

# Why do grotesque fashion ads lure consumers?

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Women's fashion magazines are chock full of ads, some featuring bizarre and grotesque images. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, these ads are effective at grabbing consumers' attention.

The study lists the following examples from fashion magazines like *Vogue*: a Jimmy Choo ad depicting a woman fishing a purse out of a pool that contains a floating corpse of man, and a Dolce & Gabbana ad that features one beautiful woman in period costume skewering another in the neck.

"Why do we see such bizarre imagery in [ads](#) for clothing that cost several hundreds or even thousands of dollars?" ask authors Barbara J. Phillips (University of Saskatchewan) and Edward F. McQuarrie (Santa Clara University). The researchers interviewed 18 women who regularly read fashion magazines to examine their reactions to macabre ads.

They found that in addition to expected modes of engagement with ads, some women approached fashion advertisement as a type of fiction.

"These women would be transported into the story world set in motion by the ad's pictures, asking themselves, 'What is happening here?' and 'What will happen next?'" the authors write.

Still others sought out imagery that could be approached like a painting in a gallery. "These women would immerse themselves in the images, examining its lighting, colors, lines, composition, and creativity," the

authors explain.

Overall, the researchers found that in many cases, the key to constructing an engaging fashion ad was not to make it likeable or conventionally pretty, but to make it engaging.

"The merely pretty was too easily passed over; grotesque juxtapositions were required to stop and hold the fashion consumer flipping through Vogue," the authors write. "For the brands that choose to use grotesque imagery—roughly one-fourth, according to a content analysis—the promise is that greater engagement with ad imagery will lead to a more intense and enduring experience of the brand."

**More information:** Barbara J. Phillips and Edward F. McQuarrie. "Narrative and Persuasion in Fashion Advertising." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2010.

Provided by University of Chicago

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