of exposure to a highly attractive comparison target. However, engaging in ego-protective strategies during the explicit social comparison process is cognitively demanding, therefore, such explicit social comparison processes requires more cognitive resources than social comparison processes that are implicit. To test this notion, our third experiment was conducted to mainly examine the role of the availability of cognitive resources in modulating the impact of exposure to idealized female images on participants’ self-evaluations. Supporting our predictions, participants found the sunglasses task more cognitively demanding, which, consequently, meant that they had fewer cognitive resources available to engage in conscious strategies and counter-arguments that would help in protecting them from the negative consequences of exposure to idealized female images.

Altogether, these three experiments contribute to our understanding of the impact of social comparison processes on self evaluations. Surprisingly, our results indicate that participants were best equipped to deal with exposure to idealized images when this exposure was explicit. Thus, rather counterintuitively, we have found that women may be most susceptible to the negative consequences of exposure to idealized female images precisely when they are not focusing on their level of attractiveness.
REFERENCES


