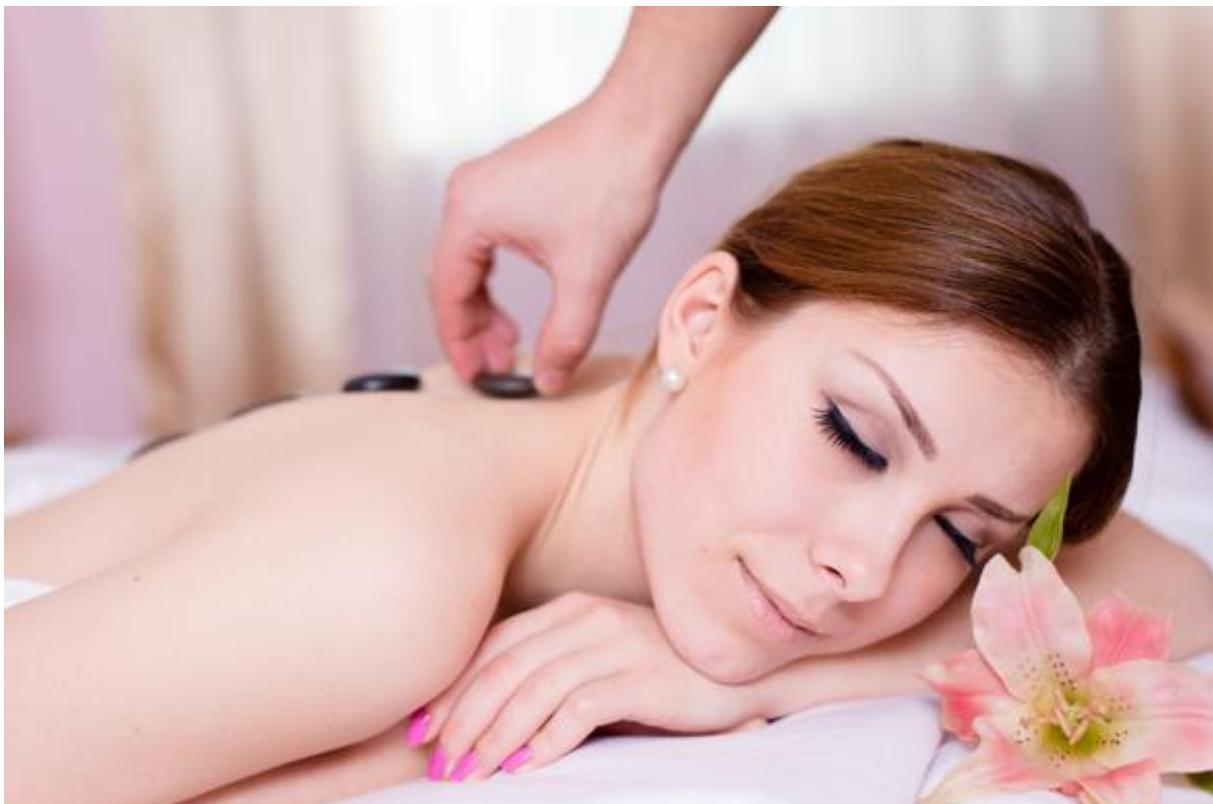


The business of the body

Dr Fiona Holland, Senior Lecturer, University of Derby looks at body image representation within spa and wellness culture

Many people are drawn to work in the massage, complementary therapy, spa and wellness industry because they want to help people to feel better. They also wish to support clients in their search for balance and well-being. However, in my experience as a practitioner, client, teacher and researcher, I've come to wonder if the images we use to promote our work undermine these altruistic intentions.

'A picture says a thousand words'



PICTURE: SHUTTERSTOCK

Let's consider how the brands of 'spa' and 'wellness' are marketed visually. If I asked you to think about the top ten images that come to mind when you think of these two words, what would they be? People receiving massages in a relaxing environment? Hot stones on someone's back as they lie on a massage couch? Someone relaxing in a hot tub or meditating on a beautiful view?

I asked a group recently to do an exercise that I called the 'Top 40'. They used an internet search engine and typed in either the word 'spa' or 'wellness', and looked at the first forty images that came up. I asked them to analyse them using the following questions:

- How many photos are there of women?
- How many photos are there of men?
- How many photos of white women?
- How many photos of white men?
- How many photos are there of non-white clients?
- How many photos are there of non-white therapists?
- How many photos are there of people (in any role) who do not represent an ideal western body shape and size (i.e. slender for women, lean and muscled for men)?
- How many people appear to be above the age of 50?

They were quite surprised at the answers (why not try this yourself and see what you find?). The images that included people were all young, the vast majority were women, with only one or two white men and non-white women, and all conformed to the idealised shape/size. This led us as a group to question whether, as practitioners in this industry, we do welcome a diverse range of clients. Other questions we posed were: Do our clients see people they can relate to in these images? Or are these idealised images exclusive, narrowly focused and targeted to represent a minority of people?

Some might argue that it makes good business sense to use these traditionally attractive images to sell these 'brands'. However, research suggests this approach creates enormous amounts of body dissatisfaction and certainly does not align philosophically with a message of well-being. There seems to be an inherent mismatch between the underpinning ethos of many who work in the wellness and spa industry and some of the techniques used to promote the industry's branding.

Body dissatisfaction and marketing

We might consider the worrying statistics for women and men in the area of body image. Studies have revealed the following:

- 60 per cent of adults in the UK report that they feel ashamed of the way they look;¹
- 70 per cent of adult women and 40 per cent of adult men report that they have felt pressure from television and magazines to have a perfect body;¹
- 34 per cent of adolescent boys and 49 per cent of girls in the UK have been on a diet to change their body shape or to lose weight;²
- 42 per cent of girls and young women feel that the most negative part about being a female is the pressure to look attractive;³
- 90 per cent of girls and young women believe that TV and magazines focus too much on what women look like rather than what they achieve;³
- Between one third and half of young girls fear becoming fat and engage in dieting or binge eating;⁴
- More than 725,000 people in the UK are affected by an eating disorder⁵ and 11 per cent of these are male;⁶
- Girls as young as five years old are worried about the way they look and their size;⁷
- One in four seven year-old girls have tried to lose weight at least once;⁸
- One third of young boys aged 8-12 are dieting to lose weight.⁹

Additional research has shown the damaging effect of viewing idealized images of models. A study of young girls¹⁰ examined the relationship between concern with weight and general exposure to mass media and found that 69 per cent (out of 548 respondents) reported that magazine pictures influenced their idea of the perfect body shape and 47 per cent said they wanted to lose weight because of the magazine pictures. Women often devalue their bodies when exposed to media images of thin women¹² leading to:

- body dissatisfaction^{11,13}
- negative mood¹³
- weight-related appearance anxiety¹⁴
- self-objectification¹⁴

Additionally, exposure to media images of muscular/lean men has been linked to increases in body dissatisfaction in young men.¹⁵

Body positive marketing

A recent All Parliamentary Report on Body Image¹⁶ summarised that over 28 published empirical studies have demonstrated that women and men report more positive body image and less body image dissatisfaction after viewing media images of average-size female and male models than after viewing images of thin female models and muscular male models. These studies all provide support encouraging the media to adopt models that reflect a broader spectrum of people to advertise their brands.

Some of these studies found that consumers perceive that average-size models are just as effective in advertisements as ultra-muscular and ultra-thin models. A recent US study¹⁷ found that exposure to thin models did not induce more favourable brand attitudes than exposure to average-size models. Another found that women increase their purchasing intentions by more than 200 per cent if they see a model who reflects their size. There were similarly positive relationships between purchasing intentions of women when they saw models who reflected their age and ethnicity.¹⁶

Some might argue that brands would lose money if people felt good about themselves when they saw marketing images, as inherently industries might profit more if people consume to 'fix' their inadequacies. It is no surprise that advertising agencies hire psychologists to maximize their brand effectiveness. However, one global beauty brand, Dove, harnessed the power of positive body image in their 'campaign for real beauty', in which models of all ages, shapes and sizes were used to market their products. In the first six months of the campaign, sales of products increased 700 per cent in Europe, and in the first year, global sales surpassed one billion dollars. This certainly offers a different and successful model to consider.

As an industry aimed at supporting health and well-being of our current and future clients, we might well ask if images that are currently used are serving them. Using more realistic models and having a greater diversity of people included in advertising might actually increase business for us and promote more body positivity. As the Top 40 exercise suggests, our representation of who is visible and 'welcomed' in our industry is very narrow.

Conclusion

I would argue that there are many opportunities for marketing communications to embrace a wider range of models in media campaigns. This would reflect the wider social and cultural diversity of images across age, ethnic and gender groups and would promote greater inclusivity rather than exclusivity. I challenge us all as therapists, spa managers, or wellness promoters to review the visual messaging that we use in our promotion. What could we do to help future clients identify with our brand/services? How could we help them feel more welcomed and less threatened? How could we use our imagery to support people in feeling good about themselves and inspired to support their health and well-being? Perhaps it is time to review your leaflets, photographs and images used in your practice/spa and reflect upon creating a truly diverse, welcoming practice for people of all ages, shapes, sizes and ethnicities. Take note of what happens to your customer numbers!

Dr Fiona Holland is a Senior Lecturer in the Psychology department at the University of Derby. Fiona supports students in research in the areas of health and well-being and conducts her own research in body image, nature connections, behaviour change and positive psychology.



What do you think? We'd love to hear your thoughts on the topic of body image in the therapy and health and well-being industry. Please email your opinions to our deputy editor, Dan Ralls at dralls@fht.org.uk

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