

# The Spillover Effects of Overweight Models in Food and Fashion Advertising

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## Abstract

Obesity is a leading health crisis in the United States, however, marketers have done little to understand how it can affect marketplace phenomena outside of food choice behavior and customer service. Applying concepts and potential outcomes associated with a “weight bias,” we investigate the effect this bias may have on the brand and product for which an overweight person is used within a marketing communications tactic (advertising). We bridge this gap and provide initial empirical insights into how the brand endorsers body type can “spillover” into brand attitudes, unrelated brand attributes, and product quality ratings. This study should encourage further inquiry into how endorser body type can potentially undermine marketing program goals, particularly in the diet or “plus size” target groups for new or unfamiliar brands.

Research suggests that strong prejudices exist towards the obese and that it is socially acceptable to express negative attitudes towards overweight individuals (Brochu & Morrison 2007, Crandall 1994). Specifically, obese and overweight individuals are subject to a “weight bias” that is a relatively accepted form of modern prejudice (Brownell 2005). People also tend to have consistent anti-fat attitudes (Morrison & O’Connor 1999) that affects their judgments of overweight people in a variety of contexts.

Using a controlled experiment, this study tested the spillover effects of obesity in the context of food (snack bar) and fashion (purse) advertising. The experiment consisted of a 3 (body image: thin, overweight, no model) x 2 (product type: food vs. fashion) factorial design. Brand attitudes, brand attribute ratings, and product quality perceptions were the main dependent variables. For each product type, participants were asked to respond to statements about seven of the product’s important attributes.

A series of one-way ANOVAs on the dependent variables of purchase interest, brand attitude, and perceived product quality indicated differences between the body types in almost every instance. In the fashion category, the use of the overweight model resulted in less favorable brand attitudes than the thin model ad ( $p < .01$ ), and the spillover effect of the overweight model is present such that participants rated the product to have lower quality ( $p < .01$ ). In both cases, the control ad did not produce a significantly different rating than either treatment. This suggests a neutral

response to the control ads, but a stark difference between using a thin or overweight model. No differences in purchase interest were observed for the purse.

For the food advertisement, a similar pattern emerged, whereby the ad featuring the overweight model was rated much lower in product quality ( $p < .01$ ) and brand attitude ( $p < .01$ ) than both the ad featuring the thin model and the control ad. Purchase interest was also suppressed by the overweight model.

Only three of the food attributes were affected by the body type of the model: healthy, nutritious, and caloric estimate. In each case, only exposure to the thin and overweight models produced significant differences. Given the importance of these three attributes in the food category (and their relatedness to each other), this finding should be a warning to diet food marketers. Analyzing the purse advertisements, five of the attributes are rated lower for the overweight model, compared to the thin model and the control: product warranty, quality of the materials, construction, durability and fashion. Compared to the food attributes, these cast a wider net of attribute characteristics that the marketer may not have previously considered being affected by an endorser.

Further, we found that the influence of model body type on product quality is fully mediated by brand attitudes for both the fashion product ( $\beta = -.61$ , 95% CI = -1.01, -.27) and the food product ( $\beta = -2.75$ , 95% CI = -4.51, -1.24). Anti-fat attitudes moderated the model only for the fashion product. This suggests that anti-fat attitudes are more influential for symbolic or expensive products, compared with those that are more functional and private in nature.

Clearly, stigmas towards overweight persons deserve more attention in the marketing literature. This study should encourage more research in this domain and hopefully help researchers consider other implications and contexts of body image biases.

## References

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**Keywords:** *obesity, spill-over, brand attitudes, weight bias, advertising, models,*

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and Practitioners:** This research should inform practitioners of the influence model body size can have on consumer evaluation of product attributes.

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