

WHY REFLECT REALITY? AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TRADITIONALLY ATTRACTIVE MODELS (TAMS) AND REALISTICALLY ATTRACTIVE MODELS (RAMS) IN FASHION AND BEAUTY ADVERTISING

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ABSTRACT

Through qualitative research, I explored how women evaluate traditionally attractive models (TAMS) and realistically attractive models (RAMS) in advertising and how their evaluations influence brand attitudes. I found that viewer-source similarity, copy, disposition, and visual codes affect endorser and brand assessments and that, overall, RAMS received the most positive evaluations.

INTRODUCTION

Endorsers serve a critical purpose in ads. They demonstrate how products function, what results they provide, and act as brand representatives. Recently, however, the physical contrast between models and consumers has fueled a backlash against using endorsers that represent a singular beauty ideal. Research suggests that the predominance of young, thin, and white models is having a damaging impact on women's body image (Park 2005). Some brands have begun to feature diverse endorsers with anecdotal success. Beauty brand Dove featured models of a variety of ages and sizes, increasing sales by 700 percent six months after the ad release (Barry 2007). Despite these results, few brands have changed their practices. The uncertainty over models is fueled by inconsistent and problematic results from existing research on the relative effectiveness of TAMS versus RAMS. Some researchers contend that TAMS are more effective than RAMS (e.g. Bower 2001) while others suggest that RAMS are equally successful to TAMS, and could be more effective in particular contexts (e.g. Dittermar and Halliwell 2004). I aim to resolve these inconsistencies by exploring how women evaluate TAMS and RAMS in ads for attractiveness-related products and how these evaluations influence their brand attitudes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are two available studies that compare the relative effectiveness of TAMS and RAMS in ads for attractiveness-relevant products. TAMS are defined as young, thin, and white models whereas RAMS reflect the average sizes, ages, and skin colours of consumers. Dittermar and Halliwell (2004) found that TAMS and RAMS are equally effective at increasing purchase intentions. Bower and Landreth (2001) concluded that TAMS are more effective at increasing purchase intentions for "enhancing products," and are at least as effective for 'problem-solving' ones. While both make important contributions, I am cautious about drawing implications from them because they fail account for several contextual factors. I now explore three strands of literature to provide a more detailed understanding of endorser effectiveness in ads.

The "match-up hypothesis" examines how the convergence between product type and model attractiveness influences ad effectiveness. It asserts that attractive endorsers are more effective for attractiveness-related products than for unrelated ones because viewers convert models' appearances into arguments for product efficacy (Kahle and Homer 1985). Some studies found that attractive endorsers increased purchase intentions for attractiveness-related products (e.g. Ashmore et. al. 1992) while others concluded that physical attractiveness was insignificant (e.g. Caballero et. al. 1989). Bower and Landreth (2001) aimed to clarify this inconsistency by classifying attractiveness-related products into "problem-solving" and "enhancing" categories. The former "serves to fix or hide beauty liabilities" whereas the latter "may enhance beauty through their application (2)." Their division, however, is limited because product function is based on the benefits promoted in the copy rather than being an inherent product feature. Match-up studies are also problematic because they compare TAMS with unattractive models (e.g. Kahle and Homer 1985). Bower and Landreth (2001) used RAMS, but their vague definitions pose difficulties for replication. Dittermar and Halliwell (2004) created RAMS by taking TAMS from ads and digitally stretching them, thereby using artificially constructed endorsers rather than authentic RAMS for comparison.

A second strand of research explores consumer reactions to TAMS in ads. Some studies apply attribution theory — asserting that people infer qualities about models and the products they endorse — based on their appearance (Mowen and Brown 1981). Research has concluded that consumers attribute positive traits to physically attractive models and hence to the endorsed brand (e.g. Petroschius and Crocker 1989). Other studies explored the psychological impact of using TAMS in ads on self-image (e.g. Richins 1991), concluding that self-image is reduced as consumers compare themselves with TAMS.

Consumers are likely to resent the images presented within ads and this leads to a negative view of the advertised brand (Bower 2001). The previous studies on TAMS and RAMS failed to consider sources of self-image other than size.

A third strand of research has focused on the role of viewer-source similarity in ad effectiveness. These studies found that viewers increase positive responses to ads when they identify with models by perceiving shared traits and ads are more effective when the basis of similarity is salient (e.g. Brumbaugh and Grier 1999). According to social distinctiveness theory, traits are more salient when they are perceived to be deviant and/or different from the norm (Deshpande and Grier 2001). Past research on social distinctiveness has not explored the salience of beauty traits. Bower and Landreth (2001) and Dittermar and Halliwell (2004) also did not control for similarities between the sources and viewers, thereby ignoring the possible influence of salient traits. However, social distinctiveness theory suggests RAMS might be more salient than TAMS because their traits are outside of the beauty norm.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the above literature, I have identified issues — largely overlooked in research on model attractiveness — that might help to explain endorser effectiveness in ads. A primary objective of this study is to resolve some of the inconsistencies within the literature by exploring the perceptions and attitudes of women upon viewing each endorser type in ads. To meet my objective, I frame my study using concepts identified in the literature. My research was exploratory so my framework remained open to modification as I collected, analyzed and interpreted the data. Nonetheless, I began by focusing on two research questions: 1) How do women evaluate TAMS and RAMS in ads? In particular, how do viewer-source similarity, brand type and ad copy, and disposition to models influence their evaluations? What other factors affect their evaluations? 2) How do women's evaluations of models influence their attitudes towards the advertised brand?

METHODOLOGY

I used a qualitative design because it was most suited to resolve past research inconsistencies by providing a broad understanding of relevant issues (Punch 2005). My research involved a case study comparison of focus groups (Miles and Huberman 1994). To attract a stratified sample, I followed a self-selected snowball method (Bryman 2004). I placed posters in community centres, social and fitness clubs, and grocery stores in London, UK, Boston, USA, and Toronto, Canada. I acknowledge the problem of external validity associated with my sample. Despite this limitation, my multiple cases minimize idiosyncrasies and improve representativeness. I conducted four groups composed of five women in each of the three countries segmented by the age categories of 14-19, 20-34, 35-49, and 50-65. Each lasted 90 minutes and participants reflected stratified age, size, skin colour, and class variables.

I exposed participants to mock ads to stimulate discussion. I enlisted an expert panel of ad agents to create the ads (Punch 2005), instructing them to incorporate the variables identified in the literature. Following Bower and Landreth (2001) and Dittermar and Halliwell (2004), I used size as the differentiating criterion between TAMS and RAMS. Fashion models are a US dress size 0, and so TAMS were defined as US dress size 0. I defined RAMS as a US dress size 14 because it is the size of the average US women (Wykes and Gunter 2005). I instructed the panel to select TAMS and RAMS in black and white skin colours and between 40 to 55 and 16 to 25 years old. To reduce respondent fatigue, two series of twelve ads were created: One depicting the product as consumer or luxury good and the other promoting it as enhancing or problem-solving. Each series featured TAMS and RAMS in the two age and skin colour combinations. Mascara was shown in the ads, selected randomly from the items used by Bower (2001).

I moderated all groups following a semi-structured format. Participants completed a socio-demographic form on arrival. I first showed them each ad, asking how they felt about it to expose new insights. I then asked semi-structured questions to explore the concepts from the literature and the second research question. I showed each ad and asked participant how the model made them feel; whether they identified with her; what they thought about the copy; and what they thought about brand type. After each question, I asked how they felt towards the brand. Each group was recorded and transcribed. I analyzed the data following data reduction, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions (Miles and Huberman 1994). I predetermined some initial codes from the literature and discovered others during analysis (Punch 2005). I performed checks suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) to improve the validity of my analysis.

FINDINGS

A general finding is that respondents evaluated TAMS less favourably than RAMS. They explained that the body shapes of TAMS appeared to be unhealthy. Even the participants in the smallest size cohort remarked that they did not identify with TAMS because their bodies were smaller than their own. Many participants had negative attitudes towards brands that used TAMS, contending that these brands glamorized unhealthily thin models. In contrast, the majority of respondents perceived brands featuring RAMS as “trustworthy” because they pictured authentic female images. Others suggested that these brands inspired “love” because they celebrated women being confident in their natural bodies, not conforming to an ideal.

Viewer-source similarity tended to moderate the strength of the relationship between model type and brand attitude. In other words, most women who expressed positive evaluations of RAMS (or less negative evaluations of TAMS) had more positive brand attitudes when they shared similar ages, sizes, and skin colours with the model. By sharing traits, they could picture how the merchandise would look on them. In contrast, evaluations of RAMS had a less positive relationship on brand attitudes when women did not share similar traits because they felt the brand was not targeting them. Some younger women expressed positive evaluations of TAMS because they were dieting and hoped to eventually have a similar body.

Participants did not initially distinguish between consumer and luxury brand types until specifically asked about them. Even upon being asked about the difference, they did not perceive brand type to play a role in relative endorser effectiveness. Respondents evaluated RAMS as more effective than TAMS for both consumer and luxury brands because they demonstrated that the style was achievable for them. Some women liked luxury brands that featured RAMS in the same manner as TAMS because these brands define what is fashionable. Showing RAMS in an image that followed fashion conventions showed that every woman could be part of fashion. Some participants held equally negative attitudes towards both brand types featuring TAMS because showing unattainable images demonstrated that brands did not value their custom.

In my study, mascara was promoted as ‘enhancing’ when the copy said that it enhanced naturally beautiful eyes whereas it was ‘problem solving’ when it corrected thin eyelashes. Participants favourably evaluated RAMS in ads with enhancing messages. They perceived these brands as honest because they recognized that most women are not supermodels. Participants had mixed evaluations to TAMS in ads with enhancing messages. To some women, TAMS featured in ads with enhancing copy demonstrated that the brand communicated that all women could be as attractive as models. Others explained that brands were deceptive because women would never look like TAMS. Both model types were perceived to be equally ineffective in ads with problem solving copy. Many women considered these brands dishonest because their executives knew that their products would not produce the same result as their pictured model.

I discovered two themes when exploring participants’ affective response to the models. First, following past research, viewers’ disposition towards models result from interpersonal comparison. Many of the younger participants expressed a strong negative disposition when they evaluated TAMS. They compared themselves to the models and felt badly about their bodies because they did not resemble them. They said that they held the brands responsible for making them feel badly about the bodies by promoting one beauty ideal. Upon viewing RAMS, most participants expressed positive emotions, explaining that they felt empowered and attractive. Second, I discovered that the social climate is a driver of individual affect towards models — which was previously undetected in research on models. When commenting on images of TAMS, most women explained that they held prior information about the harmful impact of TAMS on women’s self-image from media and educational sources. In contrast, many women referred to the Dove ads when shown images of RAMS. Participants considered brands that featured RAMS to be “respectful” because they were trying to undo the damage of promoting a singular form of beauty. In contrast, some women asserted that brands that used TAMS were “harmful” because they promoted an unhealthy image.

A second new theme that emerged from the data was the importance of body position and facial expression of models, which I call visual codes. Participants interpreted TAMS and RAMS that were slouched, looking away from the viewer, and had “absent” expressions as unappealing. Some perceived these visual codes as passive, weak and unintelligent. A few saw these visual codes as sexual, perceiving them as indicating that the model’s purpose was to be looked upon or as a source of power. Participants interpreted models that were standing erect, making direct eye contact, and smiling as appealing. They asserted that that these codes suggested that the models were confident and “friendly.” They perceived these brands as trustworthy because they featured women in empowering ways. Participants had negative brand attitudes when models were slouched and did not make eye contact, explaining they represented women negatively.

DISCUSSION

My study begins to resolve the inconsistencies within existing literature on TAM and RAM effectiveness by introducing five moderating variables that influence the effectiveness of each endorser. Overall, I discovered that RAMS, and the brands picturing them, received more positive evaluations. Their increased effectiveness is illuminated by the influence of these five variables. First, viewers expressed more positive evaluations of endorsers with whom they shared a similar age, size, and skin colour, suggesting that viewer-source similarity might be a moderating variable impacting endorser effectiveness. Second, viewers expressed more positive evaluations of RAMS in ads with enhancing promotional messages than they did for any other combination of endorser type and copy, thereby contradicting the findings of Bower and Landreth (2001) and suggesting that copy may be a moderating variable for evaluating endorser effectiveness. Third, the match-up between the model and brand type did not influence the effectiveness of models, challenging existing research that suggests an ideal pairing between an endorser and brand exists.

Affective disposition toward the model was found to influence endorser effectiveness. This findings reveals that many women are not passive viewers, as has been suggested (e.g. Richins 1991), but are savvy and self-assured. Moreover, brands that featured RAMS received more positive responses than those employing TAMS, suggesting that brands featuring RAMS generate a positive affective response from the viewer. This finding underscores the importance of considering the social climate in which an ad is promoted as it plays a key role in how the endorser and brand will be evaluated. Fifth, my study suggests that viewers evaluate models based on the meanings conveyed by their body positions and facial expressions, thereby contributing a new variable as a factor influencing the relative effectiveness of TAMS and RAMS.

While using TAMS may currently be a profitable strategy for attractiveness-relevant brands, my study reveals that unrealized potential may exist for brands that feature RAMS. Given the choice, the women in my study provided more positive evaluations of brands that featured endorsers who physically reflect them over endorsers who do not. To reap the benefits from these positive evaluations, fashion and beauty marketers are advised to select models that reflect the sizes, ages, and skin colours of their target market. Moreover, my findings suggest that attractiveness-relevant brands may currently be causing themselves harm by featuring TAMS who meet the current criteria for fashion models. Viewers hold negative evaluations of TAMS because they regard them as unhealthily thin. Even petite and young women contend that the current TAMS are unhealthy and hold negative attitudes towards brands featuring them.

Given that my study employed a qualitative approach, my findings are suggestive and require confirmation. Future researchers should conduct a quantitative study with a random, representative sample of women to confirm my results and establish their generalizability. Moreover, three other aspects of my study would benefit from more detailed investigation. First, participants tended not to distinguish between consumer and luxury brands until specifically asked. Future researchers using mock ads should use stronger stimuli to emphasize the difference between product types. Second, scholars investigating model effectiveness should control for respondent perceptions of the social climate to explore whether it influences how they evaluate endorsers and their respective brands. While I did not control for this variable, I found that participants' previous dispositions toward women in media influenced their evaluations. Third, while my mock ads promoted mascara, many participants commented on the clothing of the models because the ads featured full-length images. Future researchers should explore the impact of using headshots versus full-length images of models when exploring their effectiveness. While further work remains to be done in this area, I have nonetheless provided a conceptual platform from which academics and managers can further improve their understanding of when it makes sense to reflect reality.

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