

Brief report

Deconstructing 'real' women:

Young women's readings of advertising images of 'plus-size' models in the UK

Authors

Katie Beale, University of the West of England, UK.

Helen Malson, University of the West of England, UK.

Irmgard Tischner, University of the West of England, UK.

Abstract

Critical feminist researchers and others have amply elucidated the perniciousness of contemporary Western beauty ideals and, particularly, the near-ubiquitous idealisations of slenderness. In this context the advent of media images featuring 'plus-size' models has been rightly heralded as a welcome challenge to this hegemony. Yet little attention has been given to women's interpretations of these images. In this brief report we outline a preliminary exploration of young women's views about advertising images featuring 'plus-size' models in the UK. We used a discourse analytic method to analyse 35 young women's responses to a qualitative questionnaire asking for their views and feelings about three adverts featuring 'plus-size' models. Our analysis suggests that, while the models were positively construed, participants also drew on distinctly conservative notions of femininity such that romanticised constructions of a 'plus-sized', traditional and domestic femininity were contrasted with a highly pejorative framing of 'stick thin' women as vain, vindictive and self-obsessed. Our analysis thus indicates how representations of women focusing on

body weight and shape can, even when reclaiming 'fat' or 'plus-size' bodies, mobilise derogatory and constricting rather than empowering constructions of femininity.

Keywords

'plus-size' models, media images, young women, discourse analysis.

Corresponding author

Helen Malson, Dept of Health and Social Sciences, University of the West of England,
Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, BS16 1QY. UK.

Helen.Malson@uwe.ac.uk

Introduction

Critical feminist scholars have now thoroughly critiqued cultural idealisations of female thinness and notions of gendered beauty (Blood, 2005; Malson, 1998; Orbach, 1993). These critiques illustrate, amongst other things, how culturally dominant body 'ideals' are imbricated in mobilising girls' and women's 'eating disordered' subjectivities and practices and in the discursive production of women's often distressed and distressing body-management practices more broadly (Bordo, 2003; Malson & Burns, 2009; Orbach, 1993; Saukko, 2008). A large body of experimental research similarly suggests that exposure to idealised media images of thin female bodies can result in increased body dissatisfaction (Halliwell, 2013; Harrison 2000) and may have a deleterious impact on girls' and women's psychological (and physical) well-being (Hawkins, Richards, Granley & Stein, 2004; Groeez, Levine & Mumen, 2002).

As Blood (2005; see also Coleman, 2008) notes, these experimental and critical feminist studies are at odds with one another in terms of their epistemological frameworks and their theorisations of bodies, subjectivities, images, and causality. However, they also clearly converge in problematising the near-ubiquitous 'thin ideal' promulgated in the media and elsewhere. The *Dove* 'Real Beauty' campaign, launched in the UK in 2004, can be viewed as a response to such critiques: its self-proclaimed aims are to feature 'real women with real bodies and real curves', 'to debunk the stereotype that only thin is beautiful' and to thus enhance girls' and women's well-being and self-confidence (Unilever, 2015). Since 2004, the now world-wide campaign has developed to include various studies, films and interventions as well as product promotions aimed, it says, at challenging the 'narrow' and 'unrealistic' 'stereotypical norms of beauty' (Unilever, 2015). It has also evolved over the intervening

years to include adverts featuring a greater diversity of women and challenging other cultural beauty ideals such as youth.

The Dove campaign has attracted various criticisms. Media critics, for example, have questioned the campaign's integrity, pointing to the fact that the *Dove* brand is owned by Unilever which also produces skin lightening products and 'diet' products and owns brands such as *Lynx* that use distinctly stereotyped images of women in their marketing (Lee, 2008; Nutley, 2010). Other commentators (e.g. Pozner, 2005) have argued that, as product promotions, Dove advertisements themselves inevitably work by insinuating that women's bodies are flawed and require cosmetic 'solutions' (see also Gill, 2007). More frequently, however, the campaign has been favourably received in the media (e.g. Vega, 2013; Young, 2013) and elsewhere as a welcome challenge to the hegemony of a monolithic, oppressive and largely unattainable beauty 'ideal'. Yet, while there is some research suggesting that viewing images of average- and plus-size models is associated with positive body image and that there is some dissatisfaction with the limited range of body sizes featured in advertising (Diedrichs & Lee, 2011; Schoolar, 2008), there are few qualitative studies of how images of 'plus-size' models are interpreted by women. In this brief report we therefore outline a discourse analytic exploration of young women's views about images of 'plus-size' women featured in the Real Beauty advertising campaign in the UK.

Method

A qualitative online survey was designed to garner women's views about images of 'plus-size' models. 35 women completed the survey. Participants were all psychology undergraduates at a British university and were recruited through a participant pool system

as part of their course credit requirements. 25 participants self-identified as White British, one as Black British, one as Black Caribbean/White European, four as Chinese, one as Romanian, one as African/Nigerian, one as Portuguese and one as White Other. Their ages ranged from 18 to 26 years with a mean age of 21.1 years.

Approval for the study was granted by the university's faculty ethics committee. All participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the nature and aims of the study and asked to provide written consent. An email was then sent containing a link to an online survey in which participants were shown three *Real Beauty* advertising images¹ and then asked nine open-ended questions about the *Real Beauty* campaign and the images of women featured in the advertisements, for instance: What do you think about the women in these images? How do the images make you feel? What kinds of women are featured in the adverts? Participants' responses varied considerably in both length and depth with some only a few words long and others engaged in discussions of one or two paragraphs. Participants' responses were collated, coded into themes and subthemes and then analysed qualitatively, using critical discourse analysis (Willig, 2013) to explore the ways in which our participants read these images.

Analysis

In talking about the *advertising* campaign and the images we asked about, our participants expressed both praise and criticisms. For example, some participants commented critically on the limited representation of women from ethnic minorities and on the exclusion of women with visible disabilities in the advertisements. In general, however, the women featured in the adverts were very positively construed and in the analysis that follows we

focus on explicating these prominent constructions of 'plus-size' models and on an obverse negative construction of 'stick thin' women with whom they were contrasted.

Perhaps not surprisingly the 'plus-size' models were repeatedly construed by our participants as 'like normal women', and as looking similar to participants themselves. For example,

The women featured in these adverts look like normal women. They represent the general public as they are all different ages, some may be mothers and some are older. (P5)

I feel happy because I'm not stick thin and can relate to these models much more than I can to the ones in the media who are size 0. (P28)

No unrealistic thin girls. Relate to. (P25)

Thus, in contrast with prevalent 'unrealistic' mainstream images of idealised thin women, these images of women were framed as 'normal' and as images to which participants could relate. P28, for instance, writes that she can 'relate to these models' and that she 'feel[s] happy' viewing the images, implying too perhaps that she feels unhappy viewing images of 'size 0' models. Significantly too, the women featured in these images were also almost invariably construed positively. For instance,

It [the advert] shows a variety of women all of whom seem approachable and un-intimidating. They all seem friendly as they are all smiling and happy. (P5)

I think all of the women look beautiful and all with unique shapes and size. I also think they are incredibly brave and amazing for having the confidence to do the campaign. (P18)

I think that they are 'womanly', they have curves in all the right places for their shapes and sizes...I feel like the women in the adverts are extremely confident and aware of their own bodies. (P8)

Our participants thus construed the models not only as 'normal' but as beautiful, happy, friendly and confident; constructions that differ conspicuously from those found elsewhere where women who 'fail' to conform to a rigorously policed 'thin ideal' are denigrated as unattractive, unhealthy, undisciplined, unfeminine and unhappy (Bordo, 2003; Lebesco, 2009; Meleo-Erwin, 2012; Tischner, 2013; Tischner & Malson, 2008; Weber, 2012).

Noticeably, here too, there was a prominent emphasis on the models having 'curves in all the right places' and a concomitant construction of them as 'womanly', perhaps indicating too that not all 'plus-size' female bodies would be viewed so favourably (see also Gill, 2007).

In the extract below this construction of the models' bodies as 'womanly' is extended beyond physical characteristics to personality, demeanour and life circumstances. Asked to describe the women featured in these adverts, participants wrote:

Works hard at job or being mum at home. Doesn't care what she looks like. Scars from childbirth seen as reminder of beautiful children rather than flaw. Go to when in trouble. (P13)

A woman whose heart is pure, who loves genuinely, is soft spoken but opinionated, ... one who can love her body for what it is. One who is able to take care of the household when her husband is at work. As long as she's confident and comfortable within her own skin, she is a real woman regardless of what society says. (P15)

In these extracts the models are clearly construed in ostensibly positive terms as hard-working, dependable, loving, caring and confident 'regardless of what society says'. This woman does not conform to the thin ideal but 'love[s] her body for what it is' while she gets on with her life. On the face of it, our participants have interpreted the images as very positive representations of larger or average-sized 'real women'. Equally obvious, though, is the fact that these adverts were read as images of a distinctly traditional and domestic femininity: of a woman who, while she might have a job or be opinionated and confident, is nevertheless defined by her 'pure' heart and by (very competently) caring for her husband and children. The perceived 'realness' of these 'real women' appears then not simply as a perception that these are representations of 'ordinary' female bodies that many women have. Rather the adverts, perhaps surprisingly, seem to mobilise traditional gender ideologies (Sayers, 1982) whereby a woman's 'realness' is constituted by her imagined conformity to the morally-loaded and romanticised construction of a domestic and maternal femininity that is signified by her 'larger', 'curvaceous' body.

Equally surprising, in our view, was the way in which participants contrasted 'plus-size' models with their 'stick thin' counterparts. In writing about what they considered to be opposite of the women in the *Real Beauty* adverts, our participants portrayed 'size 0 models', in extremely negative terms.

Stick thin models with no curves. No boobs or bum. Covered in makeup, fake and plastic. (P40)

Someone whose heart is to cheat, deceit, lies and chases after material things and wealth ... they follow strict dieting rules; have no time for family chasing after 'beauty'. They aren't happy. (P15)

Self obsessed vindictive so called women who prey on the larger, destroying their self esteem only so they can feel better about their own 'perfect' selves. (P17)

Thus, participants repeatedly articulated a damning construction of thin women in which thin female bodies were construed not so much as perfect, beautiful or signifiers of self-discipline or moral virtue (c.f. Bordo, 2003; Malson, 1998) but as 'fake', unattractive and associated with a host of morally-loaded, negative personal attributes. In a surprising (and in some ways very troubling) reversal of culturally dominant postfeminist and neoliberal values, a concern with body-weight, diets, beauty, material wealth and self-improvement (see e.g. Arthurs, 2003; Gill, 2008) are forcefully condemned and contrasted with the moral worth of larger women who have 'time for family'

Conclusions

In this brief report we have sought to outline the key findings from our investigation of how young women make sense of images of plus-size models, specifically those featured in three of Dove's *Real Beauty* advertisements. As noted above, our participants viewed these images very favourably. They were, they claimed, happy viewing the images and construed the women in the adverts not only as 'normal' and 'beautiful' but also as 'real' women who they imagined to be happy, confident and caring. Problematically, however, these images appeared to elicit, at least among our participants, a quite limited and limiting version of 'women' which seems to hark back to a pre-feminist fantasy of a restricted, domestic femininity (see Ussher, 1997), an image which is at odds with the *advertising* campaign's overt aims of empowering girls and women (see Unilever, 2015). Constructions of 'stick thin models' were equally problematic in disparaging thin women via the familiar sexist stereotype of a beautiful but vain and vindictive woman. Participants' responses clearly suggest a disruption of the hegemonic thin ideal but the reclaiming of 'fat' or 'plus-size' bodies, as expressed in these adverts, appears not so much as a lessening of the regulatory impact of 'beauty' or a widening of what counts as 'beauty' (both of which are much needed) than as a semiotic reversal of fat/thin women (see also Probyn, 2008) that both demonises thin women and retains body weight/shape as a central index of women's worth which in turn is indexed to heteropatriarchy norms. The construction of 'plus-size' women as 'real' and 'feminine' may, in part, represent a useful countermand to hegemonic beauty ideals but the construction of thin women as inauthentic, self-obsessed and heartless is clearly not and perhaps points to another dilemmatic or 'impossible space', like those

outlined by Griffin et al. (2012), created here between hegemonic beauty ideals and the alternative constructions outlined above: slimness becomes both a necessary criterion of aesthetically- and morally-valued femininity and a grounds for its invalidation.

Of course, our participant group consisted of young and predominantly white women studying Psychology at a university in the UK and others may read these images differently. Further research is required to assess the extent to which these interpretations are shared by other women with different demographic attributes and in different cultural contexts. Similarly, our participants' readings of the adverts might be particular to the characteristics of the *Real Beauty* adverts we chose and/or to the fact that these are *advertising* images. It would be useful to explore interpretations of a wider range of advertisements featuring 'plus-size' models (including, for example, images from clothing catalogues) and images from other sources such as fat acceptance campaigns.

In conclusion, we would suggest our findings indicate some issues requiring further consideration. The advertising images featuring plus-size models clearly disrupted cultural denigrations of fatness and idealisations of thinness and provided an ostensibly positive framing of larger women which our participants viewed favourably. However, the reframing of fat/thin women in terms of a dichotomy of sexist stereotypes - a 'curvaceous' romanticised domestic femininity versus a self-obsessed and heartless 'skinny' woman - as articulated by our participants, is also clearly problematic and, we would argue, indicates the importance of attending to the dominant cultural lenses through which an image is viewed. In promoting positive images of women who do not conform to society's highly restricted beauty ideals we need perhaps to consider further the complexities of reading as

an active process (see Coleman, 2008) if we are to mobilise more resistant and empowering interpretations of women of any size.

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Notes

1. The three images were taken from Robertson (2013), Morgan (2008) and McLeod (2004)

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Biographical Notes

Katie Beale is a recent psychology graduate of the University of the West of England, Bristol (UK). Her research interests are in advertising and media representations of gender and sexualities. She is an honorary assistant psychologist at North Bristol Trust and is intending to pursue a post graduate career in Psychology.

Helen Malson is an Associate Professor of Social Psychology at the University of the West of England. Her research focuses on post-structuralist feminist explorations of gendered subjectivity, particularly issues around 'eating disorders' and eating disorder interventions. Her publications include *The thin woman: Feminism, post-structuralism and the social psychology of anorexia nervosa* (Routledge, 1998) and, with Maree Burns, *Critical feminist approaches to eating dis/orders* (Routledge, 2009).

Irmgard Tischner is a senior lecturer in social psychology at the University of the West of England. Focusing on poststructuralist, feminist and critical psychological approaches, her research interests include issues around embodiment and subjectivity, particularly in relation to (gendered) discourses of body size, health and physical activity in contemporary western industrialised societies, as well as gendered issues of appearance and leadership in business and politics. Her publications include *Fat lives: A feminist psychological exploration* (Routledge, 2012).