Research Proposal

How have print fashion advertisements affected the purchasing decisions of U.S. women between the ages of 18-30 since 2005?

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Section One- The Problem

Introduction

Fashion advertisements are everywhere. They greet the eye whenever one looks upon a magazine, television, billboards or the Internet. People see these advertisements several times each day, yet their actual effect on what consumers decide to purchase while shopping is unknown. *How have print fashion advertisements affected the purchasing decisions of U.S. women between the ages of 18-30 since 2005?*

The fashion industry is a multi-billion dollar industry that has a huge impact on daily life. Not only is the industry seen in the clothing people wear, but also in advertisements everywhere. Clothing is an elastic good and sales are expected to increase with advertising. The total sales of clothing are expected to rise with a promotion strategy and companies in the clothing industry want to make money—increasing market share means more money (Fadiga at el. 2005). The increase in market share can be in part attributed to a promotion strategy, or marketing campaign so it is expected that clothing companies flood the media with as many pictures and brand references as possible. If people see these fashion advertisements everywhere, everyday, they must cause some effect.

Social Issue

Fashion advertisements, in their vast quantity, have become a social issue over the past decade. Fashion advertisements are unreal and impractical depictions of women and they have an impact on the way women live their lives and make their purchasing decisions. In Jennifer Aubrey's research in sexually objectifying media, she examines sexual objectification of women in the media and how it affects the women that consume it. To

achieve sexual attractiveness today, one must fit the thin ideal (Aubrey 2006). This thin ideal is something society is witness to everyday as it is seen by the many lives that revolve around trying to look thin and attractive to others. Some people strive for the "thin ideal" by exercising religiously or engaging in unbelievably strict and outrageous diets. It is natural to be thin as a result of being healthy, but are the images seen in fashion advertisements really healthy depictions of the female form?

Frith *et al.*'s study results demonstrate the contrary. She explains that the accord in research is that unreasonable expectations are created by advertisements due to the fake yet deemed 'desirable' bodies seen in these ads (Frith et al. 2005). The authors cited Berger (1972) in adding that the feminist argument of a patriarchal media is a source for the depiction of women in ads. In an experiment by Frith *et al.* comparing women's magazine advertising across cultures, the race most often portrayed as sexual was Caucasian. The American culture has been overexposed to sexuality in advertising. Sex in advertising is commonplace in the American culture and Americans are desensitized to sexuality in advertising. Sex in advertising is merely something to be expected. Frith *et al.* cited Greer (1999) in saying that advertisements are a way to see what a culture considers 'beautiful' because advertisers generally aim to convey beauty in their creations. If this is true, the sexual images portrayed in American advertising are the representation of the American beauty ideal.

Insufficient Research in this Area

The effects of fashion advertisements on purchasing decisions need to be studied because research is insufficient in this area. Not much thought is given to advertising because it is consumed in such high volumes, so its meanings and effects are usually

overlooked (Stankiewicz 2008). Advertising is something that is unconsciously consumed all day long without much thought, and consuming without knowledge is a dangerous practice. Much of the research that has been done with fashion print ads pertains largely to sexuality, victimization of women, feminism, beauty, weight, body image, self-esteem, and brand recall. Not much work has been done to move past these psychological and image effects to see if the ads are actually working and affecting buying decisions based on content.

Significance of Study

This study would be highly significant for the future. The results will help with marketing research about how customers (women 18-30) respond to advertisements. The results of the study will help make women aware of the ways women often react and are affected by fashion advertisements, so they will be able to think more deeply before being influenced by ads. Stankiewicz *et al.* (2008) cites Kilbourne (when she describes today's advertising in a very explicable way):

> Advertisers like to tell parents that they can always turn off the TV to protect their kids from any of the negative impact of advertising. This is like telling us that we can protect our children from air pollution by making sure they never breathe. Advertising is our environment. We swim in it as fish swim in water. We cannot escape it…advertising's messages are inside our intimate relationships, our homes, our hearts, our heads. (57-58)

This utilizes imagery to explain the large part advertising has in American society. Stankiewicz *et al.* (2008) also say that people judge desirability and normality through what they see in advertisements, which shows how highly people value what they see in

advertisements. This is significant in what this investigation is trying to uncover. When people are trying to decide what to buy and what to wear, they want to look *normal* and *desirable*. If advertisements provide the gauge to show this to people, they must have great significance.

Shiela Reaves *et al.* conducted an investigation looking at the digital manipulation of fashion models. They started their article explaining that the thin ideal presented in fashion advertisements has many effects on women including reduced body satisfaction, increased self-consciousness, and reduced self-esteem (Reavel et al. 2009). This is nothing new, but gives more support that the fashion advertisements people consume are more than meets the eye. These harmful effects need attention drawn to them for advertisement consumers. Women need to know the potential risks they face, along with purchasing decisions, and this further demonstrates why this study is important.

Literature Review

Upon studying literature on the subject of fashion advertising, there is a great deal of important information from scholars. There were four prevailing themes that arose through the review of literature, some of which have already been introduced in this investigation. This section will expand on these themes: 1) women as sex objects, 2) advertisements create unrealistic standards, 3) psychological effects of advertisements, and 4) prior research has been focused on the women in the advertisements rather than the clothing on the women.

Women as Sex Objects

Sex in advertisements is a factor in this investigation because what women choose to wear is a result of how they want to be perceived. If a woman wants to look sexy, it is

likely that her purchasing decisions will result in buying clothing that is advertised sexually. Julie M. Stankiewicz *et al.* studied how women are seen as sex objects in print ads and her research reiterates how female sexuality sells products and is often used in advertising (2008). This idea has come across as a dominant focus in this review of literature: sex sells. In Western culture, this is true, so it is not surprising that this research found that women are shown as sex objects in one of two ads (Stankiewicz 2008). The findings from the study of Katherine Frith *et al.* (2005) are in agreement with this proving that the ethnicity of the woman most often represented in a sexual picture is Caucasian across cultures.

Advertisements Provide Unrealistic Standards

If the advertisements women consume are providing images that are unrealistic, this must have an effect on their purchasing decisions. If a woman knows she can never achieve an advertised look, will she buy the product anyway? Or will she choose not to buy the product on the basis that she has no hope to look like the model in the advertisement? Park's findings "indirectly support the feminist argument that the social pressure to be thin, produced largely by the mass media industry, turns a woman into another woman's enemy" (609). Media most definitely causes effects for women, some of which are clearly negative. Reaves *et al.* inform, "Digitally altered fashion advertisements, which most advertisements are, promote a very unrealistic image of what is considered beautiful in our society. This makes women strive for something unattainable" (67). Women are in fact striving to look like the women they consume through fashion advertisements, and these women are not real and are thus unattainable. This is an unsatisfying and negative experience for the women who fall victim to chasing these unattainable standards.

Psychological Effects of Advertisements

Psychological effects are a factor in this investigation because experience or fear of one of these effects could lead a woman to monitor her exposure to fashion advertisements and thus affect her purchasing decisions. Aubrey's findings from a 2-year study on the effects of sexually objectifying media on body surveillance and self-objectification showed that body monitoring for women is normal without media influence, therefore, women are less likely to be influenced by the media (Aubrey 2006). Body monitoring is being highly conscious of one's body and noticing small changes and trying to fit a certain ideal. Aubrey says body monitoring is normal (2006), which can be easily hypothesized, however most would assume this is due to media influence, not in spite of. It is unexpected that women are less susceptible to be influenced by media exposure than men, based on trends in research thus far (this is a factor in purchasing decisions for women on the side of lack of influence that comes from media). Park dove deeper into the influence of media on body health in her research on the influence of media on the desire of women to be thin. Her findings opposed the findings of Aubrey, showing that media does cause psychological effects. In her research, she notes the psychological responses often stemming from the mass media including imprecise body perception, self-esteem, weight concerns, and even eating disorders (Park 2005). These are negative effects that are noteworthy, and in some cases, can be violently dangerous or even deadly.

Prior Research Focused on Women, Not Clothing

This investigation is important because the prior research in the subject of fashion advertisements, as has been demonstrated, has focused on topics pertaining to the advertisements, but focused on the sales of the promoted clothing in the advertisements.

D'Enbeau's (2011) findings from her study in using feminism to explore the construction of sex appeals present advertisements in unique terms. She says, "Advertising presents women as objects of consumption to be consumed by other women" (55). D'Enbeau accounts for the reason women often stare at and comment on the women they see in fashion advertisements. Whether women see the women depicted in ads as someone they want to be more like or someone to loathe, they are still constantly consuming their images. This is directly connected to this investigation and may carry some weight in determining the effect of these advertisements on the purchasing decisions on women.

Conclusions

There are a few major conclusions that can be drawn from the scholarly research that has been done thus far. Firstly, print fashion advertisements have various characteristics that affect women including their body consciousness, esteem and self-image. Secondly, sexuality and women are tightly coupled in advertising. Thirdly, most fashion advertisements use digital retouching or some other type of technology to alter the appearance of women in their advertisements. As a result, women in society aspire to look like these women even though the images are illusory and create unrealistic standards. Next, a variety of studies have been done pertaining to women in fashion advertisements including their sexuality and victimization, issues dealing with feminism, self-esteem, weight issues, as well as on the effectiveness of ads and brand recall, but not on their purchasing decisions. Lastly, it is difficult to find any research on female fashion purchasing decisions.

Much of the literature examined had a negative tone and negative approach to female fashion advertisements. For instance, they focused heavily on the ghastly effects

fashion advertisements can have on a person. Although there surely are negative effects, the study and interpretation of fashion advertisements is something that needs to be examined from both sides. In the past, research studies interpreting the effects of fashion advertisements have been done on a more personal health level, rather than purchasing decisions. No past research studies could be uncovered about the effects on purchasing decisions specifically.

In summary of the literature review, research suggests that the objectification of women in advertising derives from the Western patriarchal framework of male superiority and female inferiority. This was brought up several times including in the work of D'Enbeau and Frith *et al.* regardless of what the study was done on specifically. To reiterate, themes found throughout the literature review include: women are seen as sex objects in fashion ads, female fashion advertisements do not represent reality and create unrealistic standards for women, female fashion advertisements can affect the women that view them in multiple psychological ways, and most research focused on the *women* in the ads rather than the *clothing* in the ads. This opposes the purpose of the advertisement, which is to sell clothing. Fashion advertisements are supposed to be advertising for the clothing, not for the model. These themes will be pertinent in this investigation on purchasing decisions.

Purposes and Objectives

To recap from this investigation's introduction and literature review, the main issue to be investigated here is the effect of fashion advertisements on purchasing decisions, specifically. Apart from all of the ways fashion advertisements have been proven to affect

women, the current investigation will find out how fashion advertisements exclusively affect the buying habits of women.

The limitations of this specific investigation include pre-conceived notions about the fashion industry as a whole. If a woman has strong opinions about the industry as a whole, these notions may get in the way of trying to determine the industry's advertisements' specific affect on her purchasing decisions. In other words, some women may not be able to narrow their scope of focus for this investigation. An additional limitation is that some women may seek to achieve some sense of social desirability, which could vary woman to woman. Some women may think it is materialistic to be affected by fashion advertisements so they will claim they are not at all affected even if they are affected. In contrast, some women may want to seem fashionable and buy items they see in fashion advertisements. In either situation, the responses provided by that woman would be inaccurate. Another possible limitation is lack of knowledge on the subject of fashion as a whole. Women may not prioritize fashion and thus have no opinion or feelings on the subject. Additionally, some women may truly be ignorant of as to how much they are affected by fashion advertisements.

Hypothesis or Research Question

This study will attempt to answer the question: How have print fashion advertisements affected the purchasing decisions of U.S. women between the ages of 18-30 since 2005?

This investigation will be conducted through the use of surveys and focus groups. The researcher hypothesizes that women in the focus groups with similar opinioned women will leave the focus groups with empowered and emphasized opinions of their level

of affectedness from fashion advertisements. The women in the mixed opinion group are expected to have a change in their opinions about their level of affectedness from fashion advertisements. The size and make up of these focus groups will begin to answer the questions of the present investigation because they will be formed based on initial opinion of level of affectedness from fashion advertisements.

Summary

This study will attempt to find out how fashion advertisements explicitly affect the purchasing decisions of women. This study will be blazing the trail for a topic of this kind looking at the effects on women's purchasing decisions from fashion advertisements and no other effects from fashion advertisements.

Section Two- Method

Introduction

To quickly summarize, the current investigation has looked at what has already been done in studying women and fashion advertisements. This investigation has also stated the findings that will come from this study. In order to retrieve this information, the researcher in this investigation will administer an initial survey, form focus groups, and then administer a final survey.

Description of Methodology

The methodology that will be used in this investigation is survey with the use of focus groups. This is the chosen methodology because it is the most realistic way to gather the information needed from a large group of women. The experimental methodology has often been used to study media effects in the past, demonstrated in the literature review of this investigation. Park points out that these past experimental studies have "typically

involved the manipulation of exposure to media stimuli and subsequent measurements of self-perceptions and body perceptions" (597). The experiments that have been done in this subject area in the past have been looking at effects of fashion advertising that had nothing to do with purchasing decisions specifically. Conducting an experiment to measure purchasing decisions would have to be extremely complex and expensive, and this is unrealistic in the current investigation.

Using the survey methodology is a way to find out about groups and the way they think, communicate and behave. This methodology is best at gathering information from a lot of people and has high external validity. The weaknesses of this methodology include possible false results due to the way the formation of questions or due to social desirability. Another limitation of survey research is a participant's fear of repercussions and also there is the possibility that the participant could give false answers to the questions.

The alternative method that was taken into account for possible use in this investigation was experimental. Experimental is a method where the researcher creates a situation where he or she can manipulate the variables involved in the study to observe their effects. For this investigation, the experimental study would have been done using different types of women living in Chicago. An experiment would be conducted by splitting the women into groups and controlling the amount of fashion advertisements they were exposed to. They would be exposed to a certain amount and then they would go shopping and their purchasing decisions would be observed and conclusions would be drawn about how the fashion advertisements they were exposed to affected their purchasing decisions.

The experimental methodology was rejected for this investigation because the logistics would be extremely difficult to set up and the experiment would have a very high

cost. There would have to be multiple levels and phases of the experiment in order to get the information desired for this investigation. There would also be a large probability of contamination in the experiment from the media. There is a high possibility of excess exposure to fashion advertisements, which were not controlled or monitored by the researcher. This instance would cause false results.

The rationale for selecting the survey/focus group method is that it is the most realistic for this investigation. The researcher is able to get information from a large sample and has the ability to ask formal questions as well as observe focus gorups about the subject matter. Formal questions on the survey allow for easier comparison of answers between participants and lead the researcher to easily identify themes and draw conclusions. The informality of the focus groups allows for participants to speak freely with each other and enables a 'cascading effect' (Hundley *et. al 2010).* This is a situation where the response of one participant prompts the response of another participant and it creates a mixture of linked responses and opinions.

Research Design

This investigation will run an experiment with a representative sample of women in the urban setting of Chicago, Illinois. The participants will be women between the ages of 18-30 in the Chicago area. Chicago was chosen for this study because it is home to 8 million people from all over the world, each one with a different background. The researcher will be able to choose a representative sample from these women and the sample will have high external validity. To begin the investigation, the researcher will debrief the participants and issue an introductory survey.

This first survey will contain questions about current exposure to print fashion advertisements and current buying habits. The women will then be split into focus groups based on their survey responses. There will be one group formed made up of women whose survey responses say their purchasing decisions are barely or not at all affected by fashion advertisements. The second group will be made up of women whose survey responses say their purchasing decisions are moderately affected by fashion advertisements. The third group will be made up of women whose survey responses say their purchasing decisions are highly affected by fashion advertisements. There will be a fourth group made up of women from all three groups to see what conversations occur in the focus groups and how opinions are swayed after the focus group time.

In the focus groups, the topics discussed will revolve around why these women are affected the way they are by fashion advertisements. Sexuality in ads will be discussed as a variable to see how this affects women's opinions of the clothing in the ads. For example, would they be more or less likely to purchase an outfit that looks great on a very sexually depicted model? Questions like this and others will be prepared to structure the conversations, but the women in the groups will be encouraged to speak freely about their opinions in the subject matter.

After the women spend about 30-40 minutes in the focus groups, they will be given a final survey to fill out. The final survey will ask the women if their original opinions and behaviors have been reinforced or diminished. The survey will explore the validity of the responses asking about levels of exposure to fashion ads in a week coupled with questions about money spent on clothing in a week. Questions will also be about which stores the women shop at in order to evaluate price points and form connections between the stores

and their amount of advertising. The final survey will also ask similar questions to the first survey but in a different form to see if the women's responses changed at all after the time they spent in the focus group.

Through these different levels of asking and observing women's opinions on fashion advertisements and purchasing decisions, the researcher will be able to formulate their responses and assert themes and patterns of these women's purchasing decisions. The researcher will able to make an assumption about all American women from these results, since the sample will be representative.

Summary

The survey and focus groups are designed to study the way fashion advertisements have affected the purchasing decisions of American women between the ages of 18-30. This investigation will conduct this study in the hopes of being able to draw conclusions about what aspects of fashion advertisements make women more or less likely to purchase the item featured or an item similar to the one features. The results of this study will be useful to women as well as clothing marketers. Women will be able to have an insight to the way their brains process the advertisements they consume and will be able to think through this before making a purchasing decision. The results will also inform clothing marketers of specific aspects of advertisements that have the power to sway the opinions of the women who see them.

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