We investigate the impact of motifs depicting female models in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose in advertisements on responses of female consumers towards the promoted products. We start with providing examples of such motifs used in real advertising campaigns. Prior research on erotic stimuli in advertising suggests that these motifs are disadvantageous. However, the motifs considered here combine sex appeal with the metaphor of narcissus which makes the appearance of the motifs surprising, attention-getting, and curiosity-evoking. We tested the usage of these motifs and found a positive effect on the attitude towards an extraordinary product when the image showed a model who kissed her reflection. For a lower degree of autoeroticism, we found no effect. Moreover, depicting female models in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose was ineffective for promoting an ordinary product. Finally, we found that consumers with low self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity respond more favourably to these motifs than consumers with high self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity.

1. Introduction

1.1. Images of female models in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose in advertisements

There are numerous companies offering apparel products, cosmetics, perfumes, and jewellery that show images of female models in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose in print advertisements and commercials to promote their goods. In Fig. 1, we provide some examples of these motifs. Moreover, some brands use the image of two highly similar models in this pose for the purpose of advertising. In Tab. 1, we list some brands that have used this kind of advertising strategy.[1] Mostly, these brands are famous brands and positioned in the premium market. Additionally, these motifs are sometimes included in pop music videos (e.g., Carmen of Lana Del Rey).

Obviously, the motifs contain two different pieces of information. First, they are erotic cues, which can easily be recognized by perceivers. In particular, the motifs can evoke impressions at first sight that two homosexual females are shown. Second, the motifs evoke the illusion of one female person who is physically in love with her reflection. They can be recognized as a metaphor because they are alluding to the behaviour of Narcissus. Narcissus is a mythological character from ancient Greece who fell in love with his reflection in the water and died because he could not leave this image. To recognize this metaphor, a more effortful and detailed processing of the motif is necessary. In fact, the motifs considered here are a mixture of both types of cues, eroticism plus narcissism, what makes the ad motifs interesting for investigations because responses of perceivers are unclear.

In this article, we investigate how female consumers respond to these images showing mildly autoerotic, narcissistic poses of female models in advertisements. We focus on female models because we did not find male autoerotic, narcissistic images in real advertisements; as an exception, we found the image of a male person in this pose on the front page of a book about narcissism (Jefrey Powell: Narcissism Unleashed); however, this motif is a parody on Narcissus. This practice may be grounded in the assumption that women are more concerned with their body compared to men (Grover et al. 2003). We also focus on responses of female perceivers because the

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ads using such motifs predominantly target female consumers.

1.2. Gap in research, research questions, and contributions to theory and practice

The introductory section indicates that the motifs considered here show a female person in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose. If we neglect the narcissistic component in the motifs and transfer the findings from prior research about the response of female perceivers to erotic female models shown in advertisements (although they are very rare and partly rather old; we will report them in Section 2.1) to our issue, we would hypothesize a negative effect on product evaluations when such motifs are

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Tab. 1: Examples of brands that used models in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose in advertising campaigns
used in ads. However, they clearly convey an additional meaning: narcissistic vanity (we will explain this concept in more detail in Section 2.2). Regarding this concept, prior research does not provide any ideas about how perceivers respond to such images. Thus, we conclude that there is a gap in research: an answer to the question about how and (if there is an effect) why female perceivers respond to female models who present themselves in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose:

(1) Are the evaluations of a product from the viewpoint of female consumers positively or negatively affected by showing an image of a female model in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose in an advertisement? (Main effect)

In Section 3, we will discuss reasons why product evaluations are likely to be affected. We will consider perceptions of model beauty due to the narcissistic pose and emotions of interest due to the surprising nature of the motifs:

(2) If there is an effect, why does it occur? Are the mediators mentioned in the preceding paragraph relevant? (Mediating effects)

Furthermore, we are interested in identifying conditions under which the use of a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic motif is advantageous. We consider the type of the motif, the type of the promoted product, and perceiver characteristics as moderating variables.

First, an overview of versions of ads used in practice containing images of female models in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose showed that marketers use different types of motifs to convey narcissistic vanity and thus to allude to the myth of Narcissus. There are models kissing their own reflection (e.g., the ad promoting the Chaumet brand contained in Fig. 1) and there are models gently touching their own reflection (e.g., the ad promoting Sissy Boy contained in Fig. 1). We surmise that kissing one’s reflection represents a higher level of narcissistic vanity than touching one’s reflection. As both variants of such images are used in advertising practice and nothing is known about responses of perceivers, we also consider this variation. We aim to answer the following research question:

(3) Is the effect of showing an image of a female model in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose in an advertisement contingent on whether the model is kissing or (merely) touching her reflection?

Second, perceivers might or might not recognize a fit between the products and depictions of people who exhibit narcissistic vanity. In numerous cases contained in Tab. 1, the brands are extraordinary and famous (e.g., Gucci, Chaumet, and Yves Saint Laurent) which might possess a fit to extraordinary model motifs. However, there are also brands that used such motifs and are unlikely to be associated with perceptions of extraordinariness because of their lower price level (e.g., Buffalo David Bitton and Sissy Boy). Thus, we examine:

(4) Is the effect of showing an image of a female model in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose in an advertisement contingent on the extraordinariness of the promoted product?

Third, we consider the perceiver’s own narcissistic vanity. Probably, perceivers with high self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity evaluate others depicted in this pose favourably because the motif evokes sensations of similarity between the model and the own person. Alternatively, perceivers with low self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity may find their own body as less attractive and use models shown in an autoerotic, narcissistic pose as desirable role models. We ask:

(5) Is the effect of showing an image of a female model in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose in an advertisement influenced by the perceiver’s self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity?

Our research contributes to two streams of research. First, it contributes to insights about how individuals respond to erotic cues. We aim to add knowledge to the question about whether there is a general aversion in female persons against erotic female models in advertisements as one might infer from findings in prior research (which we will explain below) or whether there are exceptions, for instance when eroticism additionally transfers a metaphoric meaning. Second, it contributes to research in the field of narcissism. To the best of our knowledge, until now nothing is known about how perceivers react to people who show signs of narcissistic vanity. Additionally, our research adds insights which are helpful for designing effective advertisements because numerous companies employ such motifs in their advertising campaigns.

In the next section, we present brief overviews of the research in the field of erotic advertisements and of narcissism to provide deeper insights into the fields of research our investigations contribute to. We first review findings about the effectiveness of erotic cues in advertising when erotic female motifs are used to attract female consumers and then describe streams of research on narcissism.

2. Background

2.1. The concept of eroticism

At first sight, the motifs shown in Fig. 1 could be identified as erotic stimuli. According to Reichert et al. (2001, p. 13), erotic cues are messages “that are associated with sexual information” which “evoke sexual thoughts and/or feelings in the viewer.” Research in the field of erotic cues and in particular of erotic ad cues is rather broad. However, the researchers mostly conducted content analyses (e.g., investigated the frequency how often erotic ads are used for different product categories; e.g., Biswas et al. 1992; Reichert et al. 2012; Taylor et al. 2013), compared erotic cues to non-erotic cues (e.g., erotic motifs to landscapes or humorous scenes; e.g., Sengupta...
and Dahl 2008; Dahl et al. 2009; Vohs et al. 2014), focused on analysing the likeability of erotic motifs per se (i.e., presenting them without an advertising context; e.g., Belch et al. 1982), investigated the attitudes towards the ad (e.g., feelings of being offended; e.g., LaTour 1990; Black et al. 2010; Dianoux and Linhart 2010), or did not report the product or brand evaluations of female perceivers to female erotic models depicted in ads (e.g., Dudley 1999; Liu et al. 2009; Reichert et al. 2011).

We found four studies of researchers who manipulated images of female models (more or less erotic) in advertisements and assessed attitudes towards the promoted product or purchase intention of female consumers. Bello et al. (1983) compared two commercials showing Brooke Shields as a model that promoted the Calvin Klein brand. In the erotic version, Brooke Shields asked the audience “Do you know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing.” Consumers might conclude that the undergar model did not wear underwear and create phantasies. According to the researchers, the dialogue and the model’s pose were much less provocative in the non-erotic commercial version. The authors reported that the erotic ad version did not affect brand attitudes of female perceivers towards Calvin Klein, but improved purchase intent compared to the non-erotic version. LaTour and Henthorne (1993) created ad versions promoting a perfume brand. The versions either showed a semi-nude or a nude female person. The authors found that women were more favourable in their attitude towards the perfume brand when the semi-nude model compared to the nude model was depicted. Jones et al. (1998) created ad versions promoting a bicycle and showed a female model either fully clothed or partly nude in this ad. They report that the use of the partly nude model impaired the evaluation of the bicycles. Liu et al. (2006) investigated the effectiveness of an ad promoting a bakery store. In the non-erotic ad version, a female model wearing a T-shirt was depicted; in the erotic variant, the model was only wearing a bra. The authors reported a null effect of this manipulation for female test participants.

Perceivers could even interpret the motifs considered here as images showing two females in a homosexual interaction when they do not recognize that the same female is depicted twice (the person and her reflection). There is also research on the question how female perceivers respond to female couples presenting themselves in a mildly homosexual interaction in ads. Dotson et al. (2009) split a sample of females in subsamples of heterosexual and homosexual women. The test participants had to report their attitudes towards the Levi’s brand and the Prada brand, then had contact with an ad each promoting one of these brands which contained an overtly lesbian motif (ad for Levi’s: “Levis 501- Lesbian ad”) or an ambiguous lesbian motif (ad for Prada), and finally had to indicate brand attitudes again. The authors found that heterosexual females devaluated the Levi’s brand while the attitudes of the homosexual women were not affected by the lesbian motif.

From this stream of research, one should conclude that female perceivers generally dislike images of erotic female models in advertisements what spills over negatively onto the attitude towards the promoted brands and products which finally impairs purchase intent. The main explanation for this finding is that erotic female motifs in ads “hurt the feelings” of female perceivers. However, this presumption is based on very few studies which are partly rather old and which are only based on few types of manipulations of eroticism. Moreover, it is unclear whether female perceivers interpret the motifs considered here just as another variant of erotic advertising or respond to them in a different way. This could happen because the motifs transport an additional meaning: narcissism.

2.2. The concept of narcissism

There is no doubt that the motifs considered here could be denoted as metaphors of Narcissus. Consumers might know it from fine-art paintings (e.g., Caravaggio: Narcissus; Waterhouse: Echo and Narcissus) or see other people depicted in this artificial pose in newspapers, magazines, or on the Internet. To clarify whether and how our investigations can also contribute to the field of research about narcissism, we provide a brief overview of this concept. To show streams of research in this field and to position our work is necessary because, as Brown and Bosson (2001, p. 210) state, narcissism is “one of psychology’s oldest and most enigmatic constructs.”

First, one century ago in psychology, Ellis (1913) and Freud (1914) used the term narcissism to describe an intense sexual relationship with oneself, i.e., a strong autoerotic behaviour in which an individual treats her/his own body in a similar way to that of a sexual object and thus looks at it with sexual pleasure and caresses it until full satisfaction through these actions is reached. However, the ad motifs considered here do not show the act of masturbation.

Second, in the following decades, clinical psychology adopted this term but used it for characterizing an abnormal personality as follows: High-narcissism people perceive themselves as grandiose persons, are unempathic and arrogant, and, for these reasons, are “insufferable as family members, partners, and coworkers” (Millon et al. 2004, p. 369). Clinical psychologist developed an extensive list of behavioural criteria of which a part have to be met for a person to be considered a narcissist (e.g., the DSM-II of the American Psychiatric Association 1968; Gunderson et al. 1990). Clinical psychology counts sexual behaviour that includes perversion, promiscuity, and the lack of inhibitions to abnormal narcissistic orientations. Mildly autoerotic behaviours as they are considered in our investigations are not contained in that list and thus unlikely would be denoted as narcissism by clinical psychologists.

Third, numerous researchers alternatively use the term narcissism to denote a personality characteristic that is
not related to clinical disorder but, on a sub-clinical level, used as an individual difference trait (Lee and Seidle 2012, p. 1485). The definitions used in this extensive stream of research have in common that narcissism describes an inflated self-concept which could manifest itself in manifold dimensions (e. g., Buffardi and Campbell 2008; Cisek et al. 2014). Raskin and Hall (1979) started this research and formulated a list of 223 statements people could agree or disagree with which were used in subsequent research to develop several variants of the so-called Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). The researchers adopted parts of this list and used factor analysis to reveal dimensions in which inflated self-perceptions could exist (e. g., Ackerman et al. 2011; Emmons 1984, 1987; Gentile et al. 2013). Raskin and Terry (1988) considered 40 statements from the original list and proposed seven dimensions in the sense of areas in which individuals could exhibit inflated self-perceptions. According to these results, individuals have inflated self-perceptions when they have very strong beliefs in their ability to lead others (1. authority), in their independence from others (2. self-sufficiency), in the extraordinariness of their personality (3. superiority), and/or in their capabilities to influence others (4. exploitativeness). These inflated self-perceptions can be directed towards others and/or towards oneself. Regarding others, individuals could have inflated self-perceptions with respect of deserving to get what they want from others (5. entitlement) and to be the centre of others’ attention (6. exhibitionism). Regarding oneself, inflated self-perceptions could be expressed in a strong tendency to admire and love one’s own body (7. vanity). Emmons (1984, 1987) denoted vanity as self-admiration. Some researchers added further dimensions because the concept, as it is used in this stream of research on narcissism, considers any inflated self-concept, independently of what behavioural area, as narcissism. For instance, Jonason and Webster (2010) described a strong need for prestige and social status as another manifestation of inflated self-perceptions. Returning to the images presented at the beginning of this article, we presume that such motifs are alluding to the behaviour of Narcissus, the mythological character, and are demonstrating the depicted person’s narcissistic vanity as suggested in the seventh dimension of the NPI of Raskin and Terry (1988).

Fourth, other researchers considered narcissism as a whole, i. e., as a one-dimensional concept suggesting that narcissism increases with an increasing number of areas in which an individual has inflated self-perceptions (e. g., Ames et al. 2006; Sakellaropoulo and Baldwin 2007). Following the latter approach, numerous researchers correlated overall narcissism with other personality traits such as the Big Five and general self-esteem (e. g., Baumeister and Vohs 2001; Bosson and Weaver 2011; Campbell et al. 2002; Gabriel et al. 1994; Künfer et al. 2013; Rauthmann and Kolar 2013; Vazire et al. 2008) or compared people who score high vs. low on such overall narcissism scales regarding consumer behaviour (Baek et al. 2016; de Bellis et al. 2016; Lee and Seidle 2012; Lee et al. 2013). The motifs considered in this paper do only fit to one very special aspect of narcissism, narcissistic vanity as suggested by Raskin and Terry (1988), and thus cannot represent levels of the concept used by these authors.

In sum, we suppose that the images considered here display females in a pose which demonstrates narcissistic vanity to perceivers (seventh narcissism dimension of Raskin and Terry 1988). Thus, our research contributes to this special aspect in the research on narcissism.

Knowledge from prior research on narcissistic vanity is very scarce. Using insights from qualitative interviews with students in introductory psychology classes, Buss and Chiodo (1991) reported that most interviewees stated that the act of looking at oneself in a mirror constantly is a typical behaviour of narcissists. Obviously, images as those shown at the beginning of this article are strongly related to the term “narcissism” from the viewpoint of students. Raskin and Terry (1988, p. 897) suggested to assess narcissistic vanity by agreement with statements such as “I like to look at my body,” “I like to look at myself in the mirror,” and “I like to display my body.” These authors correlated the resulting variable with the perceptions of this person from the viewpoint of others (e. g., “s/he is unkind,” “s/he is outgoing,” or “s/he is aggressive”). Within a list of 300 adjectives, they did not reveal remarkable correlations with three exceptions. They found that individuals with high narcissistic vanity have high scores of physical attractiveness from the perspective of observers. High-narcissistic-vanity individuals are regarded as highly “attractive,” “good looking,” and “handsome.” As a reason for this observation, we surmise that less beautiful people are less prone to admire and love their body compared to beautiful people. Campbell (1999) investigated which kind of dating partner people who differ regarding self-assessed narcissistic vanity prefer. He found that high-narcissistic-vanity individuals have a tendency to look for partners who admire them. Leung (2013) reported that there are no significant correlations between narcissistic vanity and the frequency of the usage of social media such as Facebook, Blogs, and Forums.

3. Development of hypotheses

We present two arguments in favour of the position that erotic-narcissistic ad cues have an impact on attitudes towards the promoted products; we consider emotions of interest and perceptions of the model’s beauty. From these arguments, we infer a positive main effect. Then, we consider three moderating variables: the type of motif, the type of product, and consumer characteristics.
3.1. Emotion of interest due to the motif

Incongruence of the motifs: Undoubtedly, people could interpret the motifs considered here as erotic, probably homosexual, lesbian images and additionally as metaphors of Narcissus. Thus, their appearance in advertisements is surprising: first, because other kinds of erotic stimuli in ads are more common; second, because the motif of Narcissus rarely is shown in ads; and third due to the combination of both elements. Moreover at first sight, the motifs are not realistic, especially because the image of a real mirror is absent in the motifs. Thus, we conclude that the motifs are incongruent to expectations of perceivers to a certain extent. This fact could affect mental states of perceivers as follows.

Attention and curiosity: Attention and curiosity are the immediate mental states that could be induced by getting in contact with an unexpected (i.e., incongruent) stimulus. Incongruent stimuli gain the attention of the perceivers in the sense that perceivers allocate a high portion of their cognitive resource to the stimulus that enables elaborating the stimulus. Incongruent stimuli also evoke emotions of curiosity (e.g., Berlyne 1950; Jepma et al. 2012). The main difference between attention and curiosity can be seen in the aspect that attention is the individual’s propensity to focus on the incongruent stimulus itself whereas the emotion of curiosity is the individual’s propensity to scrutinize on possible reasons of incongruence and to resolve incongruence. Menon and Soman (2002) posit that “curiosity prompts people to elaborate and generate hypotheses” about the reason of the incongruence. The term “interest” might be used synonymously, because Silvia (2008, p. 96) states that “the emotion of interest is the emotion associated with curiosity.”

Favourable feelings as a result of elaboration on the incongruent stimulus: Research in the field of schema-incongruence theory suggests that incongruence evokes pleasant feelings when individuals are able to resolve the incongruence. In the initial work in this field, Mandler (1982, p. 22) argues as follows: “Schema incongruity is a case of interruption of expectations and predictions. Such interruptions are a sufficient condition for the occurrence of autonomic nervous system (ANS) activity. ANS activity in turn determines the intensity of emotion or affect.” In subsequent research, authors added the argument that resolving incongruence indicates that one’s cognitive abilities are sufficient for coping with this situation, which is a pleasant experience (e.g., Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989; Meyers-Levy et al. 1994). Yoon (2013) denotes this as “Ah ha, I get it” experience. Numerous authors argue that consumers consider this experience as rewarding and satisfying (e.g., Halkias and Kokkinaki 2011; Jurca and Madlberger 2015; Maoz and Tybout 2002; McQuarrie and Mick 1992) and state that successfully resolving incongruence is associated with a sense of fulfilment and feelings of satisfaction because the resolution “leads to discovery and new insight” (Lanseng and Olsen 2012, p. 1111).

Transfer of these feelings to the product: Researchers expect that the positive feelings that exist in the condition of moderate (i.e., resolvable) incongruence spill over onto product evaluations (e.g., Halkias and Kokkinaki 2011; Lanseng and Olsen 2012; Yoon 2013). The transfer of positive affective states due to the experience of successfully resolving incongruence on objects that are co-present (such as an ad and the promoted product) can be predicted when further theoretical approaches are used. For instance, Schwarz and Clore (1983) presume that perceivers often misattribute the source of a positive feeling. According to the affect-as-information model (Schwarz 1990; Schwarz and Clore 1996; Skurnik et al. 2000), people use feelings that are elicited by co-present sources as a piece of information of a target stimulus. For instance, Schwarz and Clore (1988, p. 53) state: “That is, rather than basing their evaluations on a piecemeal analyses of the available facts, subjects may take a short cut and consult their feelings as a salient source of apparently relevant information.”

When we transfer these arguments to our issue, we can conclude the following: We presume that erotic-narcissistic motifs are incongruent to a certain extent (compared to commonly used ad cues), thus are attention-getting and curiosity-evoking, and, as a consequence, associated with emotions of interest. Next, we presume that perceivers can resolve incongruence. Experiencing that one’s cognitive ability is sufficient to recognize “a female version of Narcissus” likely causes a favourable feeling. When the source of this feeling is misattributed, the co-present objects, e.g., the promoted product or the brand, are evaluated more favourably. Our arguments are in line with Lee and Schumann (2004) who argue that schema-incongruence theory can be used to predict favourable effects on the attitudes towards the ad and the product.

3.2. Perceptions of the beauty of the motif

Prior research in the field of narcissistic vanity provided evidence to the presumption that beautiful persons have a stronger tendency to exhibit narcissistic vanity (Raskin and Terry 1988). Similar presumptions are frequently stated in literature (e.g., Back et al. 2010; Dufner et al. 2013; Holtzman and Strube 2010; Jaek et al. 2016; Küffer 2013; Malkin et al. 2013; Rauthmann and Kolar 2013; Vazire et al. 2008; Wallace et al. 2015). Individuals could confound the cause and the consequence when both events (e.g., beauty and narcissistic vanity) are observed simultaneously. In this condition, perceivers could infer high beauty of the model from watching the model in a narcissistic-vanity pose. It is well known in research on the effect of physical attraction of models shown in advertisements that perceivers like attractive others and dislike unattractive others and that attraction positively spills over onto product evaluations (Baker and Churchill 1977; Chaiken 1979; Dion et al. 1972; Eagly et al. 1991; Joseph 1982; Maddux and Rogers 1980; Miller 1970).
From the discussion about the emotion of interest due to the motifs which show female models in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose and about a possible misattribution of the cause and consequence of beauty, we presume the following:

H1a: Mildly autoerotic, narcissistic motifs of models shown in advertisements (compared to depicting the models in a neutral pose) improve the attitude towards the promoted product (positive main effect).

H1b: Mildly autoerotic, narcissistic motifs of models shown in advertisements improve the emotion of interest and increase perceptions of the model’s beauty which spill over positively onto product evaluations (mediating effects).

Subsequently, we consider three variables that potentially moderate the effect of erotic-narcissistic cues on product attitudes.

3.3. Type of the pose: kissing or touching

In Fig. 1, we showed the image of Marine Vacth who was displayed in ads and posters promoting the jewellery brand Chaumet. The inhabitants of Le Perq, a French city in the Île-de-France near Paris, forced Chaumet to remove these posters.[2] Obviously, some citizens living in this region considered the motif of a person who kisses her reflection, although not extremely sex-related or even pornographic, as offensive or provocative. Generally, research on erotic advertising suggests that female persons frequently feel more offended by sex in advertising than male persons (Jones and Reid 2011). It might be easier to trigger feelings of the inappropriate use of erotic female models in female perceivers compared to male perceivers.

Showing a female model kissing her reflection (as Marie Vacth did) is even more erotic than a motif depicting a model gently touching the reflection of her body. Thus, we surmise that self-kissing motifs are less effective than self-touching motifs. We test:

H2: Autoerotic, narcissistic motifs showing a female model who is kissing her reflection result in lower improvements of attitudes towards the promoted product compared to such motifs showing a female gently touching her reflection.

3.4. Type of product: extraordinary or ordinary

Generally, we presume that the motifs considered here are schema-incongruent to a certain extent at first sight. However, the combination with a particular brand or product could create a fit condition, e. g., when an extraordinary product is combined with an extraordinary motif which reduces perceptions of incongruence through the process of watching the ad. Extraordinary products might be perceived to fit to persons showing extraordinary sexual behaviour. The term “extraordinary” is used here to describe objects that are not wide-spread, cause sensations of uniqueness, and are perceived as special and expensive. Cisek et al. (2014), Lee and Seidle (2012), Lee et al. (2013), and Sedikides et al. (2007) argue that prestigious products and/or products that distinguish people (which could be regarded as a kind of extraordinary products) fit to people high in narcissism. In this condition, perceivers unlikely generate counter-arguments against the stimulus because people do not invest a high amount of cognitive resource for elaborating congruent combinations of cues. As an argument in favour of this position, schema-incongruence theory could be used as well. This approach posits that, when a stimulus (such as a brand) is congruent with expectations (that might be evoked by the ad motif), individuals unlikely develop thoughts about why this condition exists (Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989), thus do not generate counter-arguments, and like such conditions to a certain degree. As a consequence, we expect:

H3: Mildly autoerotic, narcissistic motifs of a female have a more positive effect on the attitude towards extraordinary products than on the attitude towards ordinary products.

3.5. Perceiver characteristic: low or high self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity

Perceivers with high self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity (high SPNV) might be attracted by models shown in an autoerotic, narcissistic pose. As a reason, we could refer to the fundamental similarity principle. It states that people like other people who are similar to them and dislike dissimilar people (e. g., Byrne 1971; Newcomb 1968). This principle is based on the presumption that the perceivers use their own person as a reference standard to evaluate others. Because perceivers assign positive characteristics to themselves, they assign positive characteristics to similar others.

However, people with low self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity (low SPNV) might have less positive self-perceptions of their body. Because these persons likely want to have a more positive relationship with their body, they might consider a model showing herself in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose as a desirable role model. Thoughts such as “I would like to be like her” might be evoked. Watching a model that equals the perceivers’ ideal self-concept might produce positive responses in persons with low self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity.

Thus, we have contradictory predictions. For high-SPNV perceivers, the motifs considered here could evoke sensations of similarity which makes the promoted product attractive. For low-SPNV perceivers, these motifs might elicit thoughts about one’s own ideal self-concept which perceivers could approach when they behave like the model, i. e., possess the promoted product. As we cannot derive a clear hypothesis, we refrain from postulating a hypothesis on the sign of the moderating effect of the perceiver’s self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity.
4. Study

4.1. Experimental design

The experiment is based on an 8 (female model) × 2 (model pose: mildly autoerotic pose expressing narcissistic vanity, neutral pose) × 2 (wrist watch brands with different degrees of extraordinariness: Burberry or Fossil) factorial between-subjects design. In the main study, we used images of eight female models. In the high-narcissistic-vanity condition, four of them were shown in a self-kissing pose and the other four were portrayed in a self-touching pose. In the low-narcissistic-vanity condition, each of the eight female models was depicted as one single person. We were not able to use the same models for all three levels of the pose (self-kissing, self-touching, and neutral) because we could not create realistic images for all three levels for the same models. The combination of these factors resulted in 32 conditions for which ad versions were created. Moreover, we included two control conditions; in these control conditions, the ads only depicted one of the wrist watches, the brand logo, and the slogan.

4.2. Test objects

We selected the wrist watches of the Fossil and the Burberry brand to manipulate product extraordinariness. We conducted a pretest to check whether this manipulation is successful. In this pretest, test participants had contact with an ad version that showed one watch without any model image. A sample of 60 female students (\(M_{\text{age}} = 23.15\) years, \(SD = 2.17\)) was asked to evaluate the extraordinariness of two wrist watches. 30 persons judged the Fossil brand and 30 persons rated the Burberry brand by agreement with “prestigious,” “exclusive,” “unique,” and “expensive” (seven-point scale, Cronbach’s Alpha = .88). The amount of extraordinariness that is associated with the Burberry wrist watch was higher than the degree of extraordinariness that is associated with the Fossil watch (\(M_{\text{Burberry}} = 5.12, M_{\text{Fossil}} = 3.27, t_{58} = 5.19, p < .001\)). The pretest findings also showed that the brands did not differ with respect to brand awareness.

4.3. Test stimuli

In this section, we describe the procedure how we created and selected test stimuli for the main study.

4.3.1. Creation of model images

We used two sources of photos to create images for the purpose of our experiment. First, we looked for images showing females in a narcissistic, mildly autoerotic pose on the websites of the largest stock photo agencies such as Fotolia, Shutterstock, and iStockphoto. Moreover, we searched on online community websites such as DeviantArt. Next, we contacted the rights owners of such images to clarify whether we could use the image for the purpose of our experiment for free or after the payment of an affordable fee. To provide one example, the rights owner of the image shown on the left side of Fig. 2 permitted us to use it for our study. The figure shows the original image and indicates how we modified it to develop stimulus material for our experiment. Evidently, this image is not suitable to be modified as an image that can be used for the self-touching-pose condition. This procedure was replicated for a large number of additional images of different female models.
Second, we also used motifs of models in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose that have been contained in four real advertisements (Marine Vacth shown in an ad promoting the Chaumet jewellery brand, two models depicted in ads promoting the Harvey Nichols fashion and beauty brand, and a model depicted in an ad promoting the Hedkandi brand) and modified these images to additionally create a version showing each model in a neutral pose as we did for the images we had adopted from the websites of the photo agencies and online community websites.

By doing so, we created 14 sets of model images, i.e., sets of motifs for 14 different female models. Seven sets contained the mildly autoerotic, narcissistic, self-kissing pose and the neutral pose (such as the set shown in the middle and on the right side of Fig. 2) and seven different sets contained the mildly autoerotic, narcissistic, self-touching pose and the neutral pose.

4.3.2. Selection of model stimuli

Objective: In a pretest, we investigated whether the images created in the step described above are associated with perceptions of narcissism and eroticism. As there were 14 models and for each model two poses (for one of the models, these two images are shown in the middle and on the right side of Fig. 2), we included 28 images into this pretest.

Measures: Buss and Chiodo (1991) demonstrated that people strongly associate the term “narcissism” with images of narcissistic vanity. Van der Linden and Rosenthal (2016) provided evidence that people easily understand the meaning of the term “narcissism.” Based on these findings, we decided to use a two-item measure to assess whether the test participants assign narcissistic attitudes towards the models who kissed or touched their reflections (“The model is narcissistic;” “The model is in love with herself”), seven-point scale, \( R = .71 \). To assess eroticism, the test participants agreed with “The model is sexy” and “The model is erotic” (items adopted from Reichert and Fosu 2005 and Sengupta and Dahl 2008; seven-point scale, \( R = .69 \)).

Sample: Overall, a sample of 300 female students (\( M_{\text{age}} = 23.17 \) years, \( SD = 2.16 \)) was used to determine the degree to which the motifs are associated with narcissism and eroticism. Some of the test participants were exposed to two or three test stimuli of different models; in this case, a large number of filler images were inserted between the test motifs.

Results: Based on these findings, we decided to remove images of six models from the initial set of 14 models. For the remaining eight models (four models were used to create both the self-kissing-pose and the neutral-pose condition; four different models were used to create both the self-touching-pose and the neutral-pose condition), we were able to create the test conditions as desired. Across the selected eight models, perceptions of narcissism were higher for the mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose compared to the neutral pose (\( M_{\text{narc-erot}} = 4.48, M_{\text{neutral}} = 3.12, t_{268} = 7.90, p < .001 \)) and perceptions of eroticism were also higher for this pose (\( M_{\text{narc-erot}} = 4.67, M_{\text{neutral}} = 4.19, t_{268} = 2.46, p < .01 \)).

4.3.3. Creating the test stimuli

Based on the images of the eight models selected above, we developed the test stimuli for our main experiment. For instance, based on the images shown in the middle and on the right side of Fig. 2, we created one set of test stimuli. We added the image of a watch (Fossil or Burberry), a slogan (e.g., “More time for you”, translated), and the respective brand logo. We show these stimuli in Fig. 3.

Because we considered eight models to be suitable as images contained in advertisements, this procedure resulted in four 2 (pose: self-kissing, neutral) × 2 (brand: Fossil, Burberry) designs (note that one of these seven sets is shown in Fig. 3) and four 2 (pose: self-touching, neutral) × 2 (brand: Fossil, Burberry) designs. To sum it up, our final set of test material contained four-stimulus sets for eight different models; one of these four-stimulus sets is shown in Fig. 3.

4.4. Sample in the main study

In total, 1234 female students (\( M_{\text{age}} = 23.87 \) years, \( SD = 3.29 \)) participated in the main part of the study. Data collection took place between summer 2015 and summer 2017. We collected data subsequently for each of the eight models.

4.5. Procedure

For three of the models and the control conditions, a paper-and-pencil technique was used. For the remaining five models, data was collected with the means of an online-survey. Initially, we asked the test participants to indicate their sexual orientation; we included a question about hetero-/homosexuality into the questionnaire. As the respondents commented that this question is too private, we decided to exclude this question. Thus, we cannot use this variable as a further moderating variable.[3] Data was collected in the following sequence: attitudes towards the promoted product, emotion of interest, perceptions of the model’s beauty, perceptions of the model’s narcissism, perceptions of the model’s eroticism, product extraordinariness, and self-perceptions regarding narcissistic vanity. Finally the test persons indicated their age.

4.6. Measures

The attitudes towards the promoted product were assessed by agreement with “The watch is very attractive, “The watch is very good,” “The watch is very appealing,” and “The watch is of very high quality” (Cronbach’s alpha = .81). The emotion of interest due to the
Fig. 3: Example a female model in two different poses used in an advertisement in the main study

motif was assessed by agreement with “The motif is very inspiring” and “The motif strongly arouses my interest” \( (R = .67) \). These items were adopted from the “Positive and Negative Affect Schedule” (PANAS-X) of Watson and Clark (1994). Perceptions of the model’s beauty were measured by agreement with “The motif is very pleasant to look at” and “The woman is very pleasant” \( (R = .62) \). When assessing perceptions of beauty, we focused on the aspect of pleasantness to avoid measures that also contain the eroticism aspect; other authors (e.g., Ohanian 1990) mix eroticism (e.g., “sexy”) with pleasantness (e.g., “attractive”). Self-perceptions regarding narcissistic vanity were measured by agreement with “I like to look at my body,” “I like to look at myself in the mirror,” and “I like to display my body” (Cronbach’s alpha = .79). These items were adopted from Raskin and Terry (1988).

The items to measure perceptions of model narcissism and eroticism and perceptions of product extraordinariness were adopted from the pretests. All scales were seven-point Likert scales.

4.7. Manipulation checks

In the pretests, we had examined images of models without product or brand information and images of the products without model depictions. In the main study, the test stimuli (except those for the control conditions) contain both elements: the image of a model and product/brand information. Thus, we checked whether the manipulation of model narcissism and eroticism and of the product extraordinariness also worked as intended for the advertisements.

Model narcissism and model eroticism: We analysed whether the perceptions of model narcissism and eroticism are contingent on the model pose. When we collapsed data across the brands of the wrist watches we found the following for the perceptions of model narcissism: \( M_{kissing} = 4.26, M_{touching} = 4.12, M_{neutral} = 2.54, F_{2,1171} = 118.956 \ (p < .001) \); this indicates that the test participants also recognized a high degree of narcissism even when the autoerotic motif is used as an element in a print ad. The perceptions of model eroticism are as follows: \( M_{kissing} = 4.39, M_{touching} = 4.19, M_{neutral} = 3.02, F_{2,1171} = \)
56.467 (p < .001); these data indicate that perceptions of eroticism were higher in the kissing-pose and touching-pose conditions compared to the neutral-pose condition.

Product extraordinariness: Across the female models, the perceptions of product extraordinariness were higher for the Burberry brand compared to the Fossil brand (M_{Burberry} = 5.02, M_{Fossil} = 3.23, t_{1172} = 7.82, p < .001).

We did not explicitly ask the test participants to indicate whether they regard the advertisement they were exposed to as realistic or unrealistic. However, none of the participants who filled in the questionnaire in the presence of an interviewer provided any speculations that the ad would not be used in the real world of advertising.

4.8. Results

Tab. 2 contains the attitude towards the promoted wrist watch depending on the motif and the brand. At first sight, the data show that the test participants responded favourably to the erotic-narcissistic cue in the kissing-pose/extraordinary-product condition compared to the neutral-pose condition (M_{Burberry, kissing} = 5.07 vs. M_{Burberry, neutral} = 4.09 shown in the column indicating the overall results). Compared to the neutral pose, the touching pose had no effect on the attitude towards Burberry. For the ordinary product, Fossil, neither the kissing nor the touching pose resulted in different attitudes compared to the neutral pose.[4]

The findings are stable across the models. For the Fossil brand, we found that one model (#5) produced more favourable attitudes in the neutral-pose compared to the touching-pose condition; as we did not find similar significant differences for the other models and for all comparisons in the case of the Burberry brand, we presumed – at first sight – that this difference for model #5 and Fossil was due to random. Subsequently, we compared the narcissistic-pose motif of model #5 with the narcissistic-pose motifs of the other seven models in more detail. In contrast to the other models, model #5’s eyes were not focused on her reflection but looked at the observer of the motif. Probably, the special gaze of the model is the reason for the deviation of the results for model #5.

4.9. Hypotheses tests

In H1a, we expected that mildly autoerotic, narcissistic motifs of models (kissing or touching their reflection) improve attitudes towards the promoted product compared to depicting the models in a neutral pose. For the Burberry brand, the findings show that the kissing pose is more effective than all other conditions (i.e., touching pose, neutral pose, and model-absent). The kissing pose is advantageous compared to the neutral pose (for models #1–4: M_{Burberry, kissing} = 5.07, M_{Burberry, neutral} = 4.16, F_{1,291} = 44.10, p < .001) while product attitudes do not differ when either the touching pose or the neutral pose is used (for models #5–8: M_{Burberry, touching} = 4.00, M_{Burberry, neutral} = 4.02, NS). Moreover, the touching pose and the neutral pose were as effective as the ad that did not contain the portrayal of any model. For the Fossil brand, all considered model poses improved evaluations compared to the model-absent condition while the type of the model pose had no additional effect. Thus H1a can only be supported for the Burberry-brand/kissing-pose condition. In the Burberry-brand/touching-pose, the Fossil-brand/kissing-pose, and the Fossil-brand/touching-pose conditions, H1a has to be rejected which might be explained by the moderating variables considered in our study and which are analysed subsequently.

H1b stated that the use of a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose compared to a neutral model pose affects the emotion of interest due to the motif and perceptions of the model’s beauty which spill over onto product evaluations. Tab. 3 shows that the autoerotic, narcissistic model poses indeed resulted in higher emotions of interest due to the motif and more favourable perceptions of model beauty than the neutral model pose.

To test the mediating effects, we collapsed the narcissistic poses and calculated a binary independent variable (1 = kissing or touching pose, 0 = neutral pose). The data
Thomas/Gierl, Can’t Get Enough of Myself: The Return of Narcissus in Autoerotic Female Poses in Advertisements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ad promoting the Burberry brand</th>
<th>Ad promoting the Fossil brand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotion of interest</strong></td>
<td><strong>Perceptions of the model’s beauty</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kissing pose</td>
<td>2.44 (1.43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touching pose</td>
<td>2.41 (1.47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral pose</td>
<td>2.16 (1.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.54 (1.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.42 (1.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.73 (1.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.34 (1.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.54 (1.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.10 (1.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.84 (1.40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.40 (1.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.73 (1.61)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** Scale ranges from 1 (low) to 7 (high). Standard deviations in parentheses. Mean values in the same row with different subscripts are significantly different at the $p < .05$ level (Scheffé tests). This calculation was conducted separately for the Burberry brand and the Fossil brand.

**Tab. 3: Effect of the model poses on the emotions of interest and perceptions of the model’s beauty**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consumer’s SPNV</th>
<th>Ad promoting the Burberry brand</th>
<th>Ad promoting the Fossil brand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Kissing pose</td>
<td>4.92 (1.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Touching pose</td>
<td>3.73 (1.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral pose</td>
<td>3.70 (1.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Kissing pose</td>
<td>5.27 (0.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Touching pose</td>
<td>4.34 (1.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral pose</td>
<td>4.61 (1.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>Kissing pose</td>
<td>5.07 (1.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Touching pose</td>
<td>4.00 (1.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral pose</td>
<td>4.09 (1.35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** The scale ranges from 1 (negative product evaluation) to 7 (positive product evaluation). Standard deviations in parentheses. SPNV: Self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity. Mean values in the same row with different subscripts are significantly different at the $p < .05$ level (Scheffé test). This calculation was conducted separately for the Burberry brand and the Fossil brand.

**Tab. 4: Effect of the model poses on the attitude towards the product depending on the brand and the perceivers’ self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity**

for the model-absent conditions were excluded from this analysis. We used the emotions of interest due to the motif and the perceptions of the model’s beauty as the mediating variables and the product attitudes as the dependent variable. We applied the procedure of Hayes (2013, model 4) to estimate the effects for each brand. The results are contained in Fig. 4. The coefficients support the presumption that the emotions of interest and the perception of model beauty mediate (i.e., statistically explain) the effect of the model motif on the product attitudes and thus confirm $H1b$.

When we included the brand as a moderator for the motif-interest, motif-beauty, interest-attitude, and/or beauty-attitude relationships, we did not find a significant effect. However, there are residual direct effects that are strongly affected by the brand (.32 vs. -.58). This finding indicates that the model motif has an additional effect on the product attitudes whose sign depends on the extraordinariness of the brand. We will provide arguments about why these residual direct effects happened in the Interpretation section.

In $H2$, we presumed that the touching pose results in more favourable product attitudes compared to the kissing pose. Contrarily to this presumption, the kissing pose evoked more favourable attitudes than the touching pose for the Burberry brand (see Tab. 2). Thus, $H2$ had to be rejected. We discuss the reasons for this unexpected effect in the Interpretation section.

In $H3$, we predicted a more positive effect of a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic motif when it is used for promoting an extraordinary product compared to using it in an ad for an ordinary product. Our data are partly in line with this presumption because we found a positive effect only for the kissing pose but not for the touching pose.

Finally, we surmised that the consumers’ own orientation with regard to narcissistic vanity has an effect on the responses towards products promoted by ads that contain motifs of mildly autoerotic, narcissistic female persons. Thus, we examined whether the effects of the motifs on the attitude towards the product are contingent on the perceivers’ self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity (SPNV). For this purpose, we used a median split to divide the test participants into sub-samples of low-SPNV and high-SPNV consumers. Tab. 4 indicates that there is a positive interaction effect of SPNV and the brand on product attitudes ($F_{(1, 107)} = 34.93, p < .001$) indicating that high-SPNV females generally like the Burberry watch to a higher extent than low-SPNV females (what is
a minor issue in our research). Although there is a positive effect of the kissing pose on the evaluation of the Burberry watch for high-SPNV consumers ($M_{\text{kissing}} = 5.27, M_{\text{neutral}} = 4.61, \Delta = .66$), there is an even stronger effect for low-SPNV consumers ($M_{\text{kissing}} = 4.92, M_{\text{neutral}} = 3.70, \Delta = 1.22$). $\Delta = 1.22$ exceeds $\Delta = .66$ significantly ($z = 2.30, p < .05$). This result indicates that the kissing pose compared to the neutral pose is more effective for low-SPNV compared to high-SPNV consumers.

5. Interpretation

5.1. Main effect of showing a model in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose

Findings from prior research on erotic advertising predict a negative effect of the motifs tested in our study. In contrast to that prediction, the main finding of our experiment is the observation that female perceivers do not devalue products in any case when the products are promoted with an ad showing an erotic female model. We found that depicting a model in a self-kissing pose even improved the attitude towards an extraordinary product (Burberry wrist watch).

5.2. Mediating effects

Emotions of interest and perceptions of model beauty: The estimates of our mediation model (Fig. 4) show that erotic-narcissistic ad cues evoke more favourable emotions of interest and perceptions of the model’s beauty (compared to the neutral model pose) which are transferred to the promoted product. In the Theory section, we provided arguments that predicted these effects.

Positive residual direct effect for the extraordinary product: However, we also found an additional positive residual direct effect for the Burberry brand ($b = .32$, see Fig. 4). In the following, we provide some reasons why this effect occurred. Burberry is a luxury brand, at least from the viewpoint of students. Luxury is likely associated with thoughts about “something that is forbidden,” “behaviours that are unethical,” or “things that are done due to temptation.” Presenting oneself in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose as the models shown in Fig. 1 do might cause similar thoughts. The match between the associations of the luxurious product and the associations elicited by the motifs could be the reason for the positive residual direct effect for the Burberry brand.

Negative residual direct effect for the ordinary product: For the Fossil brand, the estimates contained in Fig. 4 revealed a negative residual direct effect ($b = -.58$). To explain this effect, the following arguments might be helpful. In the Theory section, we argued that mildly autoerotic, narcissistic motifs likely cause the emotion of curiosity (or interest). Curiosity could be satisfied if the motif can be understood, i.e., when the incongruence is resolved, which produces a pleasant feeling. The reason for this pleasant feeling is recognizing the metaphor. However, curiosity is also associated with immediate expectations about what else will be seen. Loewenstein (1994) points to the fact that curiosity could even result in an unpleasant state of disappointment. To provide an illustrative example, imagine, you receive a wonderfully (vs. simply) packaged gift at Christmas: Most likely, the beautifully packaged gift results in higher expectations about the content of the package. Moreover, imagine that the content of the package is an extraordinary (vs. ordinary) gift. Probably, a person who receives a wonderfully packaged gift (which evokes curiosity and high expectations) experiences disappointment when s/he recognizes an ordinary gift. On the contrary, a person receiving a simply packaged gift will not be disappointed when s/he gets the ordinary gift. Transferring these ideas (package = motif in the ad, gift = promoted product) to our issue leads us to the following conclusion: We expect that perceivers are disappointed or even frustrated when they watch an ad that gains attention and evokes curiosity due to the motif and subsequently recognize that an ordinary product is promoted. Thus, we surmise that the negative residual direct effect resulted from disappointment; due to the contact with an erotic-narcissistic motif, the perceiver likely expected to see an extraordinary product but actually was exposed to an ordinary product.

5.3. Moderating effects

Type of the autoerotic, narcissistic pose (self-kissing vs. self-touching): From the scandal that happened in Le Perq, a city near Paris, which was caused by the posters promoting the Chaumet brand we had hypothesized that showing a female person kissing her reflection is too provocative and thus a female model merely touching her reflection might result in more favourable product attitudes. However in contrast to our expectations, we found for the Burberry brand, that the self-kissing instead of the self-touching motif was advantageous. Probably, the findings are contingent on the zeitgeist and the sample characteristics of the perceivers. The protesting inhabitants of Le Perq might have considered concerns of all citizens, e.g., older people and families with young children. The sample used in our study consisted of young female students who did not have to take such concerns into account. We conclude that the self-kissing pose might be perceived as provocative and even scandalous when the motif reaches a wide population while its use is beneficial when the target group is young and does not have to consider concerns of other perceivers.

Extraordinariness of the product: In the Theory section, we had argued that the extraordinariness of erotic-narcissistic motifs matches the extraordinary product. In line with those arguments, we found a positive effect of the self-kissing pose for the extraordinary product and a null effect for the ordinary product.

Consumers’ self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity (SPNV): For the Burberry brand, we found that the improvement of the attitude due to the self-kissing model
pose in comparison to the neutral model pose is higher for low-SPNV consumers than for high-SPNV consumers. This finding is in line with the presumption that low-SPNV females have less positive perceptions of their own body, thus would like to have a more positive relationship with their body, and as a consequence respond favourably to the self-kissing motif that mirrors a highly desirable relationship with one’s body. We conclude that low-SPNV females comprehend models presenting themselves in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose as role models and adopt their behaviour, i.e., highly value the promoted product, to increase the similarity to these role models. However, as the sign of the effect of depicting a model in a self-kissing pose does not depend on the perceivers’ SPNV, this moderating variable is less important for advertising practice.

6. Limitations

The usage of a sample of female students limits the meaningfulness of our results. Older females or male consumers might respond differently to mildly autoerotic, narcissistic motifs of female models contained in advertisements. However, we can argue that these motifs mainly attract female consumers and female students might transport their attitudes into the future what makes the findings also important for the next decade. At present, we suggest to be careful when using the motifs considered here. Especially when posters showing the motifs in the public are used, problems likely occur. Moreover, we conducted the surveys in Germany. In other countries or cultures with more or less liberal attitudes towards eroticism, the findings likely are different.

Another limitation results from the focus on wrist watches as test objects. Wrist watches can be considered as accessories of female consumers which serve to increase physical attractiveness. For different erotic-related categories such as sexy underwear, perfume, or cosmetics, we do not provide results. Thus, it is unclear whether the findings are generalizable to other eroticism-related categories.

A further limitation results from using measures that forced test participants to think about their affective responses and subsequently report their affective states, i.e., the emotion of interest. Thinking about one’s affective state likely affects the affective state. Although this procedure is frequently used in consumer research and we adopted two items from the widely used PANAS-X, the use of additional measures such as the time spent to watch the ad would increase the validity of these measures (Silvia 2005).

Moreover, we were not able to create a full experimental design, i.e. create the kissing-pose, the touching-pose and the neutral pose for the same models. Experimenters would need professional models and professional photographers to produce such special stimuli. We did not find appropriate motifs showing one model in all required poses in the sources mentioned in Section 4.2. Thus, we had created the kissing pose and the touching pose for different models and, in order to reduce biases, had selected four models for each narcissistic pose.

Finally, we have to note that we were not able to separate homosexual from heterosexual female test persons. Dotson et al. (2009) found that homosexual females respond more favourably to lesbian motifs shown in ads than heterosexual females.

7. Implications

7.1. Answers to the research questions

The main objective of our research was investigating how female consumers evaluate products that are promoted by ads which depict female models in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose. We were motivated to examine the impact of such motifs because, on the one side, prior research suggests that female perceivers respond negatively to erotic female models in ads while, on the other side, the motifs considered here convey an additional meaning because they merge eroticism and narcissism. We found a positive effect of the self-kissing pose, when the ad promoted an extraordinary product. This finding suggests that there is no general aversion in female consumers towards sex-related advertising which contradicts common knowledge in literature.

Emotions of interest and perceptions of model beauty are factors that can explain the positive effect of erotic-narcissistic cues on product attitudes.

Moreover, we were interested in an answer to the question whether the level of eroticism contained in these motifs matters. We have two contradictory answers. First, the self-kissing motif is likely perceived as scandalous as the example of the reactions of the inhabitants of a city in France to the image of Marine Vacth demonstrated. Second, our sample (female students) responded favourably to the self-kissing motifs (including the motif showing Marine Vacth). Thus, we have to conclude that the optimum level of eroticism in the motifs considered here is obviously contingent on the audience which gets in contact with the motifs.

We also asked the question whether the effect of the usage of motifs in ads showing models in a mildly autoerotic, narcissistic pose depends on the extraordinariness of the promoted product. We considered a wrist watch of the Burberry brand with relatively strong associations of prestige, exclusivity, uniqueness, and expensiveness and another, similarly looking watch of the Fossil brand with weaker associations regarding these aspects. We surmised (based on our pretest and manipulation check results) that the Burberry watch reflects a more extraordinary product for our sample compared to the Fossil watch. We found that the self-kissing motif improved the...
attitude towards the Burberry watch while no effect was observed for the Fossil watch. The autoerotic, narcissistic motifs considered here obviously match with the extraordinary product.

Finally, we were interested in the role of the perceivers’ own perceptions of narcissistic vanity. Our findings suggest that people with low self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity appreciate autoerotic, narcissistic motifs to a higher extent than people with high self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity. Based on these findings, we believe that low-SPNV consumers understand the motifs considered here as images of a role model with desirable characteristics.

7.2. Implications for theory
Contribution to the research on the effectiveness of erotic cues in advertisements: There is no doubt that erotic cues have multiple effects on perceivers. For instance, erotic persons can transport “sex appeal” in the sense that perceivers are motivated to physically approach these persons (Reichert 2002). Using erotic persons in advertising could also be seen as a kind of misuse of eroticism (because eroticism predominantly is a private matter), and feelings might be offended. Prior research suggests that the latter aspect is predominant for female perceivers when they see erotic female models in ads and, thus, females devaluate products that are promoted by the means of erotic female models. However, we found an exception to this rule. When an extraordinary erotic pose (due to the conjunction with narcissism and due to the self-kissing pose) is combined with an extraordinary product, the evaluations of products are improved. We showed that this effect results from increased emotions of interest and higher perceptions of model beauty. Thus, we add the insight to prior research that erotic ad cues are not disadvantageous per se (when a female model is depicted and female consumers are targeted): The fit between the model pose and the product extraordinariness has a favourable effect that likely exceeds or inhibits the negative effect due to concerns about the exploitation of female eroticism in advertising.

Contribution to the research on the response to others who present themselves in a narcissistic pose: As stated in Section 2.2, narcissism is a rather ambiguous construct. We argued that there is a large stream of research that conceives narcissism as an inflated self-concept that manifest itself in numerous dimensions. One of these dimensions is narcissistic vanity. Prior research found that physically beautiful persons have a stronger tendency to narcissistic vanity (i. e., proneness for admiring their body) than less beautiful persons. Our findings are in line with these insights; Fig. 3 showed that perceivers have higher perceptions of model beauty when the model is shown in a narcissistic pose compared to the neutral pose. Moreover, we contribute to this theory because we found that motifs of narcissistic vanity are also associated with stronger emotions of interest of the perceivers. Furthermore, we add the insight that female perceivers with low self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity respond more favourably to erotic-narcissistic cues compared to perceivers with high self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity. This result indicates that the effect of seeing role models in erotic ads is stronger than the attraction effect due to the model/perceiver similarity.

7.3. Implications for advertising practice
Erotic cues should be considered as advertising stimuli when the marketer aims to provide links between its brand and particular benefits that differentiate her/his brand from competitor brands. In this sense, erotic ad cues could signal that the female consumer who uses the respective products (e. g., perfume, textiles, jewellery, and cosmetics) becomes more erotic compared to the condition when she uses competitor products. However, the use of erotic cues in ads promoting products from such categories is wide-spread. Thus, marketers who decide to use erotic cues should consider the use of extraordinary erotic cues. The kind of motifs investigated in this paper can be counted to such promising cues. When marketers consider the use of erotic-narcissistic cues, they should take the following aspects into account:

First, the motifs considered here should only be used to promote extraordinary products. When ordinary products are to be promoted, marketers should look for other types of erotic cues that are effective.

Second, marketers should use models who are involved in a self-kiss to express narcissistic vanity. Lower degrees of narcissistic vanity, i. e., images of models who are merely gently touching their reflection, are not effective.

Third, marketers do not need to distinguish between females with high vs. low self-perceptions of narcissistic vanity when deciding about the use of motifs presenting models in an erotic-narcissistic pose because both segments respond favourably when extraordinary products are promoted by images of models shown in a self-kissing pose.

7.4. Suggestions for future research
We considered an extraordinary product and an ordinary product and did not take the source of extraordinariness into account. For future research, we first suggest going into more detail when designing experiments that contain the (extra-) ordinariness factor. For instance, researchers might differentiate between effects of erotic-narcissistic ad cues on evaluations of prestigious vs. non-prestigious brands, on attitudes towards brands with high or low uniqueness, and on responses to brands that are very costly vs. less expensive.

We focussed on one particular aspect of narcissism: narcissistic vanity; the models expressed self-love with their body. It is imaginable to depict other components of the narcissism construct in advertisements, e. g., models that very strongly strive for dominance (see the concept of authority in the list of inflated self-concepts developed...
by Raskin and Terry (1988). In this case, it might matter whether models promote products that are consumed publicly or in private. For instance, depicting models in ads with inflated self-perceptions of dominance over others might match conspicuous-consumption goods but not match goods that are not visible to the public such as sexy underwear. Thus, we secondly suggest examining interaction effects of other components of model narcissism and product characteristics.

In Section 5.2, we provided explanations for the observed residual direct effects. For instance, illusions that “something is forbidden but is done due to temptations” could be included in mediation analysis. Emotions of disappointment that might exist when an extraordinary erotic ad cue is combined with an ordinary product might be considered as a mediator as well. Thus, we thirdly recommend examining the relevance of these additional mediating variables.

“Brand narcissism” might be another brand-related factor that affects the influence of erotic-narcissistic cues. Like narcissists who communicate inflated self-perceptions, some brands communicate inflated brand concepts. For instance, an automotive brand using the claim “The best or nothing,” especially during the time of the Diesel crisis, could be recognized as narcissistic (Munich and Steinhart 2016). Thus, it would be interesting to find out whether a fit between narcissistic motifs and brand narcissism has a positive effect on attitudes.

We expected more favourable responses towards less provocative erotic-narcissistic motifs and hypothesized that the self-touching pose is advantageous compared to the self-kissing pose. We found the opposite relationship for the extraordinary brand indicating that extreme cues are more effective. We surmise that this could be contingent on our sample (female students living in Germany) and, thus, also recommend conducting replication studies in other cultures and among older consumers.

Notes

[1] The images of the ads and the commercials can be easily found on the Internet when searching for ads of these brands in combination with the provided information about the campaign name and/or the model’s name. As they are used intensely in the ads by the companies or by the celebrities, we surmise that the reference to the Internet is sufficient as the source of the motifs.


[3] Heversath et al. (2017) asked people living in Germany to report their sexual orientation. 1132 heterosexual, 54 predominantly heterosexual, eleven bisexual, seven predominantly homosexual, and eleven homosexual. When we combine the latter three categories (i.e., bisexual, predominantly homosexual, homosexual), 2.4% of the females indicate to be bi- or homosexual. Thus, not considering the sexual orientation of the test participants is expected not to bias our results remarkably.

[4] If we collapse the kissing-pose and the touching-pose conditions, our experimental design allows us to calculate the effects of the two factors with two levels each: the pose (narcissistic vs. neutral) and the brand (Burberry vs. Fossil). Then, the attitudes towards the promoted product are as follows: $M_{\text{Burberry, neutral}} = 3.80$, $M_{\text{Burberry, narcissistic}} = 4.09$, $M_{\text{Fossil, neutral}} = 3.69$, $M_{\text{Fossil, narcissistic}} = 4.54$. A two-way ANOVA containing the brand and the narcissism factors as independent variables provides the following statistical results: main effect of narcissism: $F_1, 1170 = 4.109, p < .05$; main effect of the brand: $F_1, 1170 = 45.963$, $p < .001$, and interaction effect: $F_1, 1170 = 11.205, p < .001$.

Note that the sample size is reduced because this analysis excluded the control conditions (i.e., the persons who were exposed to ads without showing a model). The analysis indicates that the Burberry brand is liked to a higher extent. Moreover, the analysis indicates that the Burberry-brand/narcissistic-pose condition results in higher evaluations than the Burberry-band/neutral pose condition.

References


Thomas/Gieri, Can’t Get Enough of Myself: The Return of Narcissus in Autoerotic Female Poses in Advertisements


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Keywords
Narcissism, Narcissistic Vanity, Eroticism, Autoeroticism, Advertising.

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https://doi.org/10.15358/0344-1369-2018-1-3

Gerneiert durch IP 54.70.40.11 am 01.09.2021, 14:07:25. Das Erstellen und Weitergeben von Kopien dieses PDFs ist nicht zulässig.