



M&S 'Leading Ladies' high profile 2013 campaign

RESEARCH



Dr Tamara Ansons, Assistant Professor of Marketing at Warwick Business School explains why the use of skinny models in advertising can alienate female consumers and damage a brand's reputation.

Do thin models and celebrities really help sell to women?

Big brand marketing campaigns often feature skinny, attractive models. Advertisers have for a long time favoured slim girls to promote products such as clothing, perfume and alcoholic drinks. But this kind of idealised imagery has caused controversy due to the negative and potentially damaging effects on ordinary women's self-esteem. So why are skinny models and celebrities still the staple diet of many big brand campaigns?

According to a study by Warwick Business School, advertisers should be very careful when it comes to choosing who they get to promote their products which could mean skinny models will be left out in the cold in the future. The findings indicate that using overly idealised female imagery at the forefront of an advertisement is more likely to provoke scorn than shopping as it can have a negative impact on female consumers and turn them off the product they are associated with. Dr Tamara Ansons, Assistant Professor at Warwick

Main image of 'Leading Ladies' campaign kindly supplied by Marks and Spencer, 2013

Business School explains: "When consumers are blatantly exposed to idealised images of thin and beautiful women they are more likely to use a defensive coping strategy to boost self-evaluation by denigrating the pictured woman. This can negatively affect the products these models endorse through the transfer of the negative evaluation of the model to the endorsed product."

Participants in the study were put through various experiments including being shown magazine pages that contained different adverts, one of which was for a vodka. Some women received adverts that did not feature an attractive model, other women received adverts that had a bikini-clad model on the opposite page to a picture of the vodka - meaning they were subtly exposed to the idealised female image - and the third had the attractive model on a whole page next to the vodka - meaning they were blatantly exposed to the idealised female image.

Through the series of tests the team of researchers found varying responses to the adverts. But on the whole, it seems for the everyday woman looking at a perfectly shaped model clutching the bottle of vodka is likely to provoke a negative reaction.

Sending the right message

So what can advertisers do to make sure they are not sending out the wrong message to women and alienating them from their products? Well, the good news is the study suggests whilst women are turned off by blatant skinny female imagery, they do respond well to subtle imagery and they are more likely to buy the product as a result. Dr Ansons recommends using story-telling to draw viewers' attention away from the idealised female.

"To successfully use idealised images in marketing communications, they should be presented subtly. We found that the way the picture of the perfectly shaped model is used is very important in determining a positive or negative effect on women's self-perception.



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"When the exposure to the idealised image of a woman is blatant, a conscious process is activated and consumers employ defensive coping strategies, ie they belittle the model or celebrity to restore a positive perception of themselves. So the product in the advert becomes associated with negative reactions," said Dr Ansons.

The study, in a paper entitled 'Defensive reactions to slim female images in advertising: The moderating role of mode of exposure' published in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, could have far reaching implications for the marketing industry and how they use models and celebrities to sell their products.

Case study: Marks and Spencer

Marks & Spencer (M&S) has produced two big advertising campaigns in 2013 which both feature prominent female imagery. The high profile 'Leading Ladies' campaign came first and featured inspirational female role models such as burns survivor Katie Piper, Dame Helen Mirren and Olympic medallist Nicola Adams, and was created in an attempt to reverse M&S's long term decline in sales of womenswear.

Dr Ansons believes this is a step in the right direction for big brand advertising. "M&S appears to realise that utilising female imagery that blatantly presents a thin model is not going to be well-received by every consumer group. It has favoured talented, inspirational

women over skinny models. By applying this insight to its ad campaign it appears to have revitalised the brand with its core target."

Marks and Spencer are also using the idea of storytelling and subtle female imagery to their advantage in their Christmas campaign. The 'Magic and Sparkle' film features supermodel Rosie Huntington-Whitely, who at certain times in the film is not wearing much more than a lingerie set. But rather than alienating their largely female audience Marks and Spencer cleverly draw the viewer's attention into the magical and enchanting storyline rather than the skinny beautiful model who plays the main character. The glitzy advert takes inspiration from well-known fairy tales and is a good example of how big brands can strike that balance between using models in their campaigns and making sure they appeal to their target market. ■

Watch Dr Tamara Ansons' short film 'Do skinny models score a big fat zero?' at wbs.ac.uk/go/tamara