

Do thin models and celebrities really help sell to women?

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Advertisers who put images of female celebrities and models next to their products spark scorn rather than shopping, according to new research.

A new study from Warwick Business School has found women are turned off products placed next to 'attractive' [images](#) of female models, but they are likely to buy the product if the images are used subtly instead.

Previous studies on how using attractive models affects women's perception of the product have been contradictory, but a new look at the subject has found that only [adverts](#) using images of perfectly shaped models subtly actually lead to consumers liking the product.

Dr Tamara Ansons, Assistant Professor at Warwick Business School, said: "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 was used was very important in determining a positive or negative effect on women's self-perception.

"We showed that when exposure to these images of beautiful models is subtle, a sub-conscious automatic process of upward [social comparison](#) takes place leading to a negative self-perception. But that led to a more [positive attitude](#) towards the brand.

"Yet 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."

The women 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 a series of tests the team of researchers found different responses to the adverts from the women.

Dr Ansons said: "Attractive female models and celebrities are routinely used in advertisements and yet previous research has shown mixed reactions, some have found the effect to be positive, while others have found it to be negative.

"We wanted to find out why this was. We found that a woman's self-perception and consequent effects on product evaluation depend on the degree of attention paid to the idealised image of a woman in advertisements."

This 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.

"It is important to understand when we might expect positive effects by using idealised body images in marketing on customers' [self-perception](#) and how that influences purchase decisions," said Dr Ansons.

"We showed that 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.

"However when subtly exposed to these perfectly shaped models consumers do not engage in defensive coping by disparaging the model. Instead it leads to negative self-evaluation but does not interfere with their evaluation of the pictured model. Thus, the generally positive evaluation of the [model](#) leads to a favourable reaction to the product she is endorsing."

More information: Wan, F. et al., Defensive reactions to slim female images in advertising: The moderating role of mode of exposure, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* Volume 120, Issue 1, January 2013, Pages 37–46, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2012.07.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2012.07.008)

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