

Relationship between Consumer Perceptions and Brand Preference in Photoshopped and Non-Photoshopped Online Fashion Advertisements

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Keywords: Advertising, Fashion, Photoshop

Significance of the study and theoretical framework. Photoshop, a digital alteration software, is a common tool in the fashion industry due to its capabilities to enhance models in advertising photographs. Using the software, photo retouchers are able to change physical features by increasing or decreasing the size of limbs, airbrushing the skin, and removing distinguishable traits (Odell, 2012). The act of digitally altering the appearance of models in advertisements can be controversial as it promotes a certain ideal standard of beauty. Though consumers have different preferences regarding photoshopped and non-photoshopped images, viewing these digitally-enhanced advertisements can affect a consumer's body image, self-esteem, and their relationship with the brand itself (Bissell, 2006). Previous literature has used traditional print magazines to investigate consumer perceptions of digitally altered fashion advertisements (Wasilenko, Kulik, & Wanic, 2007). However, there is a lack of literature that investigates consumer opinions on digital alteration of advertisements in an online context. Exploring magazine usage in today's culture could be considered less relevant as Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts (2010) reported that print media is consumed an average of 38 minutes a day, compared to internet usage on desktop computers and mobile devices averaging to 4 hours a day (Ofcom, 2016). Internet usage is vital to this research as people are spending more time online and are, therefore, exposed to more online advertisements.

When utilizing the existing literature that focused on consumer activity with magazine advertisements, one of the most distinguished common findings was that consumers make appearance comparisons between the models in the advertisements and themselves (Knobloch-Westerwick & Romero, 2011). Based off of such results, the Social Comparison Theory (SCT) (Festinger, 1954) was used as the theoretical framework for this study. Bissell (2006) used the SCT and found that when individuals were informed of the digital alteration procedures performed on each advertising image, their self-esteem was enhanced knowing that the comparisons made were unrealistic. In other words, media literacy can help consumers create a non-threat comparison. The above findings of previous studies created a need to investigate an individual's knowledge of the digital alteration process and how it will affect the comparisons made with photoshopped online advertisements. The current research analyzed consumer perceptions of online fashion advertisements by examining body image, online visual media literacy, self-esteem, self-congruence, brand image perception, image preference, and brand preference.

Method. The current study adopted online survey as a quantitative research method. This research methodology was deemed appropriate because the purpose of this study was to investigate consumer behaviors related to online fashion advertisements. The questionnaire was developed from adopting or adapting scales from previous studies to measure each variable. To assess visual factors and to avoid bias, the selected four advertisement photos were presented

through randomization, each featuring either a Caucasian model or African American model. Each fashion advertisement shown represented one of the two undergarment fashion brands: Aerie, the non-Photoshopped image, and Victoria's Secret, the photoshopped advertisement. The sample consisted of 405 respondents that were acquired through a data aggregate collection company. To properly assess the above fashion brands' target demographic, the respondents were restricted to females of ages between 18 and 25, and they were given reward points for purchase of merchandise or gift card.

Results & Implications. All factors demonstrated a Cronbach's *alpha* of .7 to .98 indicating high internal consistency. Based on the exploratory factor analyses, body image extracted three factors (i.e., confidence in body image, anxiety in body image, and weight perception), and self-esteem extracted two factors (i.e., self-worth and self-respect). The results of hypotheses testing through stepwise regression are as follows. Confidence in body image ($\beta = .76, p < .001$) predicted self-respect. Anxiety in body image ($\beta = .69, p < .05$) contributed the most in predicting self-worth, followed by weight perception ($\beta = -.26, p < .05$) and then confidence in body image ($\beta = .19, p < .001$). Online visual media literacy supported relationships with both self-worth ($\beta = -.14, p < .05$) and self-respect ($\beta = .14, p < .05$). Victoria's Secret brand image ($\beta = .68, p < .05$) and Aerie brand image ($\beta = .56, p < .05$) contributed in predicting self-congruence. Victoria's Secret image preference ($\beta = .45, p < .05$) and Aerie image preference ($\beta = .39, p < .05$) both predicted self-congruence. Self-respect ($\beta = .19, p < .05$) played a role in predicting Victoria's Secret brand preference, and self-worth ($\beta = -.17, p < .01$) predicted Aerie brand preference. Lastly, self-congruence ($\beta = .68, p < .01$) played a vital role in predicting Victoria's Secret brand preference as well as Aerie brand preference ($\beta = .52, p < .01$).

Based on the above interpretation of the study results, these findings validated the SCT in that individuals compare themselves to advertisement images and utilize these comparisons for self-evaluation or self-enhancement. The application of the SCT led to finding that consumers may prefer different brands based on image preference, which is affected by their online visual media literacy. Online visual media literacy or lack thereof contributes to body image and self-esteem, both of which are heavily centered in SCT due to the comparisons made of physical appearance or abilities. Using SCT, the study has aided in filling the gaps in current literature by addressing digitally-altered advertisements in an online setting and delving into a new concept of online visual media literacy. The results of this study can provide insights to future marketing concepts, such as an emphasis in confidence in body image and self-respect for Victoria's Secret and self-worth and self-acceptance for anxiety in body image for Aerie.

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