THE IMPACT OF ADVERTISEMENTS ON THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF IDEAL FEMALE BEAUTY: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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Advertising is a medium of communication used by traders to reach their potential customers. This article presents a systematic discussion on how advertisements shape the conceptualisation of ideal female beauty. A total of 30 articles conclusively met the inclusion criteria and were coded for the literature synthesis. Two distinct themes emerge in clarifying how advertisements have impacted the consumers' opinions on ideal female beauty. These themes highlight: a) the opinions on beauty equations – features and colourism, and b) the opinions on fashion trends. Recommendations for the future guidance of advertising standards in portraying the ideal female beauty are proposed towards the end of this paper.

Keywords: Advertising, consumer, consumer behaviour, ideal female beauty, ideology.

INTRODUCTION

Advertisement is seen as a reference to the definition of beauty throughout the globe. The "ideal woman" in the advertisements is regularly portrayed as tall, white, and thin, with a "tubular" body, and blonde hair (Dittmar & Howard, 2004). In the age of modern feminism, "plus size models" were introduced. A plus size model portrayed in advertisements is the model with size 8 and above. In reality a plus size model is the one with size 4 and above. This size is smaller than an average U.S woman which takes size 16 (Beck, 2014). Models shown on television, advertisements, and in other forms of popular media are approximately 20% below ideal body weight (Dittmar & Howard, 2004), which most women cannot attain. The airbrushing, digital alterations, and cosmetics surgery add to the unrealistic nature of media images (Thompson et al., 1999). Furthermore, many advertisers still lie on the stereotype that beautiful people are more likely to have more positive life outcomes and appraised more positively by others compared to those who are less attractive. The models with the idealised beauty are portrayed to have more successful careers and better marriages, creating an unrealistic bubble to the audience.

Via a systematic review of the literature on the impacts of advertising in moulding opinions on ideal female beauty, this paper aims to synthesize how the advertisements influence the viewers' opinions on the concept of ideal female beauty. The overarching research question to be addressed is: How do the advertisements shape the views of the ideal female beauty?

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CONCEPTUALISING ADVERTISING AND IDEAL FEMALE BEAUTY

Advertising

Twitchell (1996) defines advertising according to several qualities. Advertising is ubiquitous; it surrounds us. Advertising is symbiotic; it lives on other cultural organisms. Advertising is profane, it is of this world, it is shocking, and it is repetitious. Advertising is also magical in the sense that the process by which "things" come to have meaning is magical.

The types of advertisements examined in this paper are online/digital advertisements, cell phone and mobile advertisements, outdoor advertisements, print advertisements and broadcast advertisements. Advertisements play the role of primary revenue driver in many websites these days as it is the easiest medium to reach millions of promising buyers. As a new form of media, cell phone and mobile advertising works with portable electronic devices with Internet connectivity. This too takes into account the major role of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and WeChat. Outdoor advertising includes advertisements that are seen on billboards, bus shelter posters, fly posters, and the big digital boards. Print advertisements can be relatively divided into three parts which are periodical advertising (e.g. brochures, leaflets, flyers, and handouts), point of sale advertising, and direct mail advertising. These are the options that customers turn into when they yearn for permanence and tactility. Another type of advertisement is the prominent broadcast advertising which is seen on mass media, such as television and radio.

Affective conditioning is a channel which advertisers use to influence the viewers. Affective conditioning occurs when consumers decide on a purchase mainly based on the positive feelings gained from choosing a product. Dempsey and Mitchell (2010) suggest that individuals who undergo affective conditioning are 70-80 per cent more likely to pick a product paired with positive items regardless of whether or not that product is better than a competing product. Generally, advertisement is divided into two forms which are informational advertising and transformational advertising. Informational advertising mainly focuses on features and benefits of the product, plus providing comparison with competing products. Whereas, transformational advertising or experimental advertising is based on experiences from using a particular product. Typically, advertisers portray how the product could improve one's life compared to what they were before using the product.

There are many criticisms towards media for inserting the false ideology of beauty in advertisements, with a special mention to the more vulnerable audience, the young adolescents. This paper, therefore, investigates the impact of advertisement in moulding public opinions on ideal female beauty.

Ideal Female Beauty

The reality illustrated by the advertisements today is farfetched. In the haunt of images that define perfection, the highly attractive model (HAMs) are deemed in order to create a psychological impact on the viewers. The term HAMs refers to the models with admirable features and figure. The classification of HAMs differs according to culture, although generally, it refers to lighter shades, lushes eyes, sharp nose, plump lips and thinness. The marketing literature reveals evidence of the positive effects of using an attractive person in advertising on both ad and product evaluations (Sinh, 2013). As much as many marketers believe on the positive impact, some leading researchers argue that "application of the physical attractiveness stereotype in advertising must be approached with caution" (Bower, 2001, p. 60). Many females value their self-concepts and self-esteem mainly in relation to their own physical attractiveness. This eventually results in women comparing themselves with how beauty is idealised in advertisements. Hence, HAMs is associated with negative experience.

Based on the social psychology theory, our behaviour, action and thought is entirely in the mind of individuals. There may be positive and negative impacts of advertisement in moulding opinions of ideal female beauty. The ultimate goal is to investigate how feelings, thoughts, intention and goals are built and how psychological factors influence the viewers in moulding their opinions regarding ideal female beauty.

The variables that play a role in determining human behaviour are social interaction, cognitive processes, and cultural context (Franzoi, 2009). Individuals are often affected by the appearance of others. Naturally, ones behave differently towards individuals who are highly attractive compared to the less attractive ones. Through the lens of advertisement, we are educated in such a way that attractiveness promises a more positive life. In addition, the media itself carries the role of defining what is attractive. We are very much responsive to visible characteristics such as appearance of others (McCall, 1997; Twenge & Manis, 1998). As argued by Hassin and Trope (2000), as much as we consciously try to ignore the appearance of others, in reality we cannot. Therefore, despite the avoidance of "judging the book by its cover", individuals are still strongly affected by the physical appearance of others. Although sometimes we choose to deny or pretend to be unaware of such effects.

It is a mental process that takes into account attention, language use, memory, perception, problem solving, creativity, and thinking. In the context of advertising, some arguments given to persuade the viewers (in this paper, ideal female beauty) may influence the viewers based on their past memories and how they form the inferences. For example, ads promoting contact lenses may persuade the viewers that, with the application of the lens, one's eyes would look bigger and brighter. The viewers would recall how they use to be made fun of for having smaller eyes

and envying others who own such eyes. In contrast, if the viewers experience a situation where the claims made by the advertisement are fraudulent, the implication would be different. This is how social cognition work as a persuading factor in the context of moulding opinions through advertisements.

Our association with others and our perceptions towards them are deeply influenced by events, beliefs, and trends in our culture. As culture is a way of life, we tend to digest the behaviours, values and symbols even without rationalising and that is usually passed along via communication and imitation from one generation to the other. For example in the cultural context of Malaysia, the current fashion is updated via media. The viewers tend to be influenced with the trends portrayed in media. The normalisation of culture starts from the media, and advertisement does play a crucial role in creating a culture, especially the beauty standards as most advertisement features models that set a bar for "What is ideal female beauty?".

METHOD

Search procedure and inclusion criteria

A systematic review was conducted with the multidisciplinary literature on the impacts of advertisement on ideal female beauty, using the keywords of "advertising beauty", "advertising fashion", "advertising and body image", and "advertisement and consumer behaviour". Scopus is the main database for the article search. The selection criteria were specified as: (1) Content relevance - studies and conceptual papers that examined or described the impact of advertising in moulding opinions of ideal female beauty, (2) year of publication within 2013–2017, and (3) English, refereed research publications or research reports. The initial search identified 227 articles (using the subject term of advertising beauty), 138 articles (for advertising fashion), 51 articles (advertising and body image), and 156 articles (for advertisement and consumer behaviour). After reading the abstracts, 63 articles were retained for screening at the full text. Of these articles, 10 articles examine advertisement and beauty (i.e., beauty equations, colourism), two articles examine advertising and fashion, seven articles concern with advertising and body image, and five articles are about advertisement and consumer behaviour. In the end, 24 articles were coded and included in the final literature synthesis.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Krahe and Krause (2010) highlight that exposure to thin media models may have an adverse effect on women's body image and eating behaviour. Self-objectification theory provides an explanation of how media images of thinness impact women's body-related self-esteem (Moradi & Huang, 2008). A woman's tendencies to look at her figure as an object of evaluation on the basis of cultural norms of female

attractiveness is considered as self-objectification. The sense of self-worth becomes uncertain on her ability to reach the standards of beauty and this leads to body shame and appearance anxiety (Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2009).

The current review systematically explains and examines the impact of advertisement in moulding public opinions on ideal female beauty in two main themes. The two themes synthesize empirical findings and data-driven theoretical propositions in prior research on the impact of advertising in moulding public opinions on ideal female beauty. The themes, addressing the research questions as to what, how, where, and when viewers are impacted by the portrayal of ideal female beauty in advertisements, clarify: (a) opinions on beauty equations portrayed by the advertisements, and (b) opinions on fashion trends portrayed by the advertisements.

Theme 1: Beauty equations in advertisements

Kaur (2013) highlights that advertisements in beauty magazines pressure women to do their best to hold their beauty. Advertising subtly deceives reality and manipulates consumers to make them buy a way of life (Lau, 2016) and various linguistic devices such as direct address, positive vocabulary, headlines, and catchy slogans are used to attract women (Rashid, Rahman, & Rahman et al., 2016). Testimonies from the models are seen by the consumers as a form of positive self-representation. This is because celebrities or models depict the ideology of power and success, and the consumers believe that they would benefit from the products.

Jermyn (2016) argues that most of the women featured in advertisement are youth-oriented fashion media, which suggests that beauty comes at a "certain age" to an unprecedented degree and this does not promote graceful aging and self-esteem. The "cultural imperialism" of youth suggests that old age should be avoided at all costs (Del Rosso, 2016) thus encourages the women to do whatever they can to remain young.

For the last two decades, the active ingredient in skin lightening creams has shifted from hydroquinone to the harmful corticosteroids and mercury, yet 32% of the respondents in Dlova's (2014) study still opt to choose skin lightening as it is perceived as beauty, normalised by the media. Moreover, advertisements always portray skin tone as a sexual cue to distinguish men (masculinity) and women (femininity) and light skin is portrayed as a class symbol, motivating consumers to choose lighter shades (Picton, 2013; Nadeem, 2013; Xie & Zhang, 2014; Wilkes, 2015). Advertisement often associate fairness with clearness, with transparency, with the ability to see one's features and distinct emotions unlike darker tones (Picton, 2013; Nadeem, 2013).

Gill and Scharff (2013) state that the beauty advertisements have restricted the definitions of beauty, by introducing 'lookism' upon women (namely, women are constantly judged by how they look), and for promoting unhealthy body image

obsessions and potentially harmful beauty procedures. Paradoxically, advertisements are viewed as a freedom of expression for women (Gill & Scharff, 2013) hence encouraging the positive acceptance of the contents of the advertisements.

In advertising, female bodies are often objectified and buzzwords are used to address bodies (e.g. firmed, toned, smooth, and tight) which further objectify and lead women to be obsessed in creating unrealistic and unhealthy weight, beauty, and body-type goals which results in distorted view of self-worth (Del Rosso, 2016). Hegemonic messages such as thin, pretty, white, and young has developed societal and cultural bullies, leaving women to opt for death as opposed to an overweight body or unattractive face (Kilbourne, 1999).

Fairness in advertisement is always associated with job opportunities and marital success which function as a form of symbolic capital that shapes life chances (Nadeem, 2013). In many advertisements, having dark skin and not doing anything to lighten it is closely associated with being ashamed or shamed by the community. The portrayals of HAMs are of unrealistic standards and result in lowered self-esteem among the viewers (Duffy, 2013). The women's dissatisfaction with their current level of beauty makes the advertisers successful in selling their products.

Theme 2: Fashion trends in advertisements

Visual imagery (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2011; Santaella et al., 2012), and emotions (Lee & Burns, 2014) have been proven to be providing the highest level of involvement in consumers. The emotions create positive changes in consumers' attitudes towards the brand (Taylor & Costello, 2017) and consumers tend to feel positive emotions after viewing fashion ads (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2011). However, thin models may make some women compare themselves to these idealised portrayals (Borland & Akram, 2007; Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004; Martin & Xavier, 2010; Murphy & Jackson, 2011). As pointed out by Aagerup (2011), even though consumers do not prefer underweight or overweight models, fashion ads are most effective when they feature moderately thin models.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ADVERTISING IDEAL FEMALE BEAUTY

Celebrating diversity

Women are often represented in unrealistic and unattainable standards of beauty. Models portrayed often send a constant message that women must sacrifice their physical and psychological health in order to be attractive. This has resulted in decrease of self-esteem, self-appreciation, and lack of body appreciation in many females. The model portrayed on media, particularly advertisement has to be of diversity beauty, in different shapes and colour. Thus, it would impact women in a more positive manner, celebrating self-authenticity.

Shift in perception and attitude

Advertisement still lies on the stereotype that attractiveness promises a more positive life with better job opportunities and marital outcomes. This negative stereotype affects the viewer's self-esteem and this would opt them to derogation. Therefore, the advertisement outcomes portrayed have to be realistic and motivating in positive manner, embracing authenticity.

Recommendations

The advertising agencies should reconstruct the nature and guidelines of advertising. Positive beauty portrayals have to be advertised instead of creating negative attitudes, such as derogation and lack of self-esteem. The airbrushing and whitewashing of models have to be stopped. More studies on effective advertising need to be conducted in order to provide comprehensive insights of the impacts of advertising on consumers.

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