

Examining the Influence of Ideal Body Types in Social Media Influencer Advertising: Impacts on Adult Male Consumer Behavior

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Background

Since the inception of mass media advertisement, advertisers have used individuals with the "ideal body type" to promote products or services (Richins, 1991 as cited in Lou & Tse, 2021). Recently, social media influencers (SMIs) have been proven to influence consumers' purchasing decisions, with physical attractiveness being a predominant factor in this decision-making process (Chetioui et al., 2020; Javed et al., 2022; Huang & Copeland, 2020). Existing literature discusses how and to what extent ideal body images portrayed in advertisements affect consumption behavior (e.g., Lou & Tse, 2021); however, the research has mainly focused on females, leaving a notable gap in the literature. With SMIs being prevalent in contemporary advertising practices, it is crucial to understand how influencer marketing featuring ideal body types influences male consumers' consumption behavior towards food and beverages in an effort to manage their appearance.

This concept paper aims to review the current literature and theoretical frameworks to address the following research question: How do SMIs with an "ideal" body affect food and beverage consumption behavior among adult Gen Z cisgender straight males? By investigating the effects of ideal body types portrayed by SMIs on male consumption behavior, this research seeks to understand the relationships between advertising, body image, and consumer decision-making toward their appearance management.

Body Image and Social Comparison

Body image is defined as "the picture we have in our minds of the size, shape and form of our bodies; and to our feelings concerning these characteristics and our constituent body parts" (Slade, 1994, p. 497). The perception of body image can be categorized into two states: negative body image and positive body image. Negative body image refers to "negative thoughts and feelings" one associates with the body, while positive body image is the opposite, positive thoughts and feelings one associates with the body (Wood et al., 1996). Body image can be influenced by external factors, such as the media, which can shape one's perception of beauty standards and attractiveness (Tort-Nasarre et al., 2021). Western societies promote a muscular and lean physique, known as "mesomorphic ideas" for males (Tiggemann, 2002 as cited in Fioravanti et al., 2022). The sociocultural theory of body dissatisfaction postulates that body image is influenced by sociocultural factors, with media being the primary influence (Tiggemann, 2002 as cited in Fioravanti et al., 2022). These sociocultural factors influence individuals to internalize standards for physical appearance, such as the mesomorphic ideal, and engage in appearance-based social comparisons, making them feel dissatisfied with their appearance (Tiggemann, 2002 as cited in Fioravanti et al., 2022). According to the social comparison theory (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2020), when we engage in appearance-based

social comparison, we tend to compare our bodies to those of others. There are two types of social comparison: upward and downward. Upward comparison is when individuals compare themselves to others they perceive as better than them, while downward comparison is when individuals compare themselves to others whom they perceive as worse than them (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2020). Fioravanti (2022) concluded that exposure to ideal body media is a primary trigger for upward comparison, leading to body image disturbances.

Influence of SMIs on Consumption Behavior and Related Theories

In recent years, social media has become one of the most popular media outlets, especially among the Gen Z population. According to a study by the Pew Research Center, U.S. Gen Zs exhibit higher engagement levels on various platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, Pinterest, BeReal, Snapchat, YouTube, and Reddit, among others, compared to older generations (Sidoti et al., 2024). This trend has prompted marketers to leverage the widespread use of social media for customer engagement and communication (Bianchi et al., 2017). While celebrities were initially prominent in social media advertising, marketers have shifted towards utilizing SMIs as a key component of their marketing strategies, a practice known as influencer marketing (Vrontis et al., 2021). SMIs, often regarded as opinion leaders and/or product category experts, shape perceptions of products/services due to their perceived likability and credibility (Lyons & Henderson, 2005) and possess the ability to sway followers' purchasing decisions (Godey et al., 2016). In a recent study, Pasigpasigan et al. (2024) found that SMIs' perceived knowledge, trustworthiness, and physical attractiveness strongly influenced consumers to purchase collagen drinks that were promoted by SMIs. This finding aligns with that of Mills and Aronson (1965), who found that in information distribution, SMIs' physical attractiveness significantly impacts their persuasion ability. The physical attractiveness of the SMIs serves as a valuable asset in social influence tactics (Mills & Aronson, 1965).

Underpinning Theoretical Frameworks

Parasocial interaction theory (Rubin & McHugh, 1987), is explained as “a media user’s one-sided pseudo-interpersonal relationship with media characters” (Lin et al., 2021, p. 61). This phenomenon particularly resonates with SMIs, who are perceived as more relatable than traditional celebrities and often correspond with self-congruity principles (Lin et al., 2021). The self-congruity theory postulates that consumers tend to strengthen their self-image by selecting brands that reflect their identity and are aligned with their self-concepts (Sung & Choi, 2012). Building upon this notion, the actual self-congruity theory suggests that individuals prefer brand images parallel with their actual selves to preserve their identity (Sirgy et al., 2000). Conversely, the ideal self-congruity theory proposes that consumers may seek to improve their identity by adopting aspirational brand images that reflect their ideal selves (Hong & Zinkhan, 1995). Compared to traditional celebrity figures, SMIs convey a sense of authenticity, approachability, and normalcy, fostering a perception of similarity with viewers that resonates with the self-congruity effect (Chapple & Cownie, 2017; Schouten et al., 2020).

Future Research

While existing research has extensively explored the influence of ideal body types in advertisements on consumer behavior, particularly focusing on females, there remains a

significant gap in the literature regarding the impact on male consumers. Future research topics could explore cross-cultural differences in male consumers' responses to ideal body representations by SMIs. Additionally, it would be interesting to broaden the scope of this research to encompass other categories of products and services commonly promoted on social media platforms. By addressing these research avenues, scholars can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of influencer marketing featuring ideal body types on male consumers' consumption behavior, thus informing marketing strategies and promoting healthier representations of body image in advertising.

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