

Body image and advertising effectiveness: Examining Spokesperson Physical Attractiveness and Social Comparison

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Abstract

Utilizing the social comparison framework, the following study examines the impact of exposure to various levels of physically attractive advertising spokesmodels and the influence on consumer evaluation and perceived body image. A quasi-experimental design with 343 participants completed an online survey comparing exposure to a non-gendered product advertisement (e.g., breath strips) featuring a highly attractive spokesmodel, a moderately attractive spokesmodel, or no spokesmodel. Findings revealed that the condition featuring no spokesmodel was the most effective for consumer evaluation. Results also found that experimental conditions were not significantly related to negative body image. However, findings demonstrated that social comparison negatively correlated with body image. Findings contribute to social comparison literature and provide practical implications for advertising professionals.

Keywords: social comparison, body image, advertising effectiveness, spokesperson, physical attractiveness.

Physically attractive and thin spokesmodels are often used in advertisements because of their proven effectiveness in influencing consumer evaluation. Consumer evaluation can be conceptualized as the process of assessing attitudes and purchase intentions on specific products or services. Past studies have shown that utilizing physically attractive spokespersons in advertisements can positively impact consumer attitudes and intentions (Caballero & Pride, 1984; Saad, 2004; Trample et al., 2010). However, the majority of spokesmodels depicted in advertisements are physically dissimilar to average individuals. For example, the majority of fashion models are thinner than 98% of American women and approximately only 5% of individuals are able to attain a model-like body (Smolak, 1996). The vast difference in body type and physical attractiveness, and the impossibility of

attainment between images used by advertisers and everyday individuals who are exposed to advertisements, may trigger physical appearance-related social comparison tendencies (Adomaitis & Johnson, 2007; Botta, 1999). For instance, individuals who make social comparisons to media images are more likely to endorse and hold onto idealized images (Botta, 1999).

The social comparison framework proposes that individuals compare themselves in an upward social comparison to ideal media images depicting the "beauty ideal," which may lead to body image dissatisfaction (Bessenoff, 2006). Engeln-Maddox (2006) found that individuals believed that achieving media's depiction of physical attractiveness resulted in positive characteristics (i.e., more socially competent or

successful). Thus, the inability to achieve an ideal physical attractiveness from images depicted in advertisements increases one's susceptibility to body dissatisfaction. A common method for beauty enhancement and decreasing dissatisfaction with one's physical appearance is the use of cosmetic products. According to Statista (2025), in 2023, the cosmetic industry revenue in the US was approximately 19.4 billion dollars. Gen Z reported spending over \$2000 annually on beauty products and indicated a willingness to cut back on other expenses for beauty items (Statista, 2025). While studies have heavily examined the implications of advertising using primarily physically attractive spokesmodels, there is a paucity of research on the implications of advertising with spokesmodels who depict a more representative appearance that a majority of individuals can relate to. Thus, the following study examines the impact of exposure to advertisements featuring varying levels of physically attractive spokesmodels on consumer evaluation and perceived negative body image.

Literature Review

Social Comparison and Body Image

Several studies have examined the relationship between physical appearance and media images utilizing the social comparison framework (e.g., Botta, 1999; Buunk & Dijkstra, 2011; Kharkwal et al., 2025; Pan & Pena, 2020). The social comparison framework proposes that mental comparisons are driven by the need for self-evaluation and determination of standing in life (Festinger, 1954). Festinger (1954) conceptualizes upward social comparisons as making comparisons with someone believed to be better off whereas downward social comparisons refer to making comparisons with someone believed to be worse off. Research has found that individuals exposed to media images of attractive spokesmodels tend to make upward social comparisons (e.g., Buunk & Disjkstra, 2011; Dietrichs & Lee, 2010; Leahey et al., 2007). In addition, Richins (1991) found that individuals who were exposed to physically attractive spokesmodels would increase their perceptions of what constitutes physical attractiveness, thus rating average individuals as less attractive.

The social comparison framework has been widely used in advertising research to examine consumer attitudes and behaviors (Blomquist et al., 2020; Bourcier-Bequaert et al., 2021; Hogg & Fragou, 2003; Jung & Heo, 2020). In a study examining body size portrayals in advertising, Jung and Heo (2020) reported social comparison tendencies moderated the relationship between exposure to advertising spokesmodels and consumer evaluation such that those exposed to the physically heavier advertising spokesmodels (versus thinner or normal body sized spokesmodels) were more likely to report favorable attitudes toward the advertisement if they had downward-comparison tendencies. Similarly, Buunk and Dijkstra (2011) found moderating effects for social comparison when comparing consumer evaluation from exposure to a physically attractive (as opposed to a moderately attractive) spokesmodel. Therefore, social comparison tendencies can emerge when exposed to advertisement images, which can impact consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions.

In a study examining various sized spokesmodels, Kharkwal et al. (2025) found that women exposed to gym ads featuring thin-sized spokesmodels regardless of slogan type exhibited higher levels of appearance comparison and lower body

satisfaction when compared to those exposed to Instagram gym ads featuring plus-sized models, suggesting the support of social comparison theory. Similarly, Pan and Pena (2020) found that men indicated lower appearance esteem after exposure to photos depicting attractive and higher weight male models. Thus, research has found gender differences in social comparison tendency with females reporting more social comparison tendencies from media exposure (Harrison, 2002; Sohn, 2009). The following hypothesis is posited:

- **H1:** Female participants will report higher social comparison perceptions than males.

Body Image and Advertising Spokesmodels

Social comparison resulting from advertising exposure and mass media can influence one's body image. Research has found that negative body image perceptions can emerge as a result of an upward social comparison to individuals who are deemed to be more attractive (Leahey et al., 2008). Body image can be conceptualized as an individual's attitude (e.g., positive satisfaction or negative satisfaction) towards his or her body through personal evaluations, with a particular focus on its size, shape, and attractiveness (Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990). For example, individuals who are exposed to fashion spokesmodels in the media may perceive fashion spokesmodels to embody the idea of what constitutes beauty and inadvertently compare their own physical appearance to those who appear to be more physically attractive.

Past research on exposure to media images and the impact on negative body image have examined the implications of body image on an individual's mood upon exposure to physically attractive spokesmodels (Jung, 2006), the mitigating effects of interventions and body dissatisfaction (Quigg & Want, 2011), and the negative effects of images depicted in music videos and body image (Tiggemann & Slater, 2003). In the context of advertising, Adomaitis and Johnson (2007) found that while female body image was generally negatively affected by idealized media images, when an average-sized model was depicted as actively promoting a product, females criticized the average-sized model's inability to obtain the ideal body type. In summary, previous studies have demonstrated the relationship between perceived negative body image and exposure to idealized media images. Thus, exposure to advertisements featuring physically attractive spokesmodels could predict higher negative body image perceptions. The following hypothesis is proposed:

- **H2:** Exposure to the highly attractive spokesmodel advertisement, compared to the moderately attractive spokesmodel advertisement and no spokesmodel advertisement, is positively related to higher negative body image perceptions.

Several studies have examined the positive impact of using physically attractive spokespersons on consumer attitudes and behaviors (Buunk & Dijkstra, 1991; Leng et al., 2024; Onu et al., 2019). For instance, Buunk and Dijkstra (1991) found that attitudes toward the advertised product was positively related to exposure to the highly attractive, as opposed to the moderately attractive, spokesperson. Likewise, Onu et al. (2019) noted a positive relationship between levels of physical attractiveness in advertising spokespersons and consumer evaluation. In a study on planned behavior for

weight loss, Pan and Pena (2024) found that exposure to photos of more attractive spokesmodels indicated higher planned behaviors to lose weight compared to those who saw less attractive spokesmodels. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed regarding consumer evaluation:

- **H3:** Exposure to the highly attractive spokesmodel advertisement, compared to the moderately attractive spokesmodel advertisement and no spokesmodel advertisement, is positively related to higher consumer evaluation.

Methods

Upon institutional review board (IRB) approval, participants were recruited from introductory level communication courses at a large northeastern university. Extra credit was given to participants in exchange for survey completion. A total of 343 students completed the quasi-experimental study. The sample consisted of 42.9% male participants and 57.1% female participants. Of all participants, 76.0% were Caucasian, 12.4% were Asian, 5.5% were Hispanic, 3.7% were African American, 1.2% were Pacific Islander, .9% were American Indian, and 1.4% reported other.

Ad Stimuli and Procedure

In the quasi experimental design, participants were randomly assigned to one of three exposure conditions with female spokesmodels promoting a gender-neutral product (e.g., breath strips). Three ads were created using the same advertisement background and product (See supplement materials). The first ad featured a female spokesmodel with heavy makeup (e.g., highly attractive condition). The second ad featured the same female spokesmodel but with minimal makeup (e.g., moderately attractive condition). Both ads featured a close up of the female spokesperson's face against a blue background with the Fresh breath strips displayed prominently in the front. The third ad only featured the blue background with the Fresh breath strips.

Participants first answered demographic questions followed by questions regarding social comparison. Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. After a 60-second exposure, participants were asked questions on consumer attitudes and perceived body image. Participants were also asked to measure the perceived attractiveness of the spokesmodels in the assigned conditions of highly attractive spokesmodel, moderately attractive spokesmodel, and no spokesmodel exposure. This item was used as a manipulation check on the physical appearance of the spokesmodel type used to promote the product. An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), controlling for gender, was conducted to assess spokesperson physical attractiveness. Results indicated that the main effect for the experimental conditions was significant, $F(2, 339) = 993.05, p < .001$. A post-hoc test using the LSD procedure indicated that participants in the attractive spokesmodel condition rated the spokesmodel ($M = 2.85$) higher in physical attractiveness than participants in the moderately attractive spokesmodel condition ($M = 2.39$).

Measures

The Physical Appearance Comparison Scale (PACS).

Social comparison consists of an individual's tendency

to compare his/her own appearance to the appearances of others. Adapted from Thompson et al., (1991), five items using a 5-point likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always) were used to assess the appearance-related social comparison tendencies as it pertains to exposure to spokesmodels promoting products. Items include: "When looking at magazine ads, I compare my physical appearance to the physical appearances of spokesmodels," "The best way for a person to know if they are overweight or underweight is to compare their figure to models," "When looking at magazines, I compare how I am dressed to how the models are dressed," "Comparing your "looks" to the "looks" of models in magazines is a bad way to determine if you are attractive or unattractive," and "I sometimes compare my figure to the figures found in magazine advertisements" ($\alpha = .81, M = 2.75, SD = .75$).

Body Image Scale

A set of items adapted from Cash et al. (2002) was used to assess attitudes toward body image. Participants were asked six items using a 5-point likert-type scale ranging from 1 (extremely dissatisfied/extremely physically unattractive/a great deal worse) to 5 (extremely satisfied/extremely physically attractive/a great deal better) on their attitude towards their current body image: "Right now I feel... with my physical appearance," ("extremely dissatisfied – extremely satisfied"); "Right now I feel...with my body size and shape," ("extremely dissatisfied – extremely satisfied"); "Right now I feel...with my weight," ("extremely dissatisfied – extremely satisfied"); "Right now I feel...physically attractive," ("extremely physically attractive – extremely physically unattractive"); "Right now I feel...about my looks than I usually feel," ("a great deal worse – a great deal better"); and "Right now I feel that I look...than the average person looks," ("a great deal better – a great deal worse") ($\alpha = .84, M = 2.87, SD = .51$).

Consumer Evaluation

Consumer evaluation measures attitudes toward the ad and purchase intentions. A two-item scale adapted from Halliwell and Dittmar (2004) was measured on a four-point scale. Sample items include: "How would you describe your reaction to the ad" ("unfavorable – favorable") and "How likely are you to purchase this on your next shopping trip?" ("unlikely – very likely"). These items were merged to create a composite variable (Inter-item correlation = .52, $M = 2.25, SD = .64$).

Results

A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between body image and social comparison. A negative correlation that was statistically significant was found, $r(337) = -.319, p = .000$. H1 explored whether female participants would report higher social comparison perceptions than males. An independent t-test was conducted and found that females ($M = 3.02, SD = .70$) reported significantly higher social comparison scores than males ($M = 2.40, SD = .68$), $t(332) = 8.162, p < .000$. Thus, H1 is supported.

To examine H2, a one-way analysis of variances (ANOVA) was calculated to examine whether participants who viewed the print advertisement with the highly attractive

spokesmodel will have significantly higher negative body image when compared to participants who viewed the less attractive spokesmodel condition and no model condition. The experimental conditions were not significantly related to negative body image, ($F(2,334) = .365, p = .694, \eta^2 = 0.002$).

To test H3, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), controlling for gender, was conducted to examine the mean differences between experimental conditions and consumer evaluation. Results demonstrated that the main effects for experimental condition ($F(2, 321) = 26.82, p < .000, \eta^2 = 0.142$) was statistically significant. Post-hoc comparisons using Bonferroni correction to identify which specific group means differed significantly found that participants who viewed the advertisement with no spokesmodel ($M = 2.59, SD = .51$) had significantly higher consumer attitudes than those who viewed the advertisement with the physically attractive spokesmodel ($M = 2.08, SD = .60$) and those who viewed the average spokesmodel ($M = 2.12, SD = .62$). However, consumer attitudes did not differ significantly ($p = .56$) between those who viewed the advertisement with the physically attractive spokesmodel and those who viewed the advertisement with the average spokesmodel. Thus, H3 is not supported.

Discussion

Utilizing the social comparison framework, this study examined how various levels of physically attractive spokesmodels could impact consumer evaluation and body image perceptions. Surprisingly, the advertisement featuring no spokesperson was the most effective in positively impacting consumer attitudes and intentions to purchase a non-gendered product (e.g., breath strips). Findings are consistent with research from Blomquist et al. (2020) who found that food advertisements featuring no spokesmodels (versus advertisements with a spokesmodel) resulted in greater purchase intentions. Blomquist et al. (2020) suggested that the possibility of social comparison tendencies from exposure to advertising spokesmodels could lead to perceptions of body image dissatisfaction, which may negatively influence consumer attitudes and intentions. This suggests that the marketing of gender-neutral products may not benefit from the use of advertising spokespersons, regardless of the level of physical attractiveness, due to the risk of social comparison tendencies.

Results also indicated that no significant difference emerged between the highly attractive spokesmodel and the moderately attractive spokesmodel on consumer evaluation. A possible explanation for the lack of significance with the varying levels of physically attractive spokesmodels could be that the highly attractive spokesmodel, manipulated with the use of heavier make-up, could have been perceived as an untrustworthy or unlikeable source. For example, source credibility research from Mittal and Silvera (2019) found that the overuse of makeup on a spokesperson negatively impacted perceived trustworthiness from both men and women while a natural-looking appearance was the most effective for consumer evaluation (Mittal & Silvera, 2019).

Similar findings from Smith et al. (2022) noted that participants were more willing to buy beauty products with natural (vs. beautiful) looking advertising messaging. These findings could be an artifact in the popularity of the

no-makeup movement in cosmetic sales on social media (Smith et al., 2022). For instance Unilever's The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty launched in attempt to redefine the concept of beauty by showcasing females of all body types without makeup or computer modifications. Quigg and Watt (2011) found that The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty reduced body dissatisfaction in individuals exposed to music videos depicting the thin ideal. Findings provide practical implications for marketing professionals by suggesting that advertisements featuring more natural-looking spokesmodels could positively impact consumer evaluation and non-gendered products may be more effective without spokesmodels.

This study also explored perceived body image perceptions from exposure to varying levels of physically attractive spokesperson advertisements. Results indicated no significant differences in body image perceptions when exposed to the experimental conditions. Hogg and Fragou (2003) explain that advertising images could prompt social comparison tendencies based on one's social comparison goals (i.e., self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement). Therefore, the lack of significant findings on body image could be that the non-gendered product (e.g., breath strips) used in the advertisement did not induce any social comparison goals. Because the non-gendered product may not need physical beauty to market to consumers, participants may not have considered the attractiveness of the spokesmodel compared to themselves, thus their body image perceptions were not negatively impacted. For instance, Jung and Ho (2020) found that when individuals reported no or low comparison tendencies, the body size of advertising spokesmodels did not significantly relate to consumer evaluation.

Social comparison studies suggest that individuals tend to socially compare due to the amount of success by comparing their results to individuals around them (Engeln-Maddox, 2006; Myers, & Crowther, 2009). Nonetheless, perceived negative body image impacted by media depictions of physically attractive spokespersons remain important. According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (2024), approximately 28 million Americans may experience an eating disorder in their lifetime. Approximately 80 percent of females have expressed dissatisfaction with their physical appearance (Ross, 2012). Our study findings indicated that female participants reported higher social comparison tendencies than their male counterparts. Results align with past research that also noted gender differences in social comparison tendencies (Harrison, 2000; Sohn, 2009). Findings contribute to social comparison literature by extending support that gender differences exists between males and females, suggesting the need to further include gender as an important variable in social comparison research.

Prior work suggest that negative body image perceptions is a result of individuals who socially compare themselves to others (Botta, 1999; Tiggemann, & Slater, 2004). While exposure to experimental conditions from this study did not result in significant differences in perceptions of negative body image, results did show that social comparison and body image were negatively correlated such that higher social comparison was related to negative body image perceptions.

Findings from this study support past research demonstrating that individuals who socially compare themselves to the unattainable beauty ideal such as media depictions of celebrities and spokesmodels appear to increase their likelihood of having higher body dissatisfaction.

Conclusion

Several limitations exist for the current study. The manipulation of spokesmodel physical attractiveness could be strengthened for future studies. For instance, heavy make-up and no make-up in each of the spokesmodel conditions was the only indicator of physical attractiveness and thus, cannot be used to generalize physical attractiveness. Additional indicators of physical attractive, such as a svelte body, were not seen on the spokesmodel because the advertisement only showed a profile picture. As previous literature has indicated, the ideal beauty constitutes both physical and body appearance. While participants could presume the spokesmodel to have a svelte figure since comparisons can be made from facial features, a full body spokesmodel in the advertisements could increase the strength of the manipulation and be more indicative of purchasing intentions and body image perceptions. Additionally, the study utilized convenience sampling and promoted a non-gendered and low-involvement product (e.g., breath strips), thus generalizability of study findings is limited.

Body Mass Index (BMI) was also measured by providing participants with a chart and by asking participants to self-report their own BMI. However, several participants were unable to self-report their BMI from the provided chart. In the future, self-reported height and weight could be asked and calculated for participant BMI. Thus, the measurement of BMI, which could be a moderator for social comparison and body image, could not be analyzed.

Another limitation is that the study examined print advertisements, which may be an outdated form of consumer advertisement among the college population. Participants indicated that they did not read a lot of magazines and perhaps do not look at print ads. Future studies could examine digital advertisements shown on social media platforms or the effectiveness of social media influencers, which could increase the strength of the manipulation of physical beauty. If participants were more engaged with spokesmodels or influencers through various social media platforms, they could be more invested in their attitudes regarding the advertisements.

Future research could also examine popular gendered products among young adults to get further understanding of their attitudes in regards to physical beauty as a tool for persuasive marketing. In addition, types of physical beauty can be explored such as the use of traditional beauty, sexy beauty, or exaggerated beauty. In doing so, research could contribute to help marketers effectively target consumers of this demographic.

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