**Current State of Research on Body Image: Evidence, Understanding and Policy A Perspective from Business and Economics**

Ben Barry, MPhil, PhD

Assistant Professor of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

School of Fashion, Ryerson University, Toronto (Canada)

Research on body image in the fields of business and economics has explored how diverse demographic groups are represented in advertising as well as experience consumption activities. Studies on men and on the relationship between retail and brand evaluations are required. Policy should foster business educational initiatives and business-creative entrepreneurial collaborations that promote body confidence.

**Advertisements**

*Image Composition*. Female models are primarily Caucasian, youthful and thin while male models have muscular or thin and lightly muscular body types in fashion and lifestyle advertising. Older models are infrequently used by brands targeting mature consumers, and they often convey stereotypes or limited signs of aging. The number of black female models in fashion and lifestyle advertisements increased over the decade as well as those with darker complexions and non-European features.

*Skepticism/Trustworthiness*. Girls and women are skeptical of the thin ideal, digital manipulation, tokenism of diversity and stereotypical messages about age, race and gender. They trust advertising that depicts healthy body shapes, realistic signs of age and size as well as authentic and positive representations of diversity. Increased trust leads to positive brand outcomes; increased skepticism produces the opposite effect.

*Demographic Similarity*. When women share the size range, age cohort and/or race of models in fashion advertising, they increase positive responses to brands. Similarity enables women to picture themselves wearing the outfit and feel targeted/included. This robust stream of research has demonstrated the effectiveness of similarity between female consumers and models in fashion advertising with women between the ages of 18-80 and in various North American and UK contexts. Racial minority men and women respond especially favourably to advertising with models that reflect their races across a range of products. However, racial minority models do not negatively influence the attitudes of the racial majority consumers.

*Psychographics*. Women with lower self-esteem or higher thin-ideal internalization have negative brand evaluations after exposure to thin models versus average-size or plus-size models. Women with higher self-esteem or lower thin-ideal internalization have the opposite response. Young men experience anxiety when viewing advertising that depicts idealized male bodies and subverts traditional masculine norms.

*Other Image Elements*. Women have unfavourable brand evaluations when models have unflattering clothing, submissive poses, absent expressions, and are pictured alongside text highlighting beauty flaws. They have positive responses when models are represented in the opposite manner and beside complimentary copy. Girls express positive evaluations when models are engaged in realistic settings and activities.

**Retail**

*Fit and Selection*. Women (over dress size 10 UK and 50 years of age) have difficulty finding well-fitting clothing. The size variation between garments of the same size code (between and within retailers) produces frustration and body anxiety. Plus-size woman have particular difficulty finding fashionable clothing in general and at the designer level. Similarly, larger and shorter men experience frustration and body anxiety because they are unable to find fashionable and well-fitting clothing.

*Retail Environment*. Plus-size women feel disenfranchised and dissatisfied by the visual merchandising of plus-size clothing, the atmosphere of the stores and sections that sell their sizes as well as by their encounters with and the size of sales assistants.

*Fashion Leadership*. The importance of appearance and clothing to women continues with age. Middle-aged and senior women report fashion opinion leadership in which they discuss fashion during social interactions, perceive themselves to be knowledgeable about trends and have a high interest in shopping for new styles.

*Consumer Activism*. Plus-size bloggers yield significant influence in the market because they mobilize plus-size consumers. They publically endorse brands that include them in a manner perceived as authentic and fashionable and critique brands that do not. Fashion brands are incorporating plus-size bloggers into product development and marketing activities to benefit from their expertise and influence.

**Research Gaps**

Despite media reports of more diverse models in advertising, research is required to quantify and contextualize the extent to which changes have occurred. Additional studies are also needed to illuminate the business case of promoting positive body image. Research on the influence of similarity, skepticism and body image on men’s responses to diverse models in fashion advertising would enrich understandings of male consumers. Scholars should explore the relationship between brand evaluations and fit, selection and visual merchandising in the contexts of online as well as in-store fashion retail. Studying the influence of fashion bloggers from various marginalized groups would provide evidence of the contemporary marketplace dynamic in which consumers support brands that promote body confidence and derail those that do not.

**Policy**

Consumers desire advertising messages and retail experiences that support positive body image and they reward businesses that follow such an approach. Public policy should encourage and nurture young entrepreneurs—in partnership with industry, education and the third sector—to develop organizations with missions, core offerings and marketing messages that champion body confidence. To foster the development of these businesses, collaborations between entrepreneurs with creative expertise as well as those with business skills should be cultivated through conferences, business plan competitions and other initiatives. Policy should also engage business, fashion and retail departments in colleges to develop curriculum that explores the relationship between positive body image and consumption as well as to undertake research programs that further examine the business case for promoting body confidence.

**Key References**

**Advertising**

Antioco, M., Smeesters, D., & Le Boedec, A. (2012). Take your pick: Kate Moss or

the girl next door? The effectiveness of cosmetic advertising. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 52(1), 15-30.

Barry, B. (forthcoming). Selling whose dream? a taxonomy of aspiration in fashion

imagery. *Fashion, Style and Popular Culture*.

Barry, B. (forthcoming). *Why Women by Fashion: Models, Advertising and*

*Aspiration*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Christner, R., & Meeds, R. (2010). Is the model changing? a content analysis of body

images in women’s and teen magazine advertising. *American Academy of Advertising Conference Proceedings*, 96.

Duke, L. (2002). Get real!: cultural relevance and resistance to the mediated feminine

ideal. *Psychology & Marketing*, 19(2), 211-233.

Elliott, R., & Elliott, C. (2005). Idealized images of the male body in advertising: a

reader-response exploration. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 11(1),

3-19.

Hirschman, E.C., & Thompson, C.J. (1997). ‘Why media matter: toward a richer

understanding of consumers’ relationships with advertising and mass media. *Journal of Advertising*, 26(1), 43-60.

Kozar, J.M., & Damhorst, M.L. (2008). Older women’s responses to current fashion

models. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 12(3), 338-350.

Kozar, J.M. (2010). Women’s responses to fashion media images: a study of female

consumers aged 30-59. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 34(3), 272-278.

Lee, C.K., Fernandez, N., & Martin, B.A. (2002). Using self-referencing to explain

the effectiveness of ethnic minority models in advertising. *International Journal of Advertising*, 21(3), 367-379.

Martin, B.A., Lee, C.K., & Yang, F. (2004). The influence of ad model ethnicity and

self-referencing on attitudes. *Journal of Advertising*, 33(4), 27-37.

Mayo, D.T., Mayo, C.M., & Mahdi, S. (2005). Skin tones in magazine advertising:

does magazine type matter?. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 11(2/3), 49-59.

Reaves, S., Hitchon, J.B., Park, S.Y., & Yun, G.W. (2004). If looks could kill: digital

manipulation of fashion models. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 91(1), 56-71.

**Retail**

Barry, B. (forthcoming). The toxic lining of men’s fashion consumption: the

omnipresent force of hegemonic masculinity. *LIM College Fashion Then & Now Proceedings*.

Borland, H., & Akram, S. (2007). Age is no barrier to wanting to look good: women

on body image, age and advertising. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 10(3), 310-333.

Gurrieri, L., & Cherrier, H. (2013). Queering beauty: fatshionistas in the fatosphere.

*Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 16(3), 276-295.

Kozar, J.M. (2005). Older women’s attitudes toward aging, appearance changes and

clothing. In M.L. Damhorst, K.A. Miller & S.O. Michelman (eds.), *The Meanings of Dress*, New York: Fairchild Publications, 359–363.

Otieno, R., Harrow, C., & Lea-Greenwood, G. (2005). The unhappy shopper, a retail

experience: exploring fashion, fit and affordability*. International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management,* 33(4), 298-309.

Peters, C. Shelton, J.A., & Thomas, J.B. (2011). Self-concept and the fashion

behavior of women over 50. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 15(3), 291-305.

Rinallo, D. (2007). Metro/fashion/tribes of men: negotiating the boundaries of men’s

legitimate consumption. In B. Cova, R. Kozinets & A. Shanker (eds.), *Consumer Tribes*, Oxford: Elsevier, 76-92.

Scaraboto, D., & Fischer, E. (2013). Frustrated fatshionistas: an institutional theory

perspective on consumer quests for greater choice in mainstream markets. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39(6), 1234-1257.