Executive Summary

Effect of the Information about the Use and Non-Use of Photoshopping of Female Ad Models on Brand Attitudes of Young Female Consumers

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There is a public debate about whether marketers should be required to provide information about photoshopping when they use idealized images of female ad models. Proponents of such information expect that this measure will counteract diminished self-esteem in young females and reduce consumer deceptions. We ask three research questions for which marketers may want to receive answers to overcome suboptimal decisions.

RQ1: If including information about photoshopping is not mandatory (what is the case in other countries than France and Norway at present) and brand attitude is the marketers’ primary goal when designing ads, should they either present models in idealized (photoshopped) or authentic appearance? Photoshopping is a binary fact but enables idealization at different levels. Marketers therefore may additionally question if there is an optimum level of idealization that does not equal the maximum level. Can we determine a non-extreme optimum of model idealization?

RQ2: When providing information about photoshopping becomes mandatory, marketers who use photoshopped models and decide to keep showing such images might ask the question about whether brand attitude is affected when they additionally provide this information in their ads. What are the implications of this decision?

RQ3: Marketers who choose to present models in their authentic appearance might consider adding explicit information that they are not manipulating the model’s appearance through photoshopping and may ask whether this information affects brand attitude. Should they inform about the non-use of photoshopping?

In two experiments, we examine the effects of three factors: the depiction of female ad models in their idealized vs. authentic appearance, the presence vs. absence of information that an
idealized model has been digitally retouched, and the presence vs. absence of information that a model shown in her authentic appearance has not been digitally retouched. In Study 1, the presumption that self-esteem has a positive influence on brand attitude (H2c) was only supported for beauty-problem solving products, beauty-enhancing products, and body-revealing products. The presumption that perceptions of model beauty are reduced through the implementation of a disclosing information (H4) was not supported. We presume that the focus of attention when viewing the model was the model’s appearance. Thus, the subsequent processing of the additional information did not change the impression of model’s beauty. The information about the use of photoshopping was expected to enhance appearance-related self-esteem (H5). This presumption could only be supported for the beauty related products. In Study 2, the presumption was tested that a high level of idealization would not impair self-esteem as, in this condition, the expected gap between the appearance of the depicted model and the female participants is very big (H2b); in contrast to this presumption, the participants compared themselves even to the highly idealized model resulting in diminished appearance-related self-esteem when viewing ads for beauty-related products.

We contribute to research as we focus on the impact on brand attitudes while previous research has mainly focused on the influence on self-esteem. We present new findings that could assist decisions in practice: For most beauty product categories, we find that non-extreme levels of model idealization result in highest brand attitudes. Information about photoshopping ad models promoting beauty products leads to lower brand attitude. Information about the non-use of photoshopping authentic ad models tends to result in higher brand attitudes.