

Gender Differences in Memory and Self-Esteem for Advertising

Amanda K. Hendrickson

Undergraduate, Psychology

Annie E. Slauson

Graduate Student, Psychology

Introduction

Advertisements are designed with the intention to capture the viewers' attention and to establish a place for the product in the viewers' memory. These techniques often involve various visual components (color, text, and shape) as well as the use of a familiar spokesperson. Viewer related variables may also influence whether a person pays attention to a particular advertisement. For instance, people are typically attracted to advertisements that are related to a personal current goal. However, cognitive research suggests that observing an item or event does not guarantee good memory for that item or event. Instead, the type of processing is the major determinant of memory (Eysenck & Keane 2000). Of particular importance to this study, our findings suggest that people generally have excellent recall for events or items they can relate with, which is called the self-reference effect (which will be discussed later) (Symons & Johnson 1997).

Spokespeople and their Effect

Spokespeople are often used in advertisements to help sell a product. Sometimes advertisers choose spokespeople that they believe the consumers will identify with, or someone with an average appearance. Average appearance could be defined as a person with common facial and body characteristics. They also are of an average body weight and height. Overall, this person would not have the ideal characteristics of beauty. If a consumer can identify with that person, they may feel the need for that product. In addition, average-looking spokespeople may affirm consumers in who they are, without giving the message that they need to improve their appearances by purchasing the product being sold. Other times, advertisers choose extremely attractive spokespeople and dress them in a provocative manner to draw attention to the advertisement. Often, these extremely attractive spokespeople have no direct connection to the product. The problem is that those who view these particular advertisements may believe that these spokespeople represent society's image of ideal beauty. Then they may compare themselves to the spokesperson that leads to negative consequences. Research has shown that by including these extremely attractive people in advertisements, viewers can actually feel negative about themselves. In an article written by Marsha Richins, *Social Comparison and the Idealized Images of Advertising*, she reviewed theories that gave explanations on how

advertisements can lead to negative feelings towards the self. Richins researched the hypothesis that viewers compare themselves with idealized advertising images. After exploring the previous research, evidence for comparison was found, and the results suggest that idealized images raised comparison standards for attractiveness and lowered satisfaction with one's own attractiveness (Richins 1991).

Women's Esteem and Advertising

Research about the effect of ideal images in advertising on body esteem of women has been quite prevalent. Evidence suggests that females (in particular) are negatively affected by attractive same-gender advertising images. In a study conducted by Henderson-King and Henderson-King (1997) about media effects on women's body esteem, females were exposed to slide images of models found in popular women's magazines. Individual differences and social factors that moderate these media effects were examined. The results showed that individual body status, such as weight, affected how positively or negatively women rated their own body esteem (after being exposed to ideal images). The female images portrayed in these types of advertisements are extremely uncommon and, for the most part, not obtainable to the average female. The spokespeople are often unrealistically attractive, and especially for females, unrealistically thin (Richins 1991). Because the average female's weight is far from the weight portrayed by most spokespeople, self-doubt and inadequacy stem from this comparison, which leaves females to desire an unattainable image (Lasch & Freedman 1984).

Men's Esteem and Advertising

Men can also be negatively affected by advertising that portrays ideal body images. An example of this is found in a study conducted by Conner, Grogan and Williams (1996). It investigated the effects of viewing same-gender photographic spokespeople on both genders' body esteem. It was predicted that women's body esteem would be affected by media images of attractive, same-gender spokespeople, more so than men. However, it was found that both men and women's body esteem scores decreased significantly after viewing same-gender photographs. After viewing muscular, athletic images, men felt that their own image and lifestyle were inadequate to those seen on television. Men who compare themselves to these ideal images find it nearly impossible to live up to the bodybuilder-like physiques that are portrayed in the media. Just like women, men's self-esteem suffers as well.

Average-looking Spokespeople

Research on the effect of average-looking models on viewers' self-esteem is scarce. The question arises, do viewers still compare themselves to the average-looking spokespeople, and if so, what effect does it have on their self-esteem? If viewers compare themselves to the average-looking spokesperson, this may have an opposite effect on the viewer. In short, viewing advertisements with average-looking spokespersons may have a positive effect on self-esteem.

Views of the Self

Powell et al. (2001) suggests that people generally have positive biases about themselves. Self-enhancing illusions are self-serving biases, or unrealistically positive views of the self. These unrealistic views are mostly about people's talents, abilities, and social skills. For example, most people that drive a car consider themselves to be above average drivers (Svenson, 1981, as quoted by Powell et al., 2001). These positive biases or self-enhancing illusions are suggested to have a function of improving mental health. However, people also seem to carry negative biases about the self known as body-image distortion. As discussed earlier, people tend to distort their perceptions of themselves to feel unrealistically dissatisfied about their bodies. If it is true that body-image distortion is associated with negative aspects of mental health, then individuals should take the strategies associated with self-enhancing illusions and apply them (Powell et al. 2001).

One strategy is to select a group of people who are disadvantaged in comparison, so that in turn, the viewer will feel positive. This concept is called downward social comparison. This strategy could convince those with poor body-image that his or her body is more attractive than those of some others. As a result, "self-enhancement might occur if the comparison group was a disadvantaged group, such as obese people, or even if it were some abstract 'average' person" (Powell et al., 2001). By using both average and ideal advertising images and comparing them to how a consumer views oneself, one can see if self-esteem can be manipulated through the use of spokespersons. Also, it can determine if this strategy affects the memory for the product being sold.

Taking from the previously mentioned research, our research looked at the self-reference effect and how it can be seen in the viewing of average and ideal spokesperson advertisements. Further, we looked at how memory for the spokesperson, due to self-comparison, may lead to either negative or positive feelings towards the self. In forming our hypothesis, we used the results from previous studies, which showed that both men and women's body esteem scores decreased significantly after viewing ideal same-gender photographs. A study conducted suggested that the use of average spokespersons in advertisements might lead to a higher self-esteem or downward social comparison (Powell et al. 2001).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to discover what viewers would remember from an advertisement; the spokesperson or the product. We also wanted to determine if the use of ideal images in advertising would lower the self-esteem of viewers to follow with past research. Finally, we wanted to find out if the use of average images in advertising had a positive or negative effect on self-esteem.

Those who view advertisements and compare themselves to the spokesperson will have a better memory for the spokesperson, not the product. If a person compares more when the spokesperson is attractive, he or she should remember more details about the spokesperson. Whereas if people view an average-looking spokesperson, they may have a better memory for the product.

If viewing advertisements with attractive spokespeople has a negative impact on self-esteem then people who viewed the advertisements with attractive spokespeople should have lower self-esteem.

Methods

Overview. We adopted a procedure similar to that used by Henderson-King (1997) to measure the effects of advertising images from magazines on memory for the product and spokesperson and self-esteem. We divided participants into three groups and were exposed to a compilation of advertisements combined in a Microsoft, Power Point, presentation. The average spokesperson group was divided into males and females and shown a selection of advertisements that contained five neutral products (i.e. deodorant, car, etc.) promoted by same-gender, average-looking spokespeople. The ideal spokesperson group was divided into males and females and shown a selection of advertisements that contained five neutral products (i.e. deodorant, car, etc.) promoted by same-gender, ideal-looking spokespeople (i.e. models, athletes, etc.). The control group that consisted of both males and females viewed five advertisements of neutral products (i.e. deodorant, car, etc.) without a spokesperson promoting the product. A pilot study was conducted to determine what was considered average and ideal-looking. After participants viewed the specific presentation, a questionnaire was administered. It regarded demographics, self-comparison of viewers' facial features and body image to average and ideal-looking people's facial features and body image, viewers' memory for the products and spokespersons, and self-esteem. We manipulated the ideal spokesperson group. In the consent form, we stated that participants would be tested on gender differences in memory of the magazine advertisements. We wanted to mask our intent to find the effects of advertising images on self-esteem as well as memory.

Participants. Participants were 23 male and 62 female undergraduate students enrolled in General Psychology courses. This study was conducted at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, a rural, midwestern school of approximately 8,000 undergraduate and graduate students in Menomonie, Wisconsin. Participants were randomly assigned to five different categories; female ideal spokesperson, female average spokesperson, male ideal spokesperson, male average spokesperson, and male and female non-spokespeople.

Materials and Instructions. We gathered 25 one-page, single spokesperson advertisements from past and recent issues of *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Men's Health*, and *Sports Illustrated*. The basis for the ideal advertisements was taken from the study done by Franzoi and Shields, where they found that females pay attention to sexual attractiveness and body weight, and males pay attention to upper body strength (1984). We used full body images with a high level of attractiveness. They contained an emphasis of slender females and muscular males.

The basis for the average spokesperson advertisements were full body images, an average level of attractiveness, and an emphasis on normal/average figures. In each of these model types, we looked for products that were in full view, clearly represented, and a non-celebrity spokesperson promoting the product. In the advertisements with just the product alone, we looked for the

products to be central to the advertisement with distinct features. After obtaining these advertisements, we scanned them into a computer and created five power point presentations to be automatically timed for thirty seconds per advertisement. After participants viewed the images in a dark room on an enlarged screen, they completed a questionnaire. There were five separate questionnaires, one for each of the categories.

The average spokesperson questionnaire for both genders consisted of demographic questions; a self-comparison of facial features and body image compared to ideal and average-looking people; ten short answer memory questions for each of the advertisements; and a self-esteem test. For the advertisements that contained spokespeople, there were five questions about the spokesperson and five questions about the product. The ideal spokesperson questionnaire for both genders consisted of demographic questions; a self-comparison of facial features and body image compared to ideal and average-looking people; ten short answer memory questions for each of the advertisements; and a self-esteem test. For the advertisements that contained spokespeople, there were five questions about the spokesperson and five questions about the product. For the advertisements that contained products alone, there were five questions about the products.

Questions about the spokespeople pertained only to distinct features (i.e. hair color), facial expressions (i.e. smiling), body positions (i.e. standing), where they were located in the advertisement (i.e. center), where they were looking in relation to the camera (i.e. straight ahead) and specific clothing. Criteria for the questions about the product were color, slogans, brand names, packaging, and where it was located in the advertisement. All answers to the questions were clearly visible by viewing advertisement. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was located at the end of the questionnaire (Rosenberg 1965). This was a 10-item Likert scale, with items answered on a 4-point scale-from strongly disagree to strongly agree. There were 40 points total. The higher one received on the questionnaire, the higher the self-esteem one has.

Procedure. We gathered our participants by visiting General Psychology courses, and passed around five separate sheets to students with a specified time and location for each sheet. There was a sheet per condition for each gender. Some professors offered the incentive of extra credit or made it a class requirement. Each participant was given a reminder phone call on the night before his or her volunteered time.

On the day of the study, we waited in the room while the participants entered and took a seat. After they were each seated in clear view of the screen, we handed the participants the consent forms which they read to themselves. After they read it, we explained that they could leave if they wished and were free to do so without consequences. While one of us turned off the lights, the other started the power point presentation which showed each advertisement for thirty seconds. When the participants viewed the three-minute presentation, we gave each a questionnaire. When they were completed, they left it facedown on the table. When the entire group was finished, they handed their questionnaire to us and were individually debriefed.

Results

We obtained results by having an independent scorer grade the questionnaires by previously defined answers. Two memory scores were derived for each person, except for those in the non-spokesperson condition. First, a memory score was derived by totaling the number of points correct on the questions pertaining only to the product. Second, a memory score was derived by totaling the number of points correct on the questions pertaining only to the spokesperson. The maximum number of points for the spokesperson memory in all conditions was 50. The maximum number of points for the product memory in the male average condition and non-spokesperson condition was 50, in the male ideal condition the total was 58, in the female ideal condition the total was 52, and in the female average condition the total was 53.

After obtaining the scores for each participant we translated them into percentages. In order to test our hypotheses, we ran two, two factor mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA); one for males and one for females to detect the differences between the three different groups for each gender. The two factors were condition (average, ideal, non-spokesperson) and product/spokesperson memory.

Our prediction that participants who viewed advertisements with average-looking spokespersons would remember more about the product than the spokesperson was not supported by either males or females. Instead, females in the average condition showed a significantly, $F(1, 56) = 138.026, p < .001$, better memory for the spokesperson ($M = .67$) than the product ($M = .44$). Males did have better memory for the product than spokesperson, but only slightly.

Our prediction that participants who viewed ideal spokespersons would remember more about the spokesperson than the product was supported. Males in the ideal condition had significantly, $F(1, 18) = 9.403, p < .05$, better memory for the spokesperson ($M = .65$) than the product ($M = .44$). Females in the ideal condition had significantly, $F(1, 56) = 138.026, p < .001$, better for the spokesperson ($M = .71$) than the product ($M = .56$). Overall, these analyses show that there was a main effect of the type of advertisement on the participants.

Finally, we turn to the prediction that participants who viewed average-looking spokespersons would have a higher self-esteem, and those who viewed ideal-looking spokespersons would have a lower self-esteem. The individual self-esteem scores were derived from the 10-question Rosenberg Self-Esteem Test with a 4-point Likert scale (40 being the highest score of self-esteem). After the individual self-esteem scores were derived, another two, two factor mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to evaluate the effect of type of spokesperson (average vs. ideal) between genders on self-esteem. There were no significant differences in self-esteem in either condition across gender.

Conclusions

In this study, we investigated advertising, and more specifically, what aspects of advertisements are retained in viewers' memory. We also looked at how different types of advertisements affect viewers' self-esteem (ideal images in advertisements have been shown to result in viewers experiencing negative feel-

ings about themselves) (Richins 1991). Ultimately, we sought to find the relationship between comparison and memory, and comparison and self-esteem.

We found some very interesting information from this study. First, we discovered that females remember more about the average spokesperson than the product. We did not hypothesize this idea. These results could imply that females have a tendency to compare themselves to the spokespeople of advertising, whether the spokesperson is considered average or ideal. This could be a result of the repeated exposure to the preferred body image, causing females to not differentiate between average and ideal images. When a spokesperson is present, females tend to compare themselves and observe the image details, which is congruent with the self-reference effect.

Second, we found that the participants remember more about the ideal spokesperson than the product, as we hypothesized. We found that both males and females remember significantly more about the spokesperson than the product. This is again congruent with the self-reference effect. Since both the males and females compared themselves to the spokesperson, they remembered less about the product. This could imply that having a spokesperson present in the advertisement may interfere with the memory for the product being sold. This presents the question as to what advertisers are really selling- the product or the spokesperson?

Finally, the participants' self-esteem who viewed ideal and average-looking spokespeople was not greatly affected. This could have several implications. One could be that certain participants have a high self-esteem and felt themselves to be just as or more attractive than the spokespeople they viewed. Also, brief exposure can not significantly alter self-esteem. Finally, the self-esteem measured used may not have been sensitive enough to measure differences in self-esteem.

Our findings are similar with past research. Spokespeople can inhibit viewer's memory for the product being sold due to the self-reference effect, with exception of males viewing average-looking spokespeople. As Conner, Grogan, and Williams (1996) and Jirousck (1996) found in addition to our discoveries, males are especially sensitive to ideal-looking spokespeople. What our study found different from the limited research on average-looking spokespeople is that memory for the product is again inhibited in females viewing these advertisements. Whether the spokesperson is average or ideal, females tend to compare themselves to the spokesperson. Females will pay more attention to the spokesperson and not the product. In the matter of self-esteem, our findings did not run congruent with the past research of Marsh Richins (1991) and Conner, Grogan, and Williams (1996). Surprisingly, it was shown in our study that brief exposure to the advertisements did not lower self-esteem of either females or males. Overall, past research of the self-reference effect was very evident in our study.

One limitation of this study was the small amount of participants in four of the five conditions. This resulted in the exclusion of the non-spokesperson condition when computing results. Therefore, we did not have a base measure of self-esteem to compare possible effects in average and ideal condi-

tions. Future researchers may want to include a younger age group in the sample, such as teenagers. They're an important group due to the fact they make up a portion of the fashion magazine market. It might also be beneficial to administer a higher sensitive self-esteem questionnaire prior to viewing the advertisements. Future research could take these limitations into consideration.

References

- Conner, Mark, Grogan, Sarah, & Williams, Zoe. (1996). The effects of viewing a same-gender photographic models on body esteem. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 20, 569-575.
- Eysenck, Michael W. & Keane, Mark T. *Cognitive Psychology* (4th ed.). Psychology Press Ltd. Philadelphia, PA, 2000.
- Franzoi, Stephen L., & Shields, Stephanie A. (1984). The body esteem scale: multidimensional structure and sex differences in a college population. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 48, 173-178.
- Henderson-King, Eileen, & Henderson-King, Donna. (1997). media effects on women's body esteem: Social and Individual Differences Factors. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 27, 399-417.
- Jirousck, Charlotte A. (1996). superstars, superheroes and the male body image: The Visual Implications of Football Uniforms. *Journal of American Culture*, 19, 1-11.
- Powell, Jack L., Matarin, Mala L., & Stuart, Anne E. (2001). body esteem: An exception to self-enhancing illusions? *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 31, 1951-1979.
- Richins, Marsha L. (1991). Social comparison and the idealized images of advertising. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 18, 71-83.
- Rosenberg, Morris. (1965) *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image*. Princeton University Press. Princeton, N.J.
- Symons, Cynthia S. & Johnson, Blair T. (1997). The self-reference effect in memory: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 121, 371-394.