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Does size matter? An exploration of the role of body size on brand image perceptions

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to investigate the role of body size on female consumers' fashion brand image perceptions.

Design/methodology/approach – An experimental design was used whereby the model's body size in a fictitious advert was digitally manipulated to create four advertising images with an underweight, slender, average and obese model size (all other factors remained constant). Through an intercept survey of German female consumers, respondents were exposed to one of the four images, and asked questions pertaining to their brand image perceptions.

Findings – The findings suggest that for older consumers, model body size has no significant impact on their brand image perceptions. For younger consumers (18-25), there was some limited evidence of how a positive brand image affects when a slender model size is used, but there was no evidence that underweight models have a more positive impact on brand image.

Research limitations/implications – The sample was restricted to a single German city (Berlin) with a relatively small sample and, therefore, the generalisability of the findings may be limited. It would be interesting to repeat the study in different cultural contexts. Whilst this paper focussed on potential differences in perceptions between different age groups, future studies could consider other factors, such as fashion involvement or consumer personality on the impact of body size on brand image.

Practical implications – Given the potential link to low self-esteem and eating disorders, it is recommended that fashion brands cease using clinically underweight models. Brands targeting older consumers may benefit from using larger models.

Originality/value – There is limited research to date that looks at the role of body size on brand image, and this is one of the first studies to consider all non-product-related brand image associations, and how perceptions may differ between different age groups, with many previous studies relying on student samples.

Keywords Fashion marketing, Brand image, Brand personality, Body size, User imagery

Introduction

Increasingly the advertising and media industries are being critiqued for heavily promoting a thin ideal by using very thin (clinically underweight) models in their campaigns (Halliwell and Dittmar, 2004, Borland and Akram, 2007). Borland and Akram (2007) suggest that the average models' body size is more than 20% underweight. This provides a thin ideal which is essentially unattainable for most women (Sptizer et al, 1999, Borland and Akram, 2007) and as such has been associated with body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem and eating disorders. Indeed, the BMA (2000, p. 38) suggest

that “the media play a significant role in the aetiology of eating disorders”. Despite these criticisms the use of very slim models persists – although some brands, notably Dove and Bravissimo have moved to using ‘real’ women. Essentially brands argue that using larger models would have a negative impact on their brand image. Given thinness can be stereotypically associated with youthfulness, success, happiness and social acceptance (Evans, 2003, Boreland and Akram, 2007, Peat, 2008), whereas overweight is considered a negative characteristic (Agerup, 2011), thin models are used to enhance brand image. However, despite the fact that brands (and the media) argue that ‘thinness sells’ there is little empirical evidence to support this (Halliwell and Dittmar, 2004). Halliwell and Dittmar (2004) further suggest that often research in this area tends to confound attractiveness and weight – that is to say, often the ‘thin’ models used in empirical research are contrasted with less attractive larger models. This research therefore seeks to explore the impact of body size on brand image associations. It does so through an exploration of perceptions of fashion apparel advertising of German consumers, and in keeping with Halliwell and Dittmar (2004) utilises computer imaging software to enable different model sizes to be used, while keeping attractiveness constant. Although previous studies have explored the role of body size on fashion brand personality perceptions (Agerup, 2011) and advertising effectiveness (Halliwell and Dittmar, 2004), this is the first paper to explore German consumer perceptions. Germany is Europe’s largest clothing market with total sales of €61.20 billion in 2010 (Mintel, 2011) which makes the market highly attractive for fashion companies. The market is also an interesting context in which to explore this issue, given the major changes in the communication strategy of one of the most popular women’s magazines in Germany, Brigitte. In 2009 the magazine announced it would only use real women with average clothing sizes in its fashion editorials (The Guardian, 2009). Andreas Lebert, editor in chief of the magazine, claimed this was in response to reader’s complaints that ‘they had no connection with the women depicted in fashion features and no longer wanted to see protruding bones’ (The Guardian, 2009). However, following a 22% reduction in its subscriptions, it has recently reversed this decision (Daily Mail, 2012).

The study builds upon Agerup's (2011) research by considering the impact of body size on other aspects of brand image (beyond brand personality). More specifically it explores how non-product based attributes of brand image, namely user imagery, brand personality, price positioning and brand symbolism, are impacted by model body size, thus furthering our understanding of how body size might influence brand image perceptions. Furthermore, and in contrast to Agerup (2011), the study considers different age groups in response to Halliwell and Dittmar's (2004) call for more research on older women.

The paper begins by exploring the concept of body image, and goes on to consider the role of body image in advertising and brand image, drawing on self-concept theory. Hypotheses are developed, and the methodology explained. The results of the study are then presented, and the paper concludes with a discussion of the research implications, limitations, and future research directions.

Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Body image

The critique of the use of underweight models in fashion imagery essentially centres on the impact this has on the psychology of those repeatedly exposed to the images, and body image perceptions. Our body image is "the picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say, the way in which the body appears to ourselves" (Schilder, 1950, p.11). This body image plays an important role in social relationships because it actively affects our own behaviour, as well as self-esteem (Gleeson & Frith, 2006; Bailey & Ricciardelli, 2009). A number of authors have suggested that an individual's view of their body image can be influenced by media images where slim, young, successful women are idealised, while stereotypes of obese older figures are negative (see for example Halliwell and Dittmar, 2004; Prendergrast et al., 2002; Borland and Akram, 2007). In particular the thin imagery present in the fashion media may create issues of body dissatisfaction. Whilst there are various

forms of body dissatisfaction (Ogden, 2010), of greatest relevance here is the dissatisfaction which results from a discrepancy between an individual's 'self-perceived real and ideal body size' (Borland and Akram, 2007, p. 313). This negative affect on body image and body dissatisfaction has been linked with low self-esteem (Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001), depressive symptoms (Holsen et al., 2001), body-focused anxiety (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004, Koyuncu et al., 2010), dietary restraint (Markey & Markey, 2005; Forrest & Stuhldreher, 2007) and eating disorders, including anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa (Bruch, 1973; Stice & Shaw, 2002; Midlarsky & Nitzburg, 2008; Vocks et al., 2009). Thus, a negative body image, which can result from body dissatisfaction, represents a high risk factor for several forms of psychological dysfunction (Engeln-Maddox, 2006; Peat et al., 2008), especially in women. It should be noted Fenton et al, (2010) and Vocks et al (2009) highlight that although a relationship between body image disturbance and psychological dysfunction can be identified, the causative path is less clear – that is to say, a negative body image may be the result of low self-esteem or vice versa. However, research evidence from experimental studies does suggest that exposure to very thin models leads to short term decreases in body image (Grogan, Williams & Cronner, 1996, Groez, Levine and Murnen, 2002). It would seem that when women are exposed to a thin ideal which is essentially unattainable (Groez et al, 2002; Strahan et al, 2006) women may experience body dissatisfaction, which in turn causes the psychological dysfunction discussed above.

There is some evidence that the influence of body dissatisfaction on women's self-esteem decreases with age (Tiggemann and Lynch, 2001; Webster and Tiggemann, 2003). Webster and Tiggemann (2003) argue that older women are more experienced and stable in life, and therefore, cognitively reduce the pressure of fulfilling the ideal body image. Borland and Akram (2007) further argue that the societal demands for attractiveness lessen with age, and therefore women become less anxious about their body image. The evidence from those few studies which have explored older age groups, does suggest that body dissatisfaction is likely to be less for older women. For example, Borland and

Akram's (2007) qualitative study of women's attitudes towards media images found that body image issues appear to affect younger women more often and in more negative ways than older women, Further, they conclude that older women often felt that advertising images are unrealistic or irrelevant to their lives. Although Halliwell and Ditmar (2004) found little evidence of differences between older and younger women, the majority of their sample was under 35 years old, and thus as they suggest, it is still unclear whether negative effects continue throughout adulthood. Such differences may imply that the effectiveness of using different thinner models in fashion advertising may differ between different age groups in terms of creating the desired brand image. These issues are explored in the following section.

Body size and fashion advertising effectiveness

Given the potential negative effects of using very thin models, why do brands (and the media) continue to use them? Self-image congruence theory suggests that consumers prefer brands whose personality is congruent with their self-image (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). Of particular relevance here is the notion of ideal self-image – that is the image the individual aspires to. Given that fashion is one of the most expressive product categories in existence, fashion brands enable consumers to express their idealised selves through their brand choices. The thin models used in fashion advertising, can be seen as targets for upward social comparison (Englis et al, 1994; Bailey and Ricciadelli, 2009) as fashion models and celebrities depicted in media images are “assumed to embody current ideals of beauty and success” (Diedrichs and Lee, 2010, p. 219). Thus, it is argued that advertising images using thin models will have greater congruence with the ideal-self, and therefore will be more effective. Certainly there is some evidence to suggest that advertising approaches which are consistent with the ideal self-concept, produce a more favourable attitude toward the advertised brand, and are positively associated with purchase intention (Hong and Zinkhan, 1995). However, there is research evidence to suggest (Feldman, Feldman, & Goodman,

1988; Furnham & Radley, 1989; Furnham & Baguma, 1994) that as body sizes become progressively thinner or heavier, attractiveness ratings decrease – thus the very thin (underweight) models which are often used in fashion media, may in fact be considered as less ‘ideal’ than more moderate model sizes. In addition the impact of body size on advertising effectiveness is far from clear. Research by Halliwell and Dittmar (2004) found that whilst perceptions of model attractiveness do influence advertising effectiveness, there is no evidence to suggest that the use of thin models impacts advertising effectiveness – essentially as attractiveness ratings of thin vs average size models did not significantly differ. Borland and Akram (2007) found that for older women, using ‘normal’ sized models was believed to be more effective, although it should be noted that their study utilised three different advertisements with different models and different poses in each image, and thus did not directly test for the impact of body size. Although research by Agerup (2011) found that thin models were perceived to project greater ‘competence’ than larger models, across other personality dimensions thin models did not significantly impact brand personality perceptions. However, Agerup concludes that given the thin model is “best for communicating competence and equal to or better than anyone else at conveying all the other dimensions” that, therefore “there is nothing in the findings...that challenges the prevailing thin user imagery of the fashion industry” (op. cit., p. 497).

Advertising is a significant tool in creating and communicating brand identity (Gardner & Levy, 1955; De Chernatony & McDonald, 1992; Aaker & Biel, 1993; Keller, 1993; Riezebos, 2003). Thus the attributes that consumers associate with body size are likely to have implications for the ideal model body sizes that is used in fashion imagery. Evans (2003) suggests that thin figures may be associated with positive attributes such as happiness, social status or beauty, which would imply that women would also associate these attributes with brand image. Therefore, it could be argued that consumers’ brand associations depend on body sizes of portrayed models in fashion advertisements.

The terms brand image and brand personality are used interchangeably by Aaker (1997), although brand personality is viewed as the soft emotional side of brand image. Aaker (1997, p. 347) defines brand personality as the “set of human characteristics associated with a brand...”. These characteristics create strong emotional ties and differentiate the brand among its competitors (Fournier, 1998). In Keller’s view (1993, p. 3), brand image is defined as “...perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations...”. Keller (1993) suggests there are three major categories of association, namely, attributes, benefits and attitudes. Keller (1993) suggests that attitudes are in fact a function of the associated attributes and benefits, and therefore in considering brand image, this paper focuses on the first two categories – attributes and benefits. The brand attributes are “...those descriptive features that characterize a product or service” (Keller, 1993, p. 4). They relate to descriptive elements of a branded product and can be subdivided into intrinsic and extrinsic attributes (Riezebos, 2003). More specifically, intrinsic attributes comprise product-related features, and thus, represent physical core characteristics (Keller, 1993) whereas extrinsic attributes deal with external elements surrounding the product (De Chernatony & McDonald, 1992; Riezebos, 2003), and include price, packaging, user imagery and usage imagery (Keller, 1993). Given, in the context of fashion imagery an emphasis on non-product based attributes is of greatest relevance, only these types of attributes are considered. User and usage imagery can be formed “..indirectly through the depiction of the target market as communicated in brand advertising” (Keller, 1993, p. 4), and so are particularly relevant here. User imagery refers to the type of person who uses the product or service, and can be considered in terms of the personality of the user (e.g. sexy, youthful, fun), and evidence (Kressman et al, 2006) suggests that there is a strong connection between brand personality and the personality of perceived users. Keller (1993) suggests that price is an important attribute association, as consumers often form strong beliefs about the price and value of a brand. As highlighted earlier, there is some suggestion that thinner body sizes have more positive associations, and therefore using thinner models may create more positive brand attribute perceptions than those using larger models. For example, thinness has been associated with

attractiveness, happiness, having lots of friends, and success (Crandall, 1994, Greenleaf et al., 2006, Prendergast et al., 2002), whilst obesity has been associated with being unhappy and unlikeable (Crandall, 1994). Therefore, it seems logical that model body size may impact brand personality and price perceptions (given its association with success). However, studies such as Halliwell and Dittmar (2004) question whether body size does in fact impact assessments of attractiveness. Thus, the following research questions will be investigated:

RQ1a: Does the model body size depicted in fashion advertising influence consumers' perceptions of user imagery personality characteristics?;

RQ1b: Does the model body size depicted in fashion advertising influence consumers' perceptions of brand personality characteristics?;

RQ1c: Does the model body size depicted in fashion advertising influence consumer perceptions of the brand's price positioning?

The other category of brand image associations are brand benefits. These are the "personal value consumers attach to the product or service attributes" (Keller, 1993, p. 4). The functional and experiential benefits both derive from the intrinsic (product related) advantages, and thus are not considered here. The final form of benefit, as defined by Keller (1993, p.4) are symbolic benefits which are "... the more extrinsic advantages of product or service consumption" and satisfy social as well as psychological needs such as the desire for enhancing self-esteem (De Chernatony & McDonald, 1992). Additionally, consumers tend to prefer symbolic benefits that relate to their own self-concept (Ross, 1971; Escalas & Bettman, 2005), especially when products are sociably visible (Hughes, 1976; Keller, 1993) such as fashion apparel. Again, given the positive associations with thin body images, it may be that the symbolic benefits associated with a brand will be differ between advertisements using thinner as opposed to larger models. Thus:

RQ2a: Does the model body size depicted in fashion advertising influence consumer perceptions of brand symbolism?

As Halliwell and Ditmar (2004) highlight, it is important to consider the impact of model size for both older and younger women as there is evidence to suggest that older women may find both thin and average sized silhouettes as inspiring (Rand and Wright, 2000) and appear to be less affected by body dissatisfaction. Typically researchers in this area have relied upon student samples, and so in keeping with Halliwell and Ditmar's (2004) call for more research on older women, this study seeks to explore whether the influence of model size on brand image perceptions differs between older and younger women.

Thus, drawing on the brand image dimensions highlighted above, the following research questions will be explored:

RQ3a: Does the influence of model body size on perceptions of user imagery personality characteristics differ for younger and older consumers?

RQ3b: Does the influence of model body size on brand personality characteristics perceptions differ for younger and older consumers?

RQ3c: Does the influence of model body size on perceptions of the brand's price positioning differ for younger and older consumers?

RQ3d: Does the influence of model body size on consumer perceptions of brand symbolism differ for younger and older consumers?

Methodology

An experiment research strategy was chosen, as this enables the researcher to "measure the effect of explanatory variables or independent variables on a dependent variable while controlling for other variables that might confuse one's ability to make causal inferences" (Kinnear and Taylor, 1991, p. 267). Given this study seeks to explore the impact of model body size on brand image perceptions, an experimental design enabled the manipulation of the model body size, whilst keeping other factors constant.

Image stimulus

To explore brand image perceptions it was necessary to create an advertising image which could be manipulated to enable the body size of model to differ. To ensure that there were no pre conceived brand image perceptions, it was decided not to use advertising images from existing fashion brands,

but rather to create a hypothetical brand advertisement. The model's body size was manipulated to enable four different versions of the same advertising image – ranging from very skinny (clinically underweight), slender, normal and obese body silhouette. In contrast to Aagerup (2011) who used a single image to depict underweight and normal body shapes, this study used different images to capture clinically underweight and slender body sizes, as, given the prevalence of very thin imagery in fashion advertising, the core focus was to understand if, and how, this affects brand perceptions. Thompson and Gray's (1995) contour drawing scale functioned as a template to help manipulate the model's body silhouette. This approach of digitally manipulating photos to measure attitude effects has previously been used and validated (Lin & Kulik, 2002, Halliwell, & Dittmar, 2004, Aagerup, 2011). The model depicted in the advertisement image wore tight clothing (jeans and tight t-shirt, displaying a small amount of midriff) to ensure the body size was clearly visible. In addition to the model, a brand name (fictional) was added, and the phrase Paris 1981 to help ensure that this could not be confused with any existing brand. Apart from the model's body size, all other elements of the advertising image remained constant, including pose and background.

It was decided to measure the impact of different body sizes on brand image rather than advertising effectiveness, as the desirability of particular fashion styles may vary significantly between different age groups. Thus, it would be difficult to isolate body size effects as advertising effectiveness could be influenced by differences pertaining to fashion tastes among the different age groups.

In order to create a set of appropriate brand image adjectives to measure brand attributes and benefits, pre-test consumer interviews were conducted with seven German fashion consumers, aged between 18-65, using a snowball sampling method. Although brand image studies have typically used Aaker's (1997) Big Five personality dimensions (namely sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness), these dimensions might not be very descriptive for other cultures or specific categories (Austin et al., 2003). Indeed, Heine (2010) suggests that for luxury fashion brands these may not capture relevant personality characteristics. Although Aagerup (2011) utilised Aaker's traits in his study, as he comments, not all of these may reflect desirable brand personality characteristics – in particular he suggests (p. 497) that "... as ruggedness is comprised of the traits tough, rugged, western, masculine, and outdoorsy, it may constitute a poor fit for ladies fashion". Therefore, to overcome such limitations, this study conducted consumer interviews to generate brand characteristic adjectives that were relevant to the images employed in the final survey. Interviewees were shown each of the images (A, underweight; B, slender; C, normal; D, obese) and asked to identify which image they preferred. For their selected image, they were asked to explain

their preference, and then asked what characteristics they would associate with the brand, what they felt the brand symbolised, its value proposition and the type of person they felt the brand represented. This process was repeated for each of the images. From the interviews, the following words were used to describe the different brand image dimensions:

Brand user imagery	Brand personality	Symbolism
Successful; Confident; Happy; Attractive; Values quality; Often meets with friends; Loves to attend chic parties; Tends to stay at home in the evening; Of high social standing	Elegant; Bold; Young; Sexy; Sporty	Quality; Designer ; Status symbol

Survey instrument

Participants were randomly assigned a survey containing one of the four advertising images, and asked to indicate the extent to which they felt the brand exhibited/represented the attributes listed above, using a 5 point likert scale. For example, respondents were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) the extent to which they agreed “the brand appears sporty /bold/elegant/young/sexy”. Keller (1993) suggests that brand image is closely related to a consumer’s previous experience with a brand. Therefore a screening question was asked at the beginning of the survey, as to whether the respondents were familiar with the brand. As in fact, the brand was fictitious, respondents who suggested they were familiar with the brand were excluded from the analysis, in case they had confused the brand with an existing one and would therefore have preconceptions about it. Respondents were also asked questions related to their demographics (age, occupation, income).

Sample

Survey data were collected from female respondents in the German city of Berlin, using an intercept approach in seven different shopping locations (streets and malls) within the city between the hours of 12pm and 7pm. To ensure the different images were evenly distributed among respondents, the image shown was changed after every 5 respondents. In the final sample each advertisement image was seen by a similar number of respondents, ranging from 45 (Ad B) to 49 respondents (Ad C). 198 useable questionnaires were received from respondents between the ages of 18-65, with just fewer than 60% of the sample aged between 18 and 30, and a little over 40% of the sample aged 30-65.

Respondents were asked about their annual gross income. Of those that responded, approximately 40% had an annual income of less than €15,000, and 40% had an income of between €15,000 and €30,000. Compared with women's average annual gross wage in Germany of €34,332, this suggests that lower income groups are over represented in the sample in comparison with the overall population – presumably a function of the relatively young age profile of the respondents.

Reliability and Validity

To enable the research questions cited earlier to be investigated, the questionnaire included 19 items measured on an interval scale from 1 to 5 where 1 refers to “Strongly disagree” and 5 refers to “Strongly agree”. The reliability of the responses was evaluated through the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient method. The reliability score for all items was above 0.7 and further checks indicated that no item needed to be removed as all the Alpha scores when any item was removed were above 0.7.

The greatest potential threat to internal validity primarily related to the manipulation of the advertising image, In particular, it was important to establish that the images related to different body sizes, and that also the images were not noticeably digitally manipulated. From the interviews, all informants could identify differences in the model's body shape, and ranked all four images in the right order on Thompson and Gray's (1995) contour drawing scale. Further, only two out of seven of the interviewees identified the right advertising image (C) as the original, suggesting manipulation was not obvious. In the survey, respondents only saw one image, and thus, consistent with Aagerup (2011) this prevented respondents being able to infer the research question. External validity may be compromised given the study was limited to a single German city. Thus, the extent to which the results can be generalised across the German female population may be limited.

Results

The normality of the data was tested through the Kolmogorov Smirnov and Shapiro Wilk tests. The p-values for all variables and tests were extremely small indicating that the variables are not normally distributed (See Table 1) and therefore parametric statistical tests were excluded to test the hypotheses. The non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis one way analysis of variance by ranks test was, therefore, employed to enable differences in perceptions between the different advertising images to be explored. The means and standard deviations of the brand image dimensions are shown in Table 2.

<< Insert Table 1 and 2 about here >>

As can be seen from Table 3, in relation to non-product related brand attributes, no significant differences were found in perceptions of brand personality or brand user imagery across the different advertising images ($p > 0.05$). Thus, in relation to RQ1a and RQ1b we can conclude that the size of the model used in the advertising image does not significantly impact perceptions of the brand users' imagery, or of the brand personality. Brand price perceptions (RQ1c) displayed some differences. Pairwise comparisons (Table 4) found advertising images A (underweight model), and B (slender model) were perceived to represent a higher price point than image C (normal size) ($p=0.016$ and 0.061 respectively). No significant differences were found with respect to other image pairings.

<< Insert Tables 3 and 4 about here >>

With respect to RQ2 (Table 3), differences were found in perceptions relating to the quality and designer positioning of the brand. Pairwise comparisons (see Table 4 for mean ranks of significant variables) suggest that advertisement C (normal size) was found to have a lower brand quality perception than advertisement A (underweight model) ($p= 0.059$), although this difference was only of marginal significance. In addition advertisement A (underweight model) was significantly more likely to be believed to symbolise a designer brand in comparison with advertisement C (normal size) ($p=0.049$). No other pairings showed significant differences. In relation to the statement that the brand represented a status symbol no significant differences were found across the different advertising images.

In order to explore research questions RQ3a-RQ3d, the analysis was rerun separating the data into five age groups, broadly speaking into 10 year age groups, given Garner's (1997) assertion that for every decade of age, women tend to increase in weight by 5-10lbs, although weight declines slightly after the age of 60. All respondents over 55 were categorised in a single group, given the small number of respondents in this age group (14). Thus the respondents were divided into 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55 and over 55. As can be seen from Table 5 no significant differences were found in brand image attributes across any of the tested dimensions (user imagery personality, brand personality, brand value) for the three older age groups (36-45, 46-55, over 55). For the 26-35 age group, although no significant differences were found in relation to user imagery/brand personality or brand symbolism, there were significant differences in brand value perceptions (see Table 6 for

mean ranks), where image C (normal) was ranked significantly lower than image A (underweight). Interestingly, for the youngest age group, more differences were found in brand image perceptions between the different advertising images; the 18-25 age group rated image A (underweight) significantly more highly with respect to the user imagery characteristic of valuing quality (in relation to all other images), and although of marginal significance, image B (slender) was found to be perceived more 'confident' than image D (obese) ($p=0.053$). There was some evidence to suggest that this age group rated the brand personality characteristic of 'sexy' of image A more highly than image D ($p=0.067$), although again, this was of marginal significance. However, no significant differences were found in relation to brand price or brand symbolism perceptions: indeed, no significant differences were found in perceptions of brand symbolism across the different advertising images for any of the age groups.

<<Insert Table 5 and 6 about here>>

Research questions RQ3a-3d were further explored by comparing perceptions of the five age groups for each advertising image (see Table 7 for the results of the Kruskal-Wallis analysis, and Table 8 for the mean ranks of significant variables). With respect to image A (underweight), the youngest age group (18-25) rated the user imagery personality characteristic of 'of high social standing' significantly more highly than 36-45 year olds ($p=0.032$). With respect to image B, there were significant differences in perceptions of 'boldness' between the youngest age group and the 46-55 group, where the youngest age group rated the image as having a bolder personality ($p=0.019$). For image C the 46-55 age group rated the image significantly more highly in terms of the user imagery characteristic 'successful' than 36-45 year olds ($p=0.022$), but across all other brand image dimensions no differences were found between the age groups. Finally, with respect to the obese image (D), significant differences in the user imagery characteristics of confidence and attractiveness were found, with the oldest age group (over 55) rating confidence more highly than the two youngest age group (18-25, 26-35), ($p=0.011$ and 0.009 respectively), and attractiveness more highly than the youngest age group ($p=0.032$). A significant difference was also found for the brand personality characteristic of sexy, where again, the oldest age group (over 55) rated this more highly than the youngest ($p=0.014$). Similarly the oldest age group also rated image D as more 'bold' than 18-25 and 26-35 year olds ($p=0.040$ and 0.042 respectively). No significant differences were found in relation to brand symbolism or price perceptions.

<< Insert Table 7 about here >>

From the two sets of analysis pertaining to research questions RQ3a-RQ3d, the results appear to suggest that user imagery perceptions do differ for younger and older consumers (RQ3a), where younger consumers are more likely to rate the obese image lower. For the other age groups (25 and over) the size of the model appears to have little impact on user imagery perceptions. RQ3b asked whether the influence of model body size on brand personality characteristics differed for younger and older consumers. For most personality characteristics no differences were found, although the youngest age group (18-25) viewed the underweight image more favourably in terms of sexiness than the obese one, and older consumers had more positive perceptions of the personality characteristics 'bold' and 'sexy' for the obese image than 18-25 year olds. No clear evidence was found of differences in perceptions between older and younger consumers with respect to influence of model body size on brand value (RQ3c) or brand symbolism (RQ3d).

Discussion and Conclusion

The advertising and media industries and the fashion industry in particular have long been critiqued for using very thin (clinically underweight) models in their campaigns (Halliwell and Dittmar, 2004) due to the association with body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem and eating disorders. The industry has argued that 'thinness sells' to justify their continuing use of very thin models. The findings here appear to contest this assertion. By exploring the impact of body size on brand image perceptions using an experimental design, the results here suggest a very limited impact on brand image perceptions, and for older age groups (defined here as over 35) it would appear that body size has no significant impact on German consumers, and very little impact for 26-35 year olds. These results can perhaps be explained by drawing on previous studies (for example Webster and Tiggemann, 2003) which have argued that older women perceive less pressure to fulfil the ideal body image and that they are more confident with their bodies (Tiggemann and Lynch; 2001; Webster & Tiggemann, 2003). Further, Rand and Wright (2000) found that older women still perceive average-sized models as attractive and appealing. Thus, older women do not necessarily seek inspiration in skinny models (Borland & Akram, 2007). The results here suggest that for older target age groups, fashion brands could use a variety of body shapes without detriment to the brand image. Indeed, Borland and Akram (2007) recommend that fashion companies would benefit from addressing the older target group by offering a variety of body shapes in fashion advertisement campaigns because it would facilitate consumers 'to choose brands [...] more easily' (p. 324).

For the youngest age group investigated here (18-25) the results are less definitive. Differences were found with respect to two of the brand user imagery characteristics – namely ‘values quality’, and ‘confident’ although no significant differences were found with respect to the other seven characteristics. Furthermore, differences were found in relation to the brand personality characteristic ‘sexy’. Previous studies have found some evidence that younger age groups find thinner imagery to be more visually appealing (Borland and Akram, 2007) and Aagerup (2011) found that a thinner model is best for communicating ‘competence’ to young consumers. The results here, taken with those of previous studies, perhaps suggest that fashion brands which target a younger consumer may benefit from continuing to use slender models in their promotions. However, it should be noted that no significant differences were found in any pairwise comparisons between images A (clinically underweight) and B (slender), with the exception of the brand user imagery characteristic of ‘values quality’. This suggests that the brand image is unlikely to be damaged if brands ceased to use underweight models to promote their brands. Thus, the authors would strongly endorse recent moves to ban the use of underweight models, such as those introduced in Israel in 2013. Furthermore, the overall results suggest that where perceptions are influenced by body size, it is the ‘normal’ body size which performs worse, suggesting that fuller models could be used without damaging brand image, especially where the target is women over the age of 25.

The present study contributes to both the field of body image and brand image by investigating the impact of female consumers’ perceptions towards varying model body figures in fashion apparel advertisements on brand image. Whilst Aagerup (2011) investigated the impact of body size on brand perceptions, his study just explored a single dimension of brand image, namely brand personality, and focused on young consumers. Thus, this is the first study to consider all non-product based attributes of brand image, namely user imagery, brand personality, price positioning and brand symbolism, and thus enables a greater understanding of how body size may influence different components of brand image for fashion brands. Moreover, in contrast to previous studies, perceptions across a number of age groups were explored, enabling insights to be gained into the relationship between age and female consumers’ perceptions, and responds to Halliwell and Ditmar’s (2004) call for more research on older women. The results suggest that for young consumers (18-25) body size may hold greater influence, and highlights the need for further research on a wider range of age groups. Self-image congruence theory suggests that consumers prefer brands which are congruent with their self-image, or more specifically with their ideal-self (Hong and Zinkhan, 1995). The findings here suggest that this may not necessarily be the case. It could be that negative emotions (body dissatisfaction) created by using very thin models, militates

against the aspirational benefits of using very slender models. This may be accentuated by age, where very thin imagery may be seen as irrelevant, and contrary to industry perceptions, may not be considered 'ideal'.

From a methodological perspective, a detailed structure in regard to the experimental research strategy is provided in order to enable replication for future studies. In this context, four advertisement images were created in which the body sizes of the model represent the only changing variable.

Limitations

The present study faces a limitation on the generalisation of its findings as external validity is considered through a limited timeframe of three weeks and data collection in a single German city. Hence, the sample is not necessarily representative in terms of the whole research population. It would be interesting to expand the study with a larger sample size to include other regions within Germany, and indeed across different cultural contexts. Crandall (1994) suggests that attitudes towards fat people are influenced by culture, and thus future studies could extend this research by exploring different cultural contexts.

In contrast with previous studies perceptions of older consumers were explored, and the results suggest that older consumers may be less influenced by body size. However, a larger sample of older consumers, in particular in the 55+ range, would enable this to be further investigated. Whilst this study focused on the potential differences in perceptions between different age groups, future studies could consider other factors which might influence how body size impacts brand image perceptions. For example, the role of fashion involvement/consciousness, consumer personality or body size, could all be fruitful areas to explore. It could also be interesting to expand the work to consider male consumers. Much research in this area has focused on women, with limited research on male consumers (Elliott and Elliott, 2005). However, with increasing concerns about male eating disorders (Strother et al. 2012) research which explores the effects of male model body size could be timely.

Previous brand image studies have typically used Aaker's (1997) Big Five personality dimensions, but given concerns that these may not be relevant for fashion brands (Heine, 2010), this study used consumer interviews to generate appropriate brand characteristic adjectives. Future studies could build upon this approach, employing a larger and more representative sample to generate brand

characteristics which could be used to measure brand image dimensions to ensure that the attributes assessed are those valued by consumers for the particular type of product/service.

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Table 1: Results of normality tests

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Brand appears young	.289	187	.000	.724	187	.000
Brand appears bold	.253	187	.000	.888	187	.000
Brand appears elegant	.253	187	.000	.878	187	.000
Brand appears sexy	.329	187	.000	.798	187	.000
Brand appears sporty	.228	187	.000	.870	187	.000
Perception of brand value	.290	187	.000	.796	187	.000
Designer clothes	.263	187	.000	.869	187	.000
Represents status symbol	.198	187	.000	.906	187	.000
High quality	.294	187	.000	.859	187	.000
Women appears successful	.215	187	.000	.906	187	.000
Women appears confident	.261	187	.000	.852	187	.000
Women appears happy	.488	187	.000	.454	187	.000
Women appears attractive	.209	187	.000	.866	187	.000
attaches importance on quality	.208	187	.000	.899	187	.000
often meets friends	.217	187	.000	.872	187	.000
goes to chic parties	.223	187	.000	.882	187	.000
often stays at home	.394	187	.000	.638	187	.000

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Table 2: Descriptive statistics

	Mean	SD
User Imagery		
Successful	2.88	0.993
Confident	3.88	0.806
Happy	4.74	0.663
Attractive	3.78	0.885
Values Quality	3.33	0.952
Often meets with friends	3.71	0.892
Goes to chic parties	3.73	0.990
Tends to stay at home in the evening	1.42	0.685
Of high social standing	3.29	0.977
Brand Personality		
Young	4.26	0.754
Bold	3.35	1.151
Elegant	2.73	1.133
Sexy	3.94	0.943
Sporty	2.79	1.187
Brand Price	2.52	0.641
Symbolism		
High quality	3.53	0.908
Designer	3.03	1.180
Status symbol	2.99	1.201

Table 3: Kruskal-Wallis test results for differences in brand image perceptions between difference advertising images (total sample)

	p value
User Imagery	
Successful	0.102
Confident	0.077 ^a
Happy	0.510
Attractive	0.192
Values Quality	0.589
Often meets with friends	0.973
Goes to chic parties	0.434
Tends to stay at home in the evening	0.946
Of high social standing	0.246
Brand Personality	
Young	0.122
Bold	0.623
Elegant	0.745
Sexy	0.252
Sporty	0.342
Brand Price	0.013**
Symbolism	
High quality	0.029**
Designer	0.064*
Status symbol	0.247

^a Although the Kruskal Wallis suggested marginal differences between the groups, pairwise comparisons revealed no statistically significant differences between the images

** Significant at the 5% level

* Significant at the 10% level

Table 4: Mean ranks of significant brand image items

Advertising Image	A	B	C	D
Brand Price	107.25	103.39	77.37	92.84
Brand Symbolism				
High quality	105.82	105.04	79.23	90.77
Designer	107.70	98.30	79.66	94.86

Table 5: Kruskal-Wallis test results for differences in brand image perceptions between difference advertising images (A, B, C, D)

User Imagery	p value				
	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	55+
Successful	0.533	0.391	0.298	0.584	0.890
Confident	0.056*	0.065 ^a	0.992	0.784	0.091 ^a
Happy	0.593	0.146	0.453	0.509	0.609
Attractive	0.089 ^a	0.736	0.164	0.575	0.289
Values Quality	0.020**	0.302	0.687	0.921	0.338
Often meets with friends	0.726	0.859	0.851	0.062 ^a	0.304
Goes to chic parties	0.573	0.286	0.610	0.892	0.279
Tends to stay at home in the evening	0.960	0.816	0.873	0.679	0.637
Of high social standing	0.078 ^a	0.953	0.662	0.351	0.931
Brand Personality					
Young	0.752	0.338	0.298	0.117	0.324
Bold	0.725	0.064 ^a	0.282	0.308	0.083 ^a
Elegant	0.857	0.539	0.449	0.901	0.267
Sexy	0.075*	0.446	0.836	0.302	0.271
Sporty	0.927	0.578	0.108	0.413	0.589
Brand Price	0.134	0.037**	0.833	0.764	1.00
Brand Symbolism					
High Quality	0.082 ^a	0.298	0.679	0.894	0.720
Designer	0.073 ^a	0.167	0.868	0.352	0.476
Status Symbol	0.676	0.191	0.669	0.239	0.226

^a Although the Kruskal Wallis suggested marginal differences between the groups, pairwise comparisons revealed no statistically significant differences between the images.

** Significant at the 5% level

* Significant at the 10% level

Table 6: Mean ranks for significant brand image items between different age groups

Advertising image	A	B	C	D
User Imagery				
Confidence (18-25)	32.19	37.04	28.12	21.04
Values quality (18-25)	40.09	24.96	26.38	24.73
Brand Personality				
Sexy (18-25)	34.62	31.00	30.79	20.12
Brand Price (26-35)	39.00	37.97	24.33	37.44

Table 7: Kruskal-Wallis test results for differences in brand image perceptions between respondents aged 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 55+

Advertising Image	A	B	C	D
User Imagery Characteristic				
Successful	0.641	0.996	0.034**	0.647
Confident	0.927	0.743	0.900	0.012**
Happy	0.569	0.624	0.729	0.256
Attractive	0.818	0.919	0.171	0.021**
Values Quality	0.135	0.649	0.143	0.059 ^a
Often meets with friends	0.174	0.706	0.814	0.149
Goes to chic parties	0.375	0.959	0.836	0.111
Tends to stay at home in the evening	0.904	0.996	0.881	0.519
Of high social standing	0.029**	0.635	0.277	0.526
Brand Personality				
Young	0.467	0.347	0.584	0.113
Bold	0.396	0.005***	0.386	0.031**
Elegant	0.896	0.299	0.287	0.699
Sexy	0.406	0.382	0.831	0.012**
Sporty	0.632	0.094 ^a	0.532	0.919
Brand Price	0.721	0.775	0.764	0.639
Brand Symbolism				
High quality	0.574	0.692	0.864	0.343
Designer	0.703	0.787	0.515	0.110
Status symbol	0.520	0.488	0.854	0.089 ^a

^a Although the Kruskal Wallis suggested marginal differences between the groups, pairwise comparisons revealed no statistically significant differences between the images.

*** Significant at the 1% level

** Significant at the 5% level

* Significant at the 10% level

Table 8: Mean ranks for significant brand image items between different images

Advertising image	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	Over 55
User Imagery					
Successful (C)	23.82	25.56	18.00	36.90	-
Confident (D)	20.65	20.94	28.00	23.19	44.50
Attractive (D)	18.19	27.41	16.80	22.62	40.12
Of high social standing (A)	31.38	21.08	11.20	28.30	24.25
Brand Personality					
Bold (Image B)	14.38	27.53	11.88	32.31	23.92
Bold (Image D)	19.85	20.53	26.00	28.38	41.00
Sexy (Image D)	14.58	25.62	27.30	27.00	37.62