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The Role of Implicit Theories in Evaluations of 'Plus-Size' Advertising

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By examining plus-size female consumers, we demonstrate that not only objective body size, but also implicit beliefs about the malleability of one's size, affect attitudes toward a product advertised by a plus-size model. These effects are mediated by perceived similarity and arise only for body-relevant products.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The use of larger-sized models in advertising has become more popular in the wake of a substantial body of research documenting the negative effects of exposure to slim models on women's self-esteem (Richins 1991; Wan, Chattopadhyay, and Leboe 2013) and body-satisfaction (Grabe, Ward, and Hyde 2008; Groesz, Levine, and Murnen 2002). Recent research has examined the effectiveness of larger-sized models in beauty and fashion advertisements, largely concluding not only that fashion models do not need to comport to current thin standards to be effective (Martin, Veer, and Pervan 2007; D'Allesandro and Chitty 2011; Papies and Nicolaije 2012; Jansen and Paas 2014) but also that using average- or larger-sized models may be more socially responsible (Alessandro and Chitty 2011). Underlying much of this existing literature is the importance of perceived similarity and self-referencing in driving consumers' positive responses to larger-sized models. Yu et al. (2011), drawing on research connecting perceived similarity to perceived model attractiveness (Horton 2003), found that perceived similarity to the model mediated female participants' attitudes toward an advertised apparel brand. In the context of targeting plus-sized consumers, then, these findings suggest that larger-sized models should be especially appealing to plus-sized consumers, to the extent that the consumer is able to see herself in the model.

When evaluating their perceived similarity to the model, consumers may consider not only their objective body size, but also their subjective beliefs about the extent to which their body size may change in the future. Originally studied in the context of beliefs about intelligence, implicit theories about the malleability of one's attributes have recently been extended to beliefs about body size (Burnette 2010). Entity theorists perceive their body size as relatively fixed and unchanging, while incremental theorists believe their body size to be temporary and malleable. Drawing on the conceptualization of implicit theories, we argue that individuals sharing an objectively similar body size with a model may differ in their subjective mental representation of how similar or dissimilar they are to the model in the advertisement. Specifically, we hypothesize that entity theorists will perceive more similarity with models who are objectively similar in size, while incremental theorists, in line with their overarching self-improvement goals (Nussbaum and Dweck 2008), will perceive greater similarity between themselves and objectively thinner models, as these models represent a desired, and possible, future body size. We further hypothesize that these differences in similarity participations will lead to differences in attitudes towards the advertised product.

A pretest identified a model that was perceived to be overweight, but not very overweight, or obese. In Study 1, participants completed self-report height and weight measures and a body-specific implicit self-theory scale embedded within several unrelated measures. Participants were then presented with a print advertisement featuring this model in a shift dress and were asked to indicate how much they liked the choice of model for the advertisement, as well as their attitude toward the featured dress. Although all respondents reported liking the brand's choice of model, product evaluations were affected by the respondents' size and implicit self-theory. Among respondents who believed their body size could be changed (incremental theorists), obese respondents liked the product marginally more than did overweight respondents. However, among respondents who believed

their body size to be fixed (entity theorists), obese respondents liked the product significantly less than did overweight respondents. Study 2 introduced perceived similarity as a mediator of these effects, examined the body-relevance of the advertised product as a potential boundary condition by using a single ad to advertise either a dress (body-relevant) or shampoo (body-irrelevant), and added purchase intentions as a behavioral dependent variable. Replicating the results of Study 1, Study 2 found that product attitudes and purchase intentions varied as a function of both the respondents' body size and implicit self-theory. This relationship, in turn, was mediated by perceived similarity to the model. Among entity theorists, who believe that their body size is relatively fixed, perceived similarity to the model appears to largely depend on the objective similarity between the model and the consumer. However, incremental theorists, who believe their body size to be relatively malleable, appear to imagine themselves as thinner than they actually are, leading them to perceive similarity with the model when she has an objectively smaller body size. Additionally, the hypothesized effects were observed only when the advertised product was body-relevant. When the model's body size was not relevant to the product being advertised (e.g., shampoo), the evaluation of perceived similarity to the model was no longer dependent on objective body size and implicit self-theory, and, as a result, these factors did not affect product evaluations.

Our work contributes to the literature on model body size by suggesting that what is considered an obtainable body size will vary among female consumers according to their current size and their beliefs about the malleability of that body size. Future work should examine whether perceived similarity, generally, and the effects of objective body size and implicit self-theory, specifically, similarly affect men's responses to products advertised by male models of varying body sizes. As with female models, male models have traditionally conformed to a single body type. U.S. retailer Target has recently created a stir by using its first plus-sized male model to advertise products in the Big & Tall section of their website (Olya 2015). Additionally, a central question in the model body-size literature asks when consumers of all body types will be receptive to the use of plus-sized models. Future work should examine whether normal- and overweight consumers have equally positive responses to the use of larger-sized models in advertisements for non-body-relevant products.

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