Executive Summary

Are Slim Models Doing Better? Advertising Effect of Model Body Size
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Advertisements frequently contain images of persons (models) in a decorative role. Advertisers have to decide what characteristics these models should have (gender, age, pose, clothing, facial expression, etc.). Among these characteristics, the model’s body size is an important aspect. Numerous previous studies have shown that the model’s body size has an impact on how positively consumers evaluate the promoted product.

One must admit that the model’s body size used in advertisements has evoked controversial debates in recent years. While using slim models was not strongly criticized some decades ago, severe public concerns have been expressed in recent years. Advertisers (and “media” in general) have been accused of fostering many problems by using very slim models: body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, bulimia, anorexia, and demand for plastic surgery, among others.

As a response to these concerns, editors of some magazines decided to refrain from depicting very slim models anymore. Some brands used images of average-sized persons for promoting their brands. The most famous example was the “Real Women” campaign for Dove cosmetics, a Unilever brand. The overwhelming economic success of this campaign may be due to its innovativeness and originality and not due to the use of average-sized models per se, because this campaign was the first well-known campaign that used average-sized models. However, such campaigns could reduce potential detrimental effects when models are depicted; they could prevent consumers from developing a negative image of their body, i.e., they could avoid impairment of appearance self-esteem.

Therefore, we investigated how young consumers respond at present to products when slim, average-sized, or heavy models are shown in advertisements that do not strongly emphasize the body size of the depicted models. From our studies, we derive the following recommendations:

1. If average-sized or heavy young consumers are targeted, average-sized models are advantageous. If the audience of the company consists of slim young consumers, slim models should be depicted.

2. This advice is not contingent on whether appearance-related or appearance-unrelated products are promoted.