Do models need to be thin to sell moisturiser?

Advertisers say they use very thin models because they ‘sell’ more products. Yet research shows that not only do women feel bad about themselves when they see these images, but they are just as likely to buy a product if the model is equally attractive but of average size. The research by Dr Helga Dittmar from the University of Sussex and Dr Emma Halliwell from the University of the West of England looked into how women viewed the effectiveness of advertising.

The findings by Drs Dittmar and Halliwell are based on four studies involving 800 female students aged 18 to 30. Women who had poor self-image became more anxious about their bodies after looking at thin models than women with less of a gap between their body image and how they would ideally like to be. This effect occurred regardless of their actual weight.

The act of looking at ultra-thin models made women anxious “because they made them think, there and then, about an ideal self that is thinner than their actual self”, Dr Dittmar and Dr Halliwell found. Heavier women also became anxious after looking at average-sized models.

To ensure their findings were as accurate as possible, the team created a series of adverts in which models had the same face but different body sizes – either size eight or size 14. They also mixed their research questions with other questions so that the aims of the research would not be obvious to the subjects.

Contrary to advertisers’ claims, women were just as likely to buy a product if the model is equally attractive but of average size. There were some links between thinness, attractiveness and the ratings of the models but these were not straightforward. Women with chronic ‘self discrepancies’ between their ideal size and their actual size, and who believed they could not lose the pounds required, thought that models who advertised weight-loss products were more knowledgeable and trustworthy. At the same time, those with chronic ‘self discrepancies’, but whose weight was not far off their ideal, preferred the thin models, but only when they were moderately attractive but not beautiful. However, the striking finding was that average size models can be just as effective in advertising but, unlike ultra-thin models, they don’t lead to body dissatisfaction amongst vulnerable women.

Dr Dittmar and Dr Halliwell conclude that their findings have important implications: “At the social and public level, they can inform debate about responsible advertising policies, and at the level of the individual, they suggest that – in addition to critical reflection on unhealthy media images - girls’ and women’s patterns of self-beliefs should be targeted, so that body weight and appearance become less central sources of self-worth.”