Weight Loss At the Cost of Safety Is Ok For Women: Thin Female Norm and Perceptions of Weight Loss Products Using Before and After Appeals

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The core idea of our paper is that thin female ideal, as a powerful culture norm can suppress persuasion knowledge, making consumers adopt more risk when it comes to evaluations of weight loss products. This pattern is more pronounced when the endorser of weight loss product is female (vs. male).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Competing paradigms embedded in advertisements of body images and weight losses

If advertisements portray or consolidate deep seated culture values, the ad world employing thin female ideals seem to indoctrinate female viewers with the value that being thin is being beautiful for women. After all, marketers often employ highly attractive models or product endorsers in their advertisements with the expectation that an attractive person in an advertisement will have a positive effect on both ad and product evaluations (Belch, Belch, & Vilareal, 1987). Advertisements with their overwhelming reliance on female idealized images can act as an important cultural or social agent that may exacerbate, or possibly contribute to a constant wrestling with body image among women. Media researchers provided converging evidence from content analysis of a variety of media outlets that the thin ideal is prevalent and spotlights unrealistically thin models (e.g., Davis, Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 1993; Van Zoonen, 1994). Media researchers argued that when relying on highly attractive models in their messages to transfer the positive affect from models to endorsed products, advertisers set the idealized models as representatives of aspirational reference groups for consumers, especially young women (Gulas & McKeage, 2000). At the individual and psychological level, repeated exposure to idealized images may cause a range of problems such as eating disorders, lowered self-esteem and a distorted perception of one’s body image (e.g., Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, & Thompson, 1980), or stereotypical perceptions of and behaviors toward men and women (Beckwith, 1994).

On the other hand, in 2010, more than one third of U.S. men and women were obese (Ogden et al., 2012) and this rate is expected to continue to climb. Here lies the opportunity of a weight loss product industry. In 2007 Americans spent $46.3 billion on weight loss products (Warren and Steiner 2007).

Research on this topic has shown some positive effects of before/after appeals. For example, Lowenstein (1996) defined before/after appeal as a sensory exposure to stimuli creating a sense of impulsivity that leads people to spend more on advertised products. Amos (2008) showed that using before/after photos in a weight loss program advertisement enhances viewers’ attitudes towards the product and also increased consumer’s willingness to pay. It was also shown that before/after ads are more effective than just single (either before or after) ads (Geier, Schwartz, and Brownell 2003). Recent work shows that ads with before-and-after appeal accounts for 42% of ads in this sector (Amos 2008) and many of these ads display two pictures of a target user, one of the person before product usage and the other after product usage. The contrast in the shape and sizes of the person is intended to demonstrate the effectiveness of the products.

Our paper is to understand how viewers’ attitude toward before-and-after ad appeals of weight loss products

Following this qualitative study, it is important to understand how this idealized image in advertising especially in before/after weight loss ads affect viewers’ attitude towards the weight loss products and ads. It is likely that these product advertisements also affect perceptions of potential risk. The media is replete with examples of weight loss products being banned. We argue that before-after appeal may have negative perceptions of products safety. That is, the presentation of a drastic weight change (in the comparison of photos or posted weight loss results) can promote perceptions of risk associated with the products; therefore jeopardizing the perceived product effectiveness whereas a smaller change would not. Therefore, we propose that size of discrepancy (a large vs. moderate discrepancy) can negatively affect perceived product safety. This could be due to the fact that large discrepancy in before and after advertisements triggers persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1996), causing people to evaluate the ad more negatively in comparison to a small discrepancy.

We also examine the role of gender of the endorser featured in the advertisement in moderating the effects of discrepancy on perceived product safety. Unfortunately, those female consumers who are not satisfied with their appearance are then motivated to engage in risky appearance management behaviors in order to achieve one’s desired appearance. Rudd and Lennon (2000) demonstrated that over 50% of their participants engaged in risky appearance management behaviors. For men, the ideal appearance has a different emphasis, the ideal man is preferred to have large, defined muscles and a lean frame (e.g., Furnham, Badmin, & Sneade, 2002; Morrison, Morrison, & Hopkins, 2003; Olivardia, Pope, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2004).

Based on these different gender appearance ideals, we expect that endorser gender will moderate the effect of the discrepancy. In particular, for male endorsers, perceptions of product safety will be lower when the discrepancy is high as compared to low. In contrast, for female endorsers, given the thin ideal, perceptions of product safety will be higher with the larger discrepancy as compared to small. Therefore, in the current study, we examine the interaction effect of discrepancy level and endorser.

Study 1

This qualitative study has been conducted to address the broader question of how young women perceive the impact of the idealized images in advertising on themselves and on various others. Six semi-structured, audio-taped interviews were conducted in the large Southern university. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes. Six female university students, ranging from 22 to 25 years old, were participated in this study. The interviews were conducted on the basis of the guidelines of McCracken (1988) and interview procedures adopted in literature (e.g., Thompson & Haytko, 1997). During interviews, participants were asked different questions, phrased in different ways at different times, surrounded one theme: how does each participant feel, experience, and perceive the impact of thin female images in advertising on themselves and on others?

Results of this qualitative study shows that idealized images not only exerted direct influence on individuals, but exerted influence on individuals via their interactions with others in their interpersonal networks. The thin female ideal, after being filtered at different
stages, could be either fortified or emasculated, depending on the psychological relationship between self and others. In more particular, there is a great deal of emotionality and tension associated with the way in which female consumers deal with the use of thin female images in advertisements. For example, the impact led to a desire to have the body of the models and the products they use that contributes to feelings of dislike, guilt and impulsivity. Similarly, the women believe that these images have a greater negative impact on other female consumers that leads to feelings of pity and sympathy. Our findings indicate that thin female ideals portrayed by the media have farther reaching impacts than previously assumed. Rather than affecting individuals’ psychological well-being and behaviors, thin female ideals can be fortified and perpetuated by interpersonal influences and social interactions.

**Study 2**

This study was conducted to understand the attitude of female viewers to the ads that promote idealized person by showing before and after usage of a weight loss product. This study was a one-way between subject design with two conditions of advertisement endorser gender (male vs. female) as independent variable with all female participants (N=32) whom the average age was 21.03 years (SD=3.09). Participants were asked to read a one page color advertisement for a weight loss product with the fictitious name of Vitalism. The advertisement included a description of weight loss program which was identical in all conditions. The ad also included before and after photos of a male or female endorser who used Vitalism over this weight loss program. In the next phase, participants were asked to answer some filler questions and their attitude towards the product, advertisement and the model in the ad.

A t-test with advertisement endorser gender as the independent variables on attitudes towards product shows a significant effect of endorser gender (t(25.59)=2.59, p = .01). This results shows that female have more positive attitude towards weight loss product when the gender of the endorser is female comparing to the situation when the endorser is male (M_{female-endorser}=3.81, M_{male-endorser}=2.62).

To determine if female people have more positive attitudes towards the advertisement when they receive an ad with female endorser, a t-test with advertisement endorser gender as the independent variables and attitude towards the advertisement as dependent variable conducted and results show a significant difference between participants attitude towards the advertisement based on the gender of endorser (t(30)=−2.37, p=.02). In particular female have lower negative attitude towards advertisement when they see the ad with female endorser in compare with the time when they receive an ad with male endorser (M_{female-endorser}=4.10, M_{male-endorser}=4.61).

And finally a t-test was conducted to see if there is any difference on how suspicious is the endorser of the ad. The results shows female people have higher suspiciousness to the model in the ad when the gender of endorser is female in compare whit the male endorser (t(30)=2.56, p=.016, M_{female-endorser}=3, M_{male-endorser}=2).

**Study 3**

This experiment was conducted to understand the effect of discrepancy between before/after photos across both male and female. This study was a 2(advertisement endorser gender: male vs. female) x 2(discrepancy: high vs. low) between subjects design (N=104). Similar to study 2, participants were asked to read a one page color advertisement for a weight loss product with the fictitious name of Vitalism. To manipulate discrepancy, participants were shown before and after photos of a person who lost 77 (21) lbs after completing the program (High/Low discrepancy). The same photo was edited to change the discrepancy. In the next phase, participants were asked to answer some filler questions and their safety attitudes towards the product on two items (safe and reliable).

The results revealed main effect of ad-gender ( F(1,100) = 8.40, p = .005) and a marginal main effect of discrepancy (F(1,100) = 3.03, p = .085) that were qualified by a significant interaction (F (1,100) = 42.54, p<.001). When the endorser in the advertisement is male, perceptions of the safety of the product are significantly lower when the discrepancy was high (M=.296) as compared to low (M=5.15, t (52) = 5.84, p<.05). However, this effect reversed when the endorser in the advertisement was female as perceptions of the safety of the product was higher when the discrepancy was high (M=3.92) as compared to low (M=2.65), t(52) = 3.38, p<.05).

**Conclusions**

This research contributes to both marketing literature and social marketing. While prior research showed visual priming in the form of before/after photos in advertising leads to positive consumer responses, the current research shows that the size of the discrepancy between the before and after photos influences this effect and results are moderated by the gender of the endorser in the advertisement. Future research aims to examine the underlying mechanism for this effect.