Images of women in beauty product advertising: 
A cross-cultural study of female’s perceptions and preferences

Abstract
This cross-cultural study explores the perceptions and preferences women have towards images of women in beauty product advertisements. Quantitative data were collected from two countries; UK and Egypt. These two countries were selected as being generally representative of two culturally-different communities; namely Western and Middle Eastern cultures. The study found that the perceptions and preferences of the surveyed females in the two countries seemed to be slightly similar. Women from both markets expressed a desire for the increased diversity of images of women in advertisements. Noticeable differences were observed including the perceptions of offensiveness and opinions towards the unacceptability of sexual images of women in TV advertisements. Despite the apparent similarities between the UK and Egyptian markets, we recommend that the complexity of these issues necessitates a more thorough evaluation of the risks of standardised advertising, and the potential benefits of adapting an international campaign to local markets.

KEY WORDS: Advertising, Cross-Culture, Female Image, Perception

TRACK: International Marketing
Background to the study
Do consumers really want to see images of very attractive women, or is the use of very attractive models simply imposed on consumers by the beauty industry? The launch of the Unilever brand Dove’s now renowned ‘Campaign for Real Beauty’ in 2004, which used images of ‘real’ or ‘ordinary’ women, contrasted with traditional beauty product advertising and the common use of very attractive, and often unrealistic, images of women. The reasons for Dove’s decision to rebel against the norm in beauty product advertising were based on the findings of extensive research sponsored by the brand. These studies (Etcoff et al. 2004 and 2006) investigated women’s perceptions of their own beauty and how their feelings about beauty impact their sense of worth and behaviour. It was found in the 2004 study that 75% of women in the study would prefer to see ‘considerably more diversity in the images of beauty’ and many women believe that ‘the popular meanings of beauty and physical attractiveness have become increasingly narrowed and unattainable’ (Etcoff et al. 2004). In response to these findings, Dove developed an advertising campaign that promotes the images of a variety of women with diverse body shapes, sizes, races and ages (www.dove.co.uk). The brand aims to communicate ‘authentic beauty’ through the mass media in order to ‘reconstruct’ women’s perceptions of female beauty and form a sense of credibility within the brand’s image. The 2004 study also found that beauty is often defined solely as ‘physical attractiveness’, but this is not entirely satisfactory to consumers. In response the campaign encourages the recognition of other characteristics to be promoted as important components of beauty and attractiveness. This study clearly outlines the components of true beauty and affirms that, while they include physical attractiveness, they also include happiness, kindness, wisdom, dignity, love, authenticity and self-realisation’.

Literature Review
This cross-cultural study aims to investigate females’ perceptions and preferences of the images of women in beauty product advertising. This part provides a brief review of previous research into the use of images of very attractive women in advertising.

A quick glance through any fashion magazine shows that the use of highly attractive models in advertisements is widespread (Caballero et al. 1989). Existing research focusing on images of women in advertisements tends either to be based around the match-up between the products being promoted and the model promoting them, or the possible negative effects viewing images of very attractive women in advertisements has on consumers.

Stephens et al. (1994) point out that a number of researchers suggest that physically attractive people tend to be more persuasive in advertising, mainly because consumers prefer them over images that are not considered very attractive. Many scholars contributed to the formation of this viewpoint, including Joseph (1982), whose influential study about “The Credibility of Physically Attractive Communicators” indicated that attractive communicators are liked and perceived more favourably by consumers. Baker and Churchill (1977) also found that the use of physically attractive models was rated more favourably by respondents in their study, especially when the product in the advertisement had ‘romantic overtones’. Their results suggested that the ‘physical attractiveness of a model may influence people’s evaluations of the aesthetic qualities of an advertisement and therefore seem to be important determinants of the attention-getting value of the advertisement and the subject’s liking of the ads. Stephens et al. (1994) acknowledge that other advertising researchers have found that the use of attractive models may positively influence the recipient’s attitude towards the advertisement, their purchase intention and actual purchase.
However, Soloman et al. (1992) suggest that ‘perceivers distinguish multiple types of good looks’, and argue that attractiveness cannot be categorised simply into ‘very attractive’, ‘moderately attractive’ and ‘unattractive’. The authors also argue that ‘in advertising, certain beauty ideals are more appropriately paired with specific products than with others’ (Soloman et al. 1992). Bower and Landreth (2001) further discuss this point as they explore the ‘importance of convergence between the product and the message communicated by a model’s image’. They also highlight that prior research has argued that very attractive models in advertisements are most effectively matched with ‘attractiveness relevant’ products, and that advertisements for ‘problem-solving’ products may be equally effective if the models are ‘normal’ looking. Furthermore, they highlight that there is evidence to suggest that ‘normally attractive’ models may be perceived to be more trustworthy than ‘very attractive’ models due to consumers’ perceived similarities between themselves and the normal model. ‘If a woman perceives herself to be physically more similar to a [normally attractive model], a greater perceived attitudinal similarity between the receiver and the source may drive the receiver to like the source more’ (O’Keefe 1990 cited in Bower and Landreth 2001, p.3).

Bower and Landreth’s (2001) put an interesting conclusion that highly attractive models may not be the most effective advertising communicators for all types of beauty product. Ultimately, they found that although very attractive models are well suited to promoting products which enhance attractiveness (lipstick, for example), very attractive models are not necessarily more effective than ‘normally attractive’ models when the products are problem-solving (such as anti-wrinkle cream). Caballero et al. (1989) study ‘Using Attractiveness as an Advertising Tool’ tested the degrees of persuasiveness individuals of different levels of physical attractiveness had when delivering a message. Interestingly, this study found that, contrary to the previous research suggestions, physical attractiveness was not a significant factor in producing a willingness to purchase a product. It is also important to highlight that their conclusion argued with the assertion that ‘the physical attractiveness of a communicator determines the effectiveness of persuasive communication, and ultimately, physical attractiveness of the communicator influences overall marketing outcomes’.

Advertising has been vilified for upholding, perhaps even creating, the emaciated standard of beauty by which girls are taught from childhood to judge the worth of their own bodies’ (Stephens et al. 1994). The Dove study (2006) states that the narrow, physical definition of beauty portrayed by mass media creates an ‘appearance anxiety’ and a ‘desire for perfection’ among a large number of women (Etcoll et al. 2006). Soloman et al. (1992) further state that ‘the pressure to be slim is continually reinforced by both advertising and by peers’. Richins’ (1991) research found that female consumers often compare themselves to the idealized images (or images of very attractive women) in advertisements. More than half in fact stated that they compare themselves frequently to models in cosmetic, clothing and personal care advertisements. Her research also found that when women compare themselves to images of ‘very attractive’ women, it often resulted in feelings of dissatisfaction and general negativity towards their facial attractiveness. It was found that when faced with an image of a very attractive model in an advertisement, the initial reaction from respondents was that of envy. Richins (1991) did however find that exposure to advertisements with images of very attractive women did not on the whole appear to increase respondents’ dissatisfaction with their body shape. Nevertheless, Gustafson et al. (2001b) study into the perceptions of female stereotypes in advertisements concluded that differing perceptions may contribute to the development of eating disorders, which are ultimately negative responses to body shape.
Previous cross-cultural research regarding beauty and attractiveness

Kalliny and Gentry (2007) have examined the cultural values reflected in US and Arab television advertising and their findings contribute to the standardisation - localisation debate. Despite the common belief that the two cultures are vastly different, they found that the content and appeal of TV advertisements had many similarities. Part of their study focused on comparing feminine appearance and beauty enhancement. The results indicated that even in countries such as Saudi Arabia, where women are required to cover their bodies and faces in public, ‘the cultural value ‘beauty enhancement’ appears to be an important one in the Arab culture’(2007). This supports their ‘supposition that Arabs differentiate between the desire for women to look beautiful and the need to dress modestly (2007). Despite the fact that this study found many similarities between US and Arab advertisements, they still recommend that advertising agencies pay attention to the differences. They suggest that advertisements produced in one country should not simply be standardised across markets due to the likelihood that values differ from country to country and culture to culture.

A recent cross-cultural research investigating European female consumers’ ideal beauty images by Bjerke and Polegato (2006) gave valuable indications of the differences in opinions and preferences across cultures. For example, they found that there were differences in consumer’s preferences when analysing a question based on looking like one out of two presented models. These findings motivated the researcher’s interest in this topic and design of this study. In accordance with what discussed earlier, Bjerke and Polegato’s (2006) study found that the use of visuals and their specific characteristics are of prime importance, especially in cross-cultural advertising. To reiterate, congruence between consumer’s self-image and the brand has been found to contribute to the development of positive attitudes towards the brand, and this is an important factor contributing to the success of an advertising campaign. Bjerke and Polegato therefore conclude that advertisers need to understand important, contemporary, cultural characteristics of the ideal beauty type before developing international advertising [campaigns]’ (2006). Cunningham et al. (1995) found that there is a level of agreement concerning the standards of attractiveness, specifically facial features, across ages, ethnicities and nationalities. As this finding challenges the ideas of culturally-specific norms of beauty, it encourages further research into perceptions and preferences of beauty in both ‘real life’ and advertisements to be carried out.

Methodology

The data collected in this cross-cultural study was quantitative in nature and was about the perceptions females from different cultural backgrounds have towards the images of women used in beauty product advertisements. The study does not only examine females’ perceptions, but also their preferences towards the sample images, as well as investigating the general opinions towards images of women in beauty product advertising. The research was carried out in two countries representing two distinct cultures; UK and Egypt.

The data collected through self-administered questionnaire in the two countries, which was accompanied by two photos of two women of differing beauty types. The study used two images, one (Ad A) considered ‘very attractive’ (as typically used in beauty product advertising) and the other (Ad B) ‘ordinary’ or ‘realistic’ (as used in the recent campaign by the brand Dove). The work carried out by Cunningham et al. (1996) and Bower and Landreth (2001) have largely influenced the methodology and questionnaire design of this current study. Cunningham et al.’s (1996) study included methods such as rating women’s attractiveness from photographs in order to examine the cross-cultural differences of the
perceptions towards the physical attractiveness of women of different races and ethnicities. The questionnaires designed for this study require respondents to rate their perceptions and opinions of two images of women, one Caucasian and the other Arabic, in the form of photographs. Bower and Landreth (2001) also used the medium of photographs as stimuli when investigating the effects of using highly attractive and normally attractive models in advertising. The attractiveness and perceived ‘normalcy’ of models were measured using both semantic differential scales and Likert scales, as is the case in our study.

For the purposes of this study, a combination of nominal, ordinal and interval scales were utilized. Nominal scales were used to establish age range and occupation of respondents. The nominal results were used to cross-classify and tabulate the collected data to assist understanding and clarify the groupings of consumers’ responses. In order to further investigate cultural differences and address the advertising standardization versus adaptation issue, ordinal or ranking scales were used to assess consumers’ preferences. By ranking preferences or levels of importance, it was hoped that analysis would be able to establish cultural differences. Both Likert and semantic scales were utilized within the questionnaire. Likert scales, comprising of five point response categories, were provided for answers that require some form of agreement or disagreement or judgement of importance to a statement, for example ‘Makes me feel unhappy about my body shape’ and ‘Encourages me to take care of my general appearance’. Questions concerning the importance of certain characteristics women in beauty product advertisements should hold also utilized Likert scales. Semantic scales, in the form of seven point rating scales with bipolar labels of opposing meaning, were provided to ascertain perceptions.

The questionnaire was distributed to 3 age groups of females to complete anonymously and independently under the supervision of the researcher. The supervision of respondents was intended to eliminate influences from outside sources such as friends and family, television and magazines (Bjerke and Polegato, 2006). The population of interest in this study was adult female of British and Egyptian nationality. The study was conceived in the UK in two cities; Edinburgh and Liverpool. In Egypt, and due to time and contact constraints, respondents were only selected from the capital city of Cairo. Due to the sensitive nature and questions of the study, it was difficult to attract a large sample of female. Only 97 Egyptian and 90 British respondents have agreed to take part, giving a total of 187 completed questionnaires.

Findings and Discussion
The aim of this study was to explore and compare the British and Egyptian females’ perceptions towards images of very attractive and ordinary women in beauty product advertising. Differences and similarities identified in this study are discussed in this part.

It was expected that there should be significant differences between females’ perceptions and preferences towards images of women in beauty product advertisements, and dissimilarities in the responses from these countries due to cultural differences. However, contrary to expectation, considerable differences were not found. The findings showed that generally in both countries the image of the ‘very attractive’ woman (Ad A) was perceived as more appealing and more attractive than the image of the ‘ordinary’ woman (Ad B). The image of the ‘ordinary’ woman (Ad B) was perceived to be more realistic in both countries. The differences between the cultures became apparent when the issue of offensiveness was raised. In Egypt, the image in Ad B was considered less offensive than the image in Ad A. The image in Ad A displayed a woman in a bikini, showing her midriff and posing with a shirtless
male model. These are all possible contributors to the respondents’ perceptions of 
offensiveness.
The respondent’s preferences were split 50/50 in UK and 60/40 in Egypt between images of 
‘very attractive’ and ‘ordinary’ women. This highlights the distinct markets which may 
provide opportunities for cosmetics advertisers to capitalise on. Perhaps even more surprising 
were the results indicating that 60% of Egyptian respondents preferred Ad A despite the fact 
that it was considered more offensive than Ad B. Additionally, the large number of 
respondents who claimed they would buy beauty products even if the advertising was 
offensive was not expected. Cultural differences were found in certain specific cases, such as 
the ‘sexiness’ of the women in advertising. Whereas this is not only accepted in the UK it is 
couraged, in Egypt it is strongly frowned upon.

A surprising finding to emerge from the study is that it seems that British and Egyptian 
females may have similar perceptions towards images of women in beauty product 
advertisements. When considering the decision to standardise or adapt advertising campaigns 
which use images of women, these results seem to support the argument for standardisation. 
However, important differences were discovered in key areas, the most significant being the 
perceived offensiveness or unacceptability of certain images. This indicates one of the 
potential risks of implementing standardised advertising strategies cross-culturally. In cases 
such as these, where the various markets under consideration have palpable cultural or 
religious differences, adaptation may be a more effective strategy.

Another interesting insight that emerged from this study is the apparent influence of age on 
the determination of preference. This reinforces the need for cosmetics firms to acknowledge 
the considerable influence of this demographic, and to therefore adapt advertising according 
to age as well as to other factors such as culture or nationality.

In conclusion the conventional use of images of very attractive women in beauty product 
advertising has been proved effective by the undeniable profitability of the global cosmetics 
industry. Literature reviewed in this study has attributed the success of using attractive 
models in advertising to the correlation between attractiveness and persuasiveness, and very 
attractive women were found to be most effectively used for advertising products marketed to 
enhance beauty. Certainly, data from this study indicated that Egyptian women appeared to 
prefer the image of a very attractive woman (Ad A) despite the same image’s perceived 
offensiveness to them. However, it seems that advertisements’ offensiveness does not 
necessarily deter consumers from purchasing the products in question, thus supporting the 
standardisation argument. Nevertheless, the long term image of a brand must be considered 
when designing advertising campaigns. Even if offensive advertising does not adversely 
affect sales, the long term image of the brand and its reputation may be negatively affected if 
offensive advertising campaigns are executed.

Additionally, the research findings indicate a desire in both countries for increased diversity 
in the images of women in beauty product advertising. Dove has already capitalised on this 
desire and the success of their campaign indicates the opportunities for the increased use of 
ordinary women in beauty product advertisements. Beauty products may also be successfully 
marketed by ordinary women depending on whether they are considered to be problem-
solving or enhancing. Finally, the risks of standardisation have been illustrated by the 
culturally disparate perceptions of offensiveness and unacceptability, thus suggesting the 
benefits of adaptation. However, further research is required to determine how beauty product 
advertising should be adapted and the extent to which this is financially viable.
References


