



Bryant University

HONORS THESIS

Are All Body Sizes Beautiful? A Content Analysis of Plus-Size Representation in Fashion Brands

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ABSTRACT

An abundance of body positive campaigns has become increasingly popular among fashion brands. The current study aims to analyze the consumers' perceptions of model's beauty attributes and well-being based on their body size. The purpose of the present research is to provide a deeper insight into the effects that models' appearance poses on an individual's well-being. The goal of this study is to explore consumers' perceptions of model's beauty attributes and well-being based on their body size. By conducting a content analysis of female models in the fashion industry, consumers' perceptions of models' beauty attributes, well-being, and lifestyle were discovered. This analysis sheds light on the differing perceptions of thin versus plus-size models. This research can be utilized to determine how marketers can incorporate diverse models, specifically when targeting young women who are most heavily impacted by unrealistic beauty standards.

INTRODUCTION

To make the product on display more appealing, marketers have utilized attractive models in advertisements. However, in recent years, advertisements have been depicting an unrealistically thin body type, which does not accurately represent the population.

Overexposure to thin models in the media has a negative impact on consumers' physical health and well-being. There is a significant difference in the way consumers perceive advertisements with attractive, thin models and the reason which marketers choose them.

Marketers claim that skinny models, who embody the ideal standard of attractiveness favored by modern culture, are more favorably viewed by consumers. However, young women are more likely to be negatively impacted by ideal models because they feel inadequate in relation to women in advertisements, meaning consumers think they do not look as good, as pretty or as skinny as the model does.

There has been an increase in campaigns to promote the inclusion of various body types in the fashion industry. Some women do not feel represented due to brands utilizing models that depict the unrealistically thin ideal. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, the average woman wears a size 16, which translates to an extra-large (HHS report, 2022). However, the average model wears a size 2, which is typically translated to a size extra small. Despite 68% of American women wearing a size 14 or above, most fashion brands promote their clothing products with models that wear much smaller sizes (The Economist, 2017).

It is important to further analyze the effects that the appearance of the model poses on consumers. The present study aims to determine the perceptions that consumers have on models based on their body types. Marketers may benefit from understanding female consumer perceptions of models in advertisements. Additionally, consumers may also benefit in an increase of body satisfaction and well-being if marketers utilize more realistic and diverse models in advertisements.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Body Image

Body image plays a large role in the fashion industry. To understand the role that body image plays in marketing, it is important to understand the concept of attractiveness, characteristics of attractiveness, such as body size, and how one's idea of attractiveness is constructed. According to the dictionary, attractiveness is the quality of being pleasing or charming, especially in appearance or manner (Dictionary.com, 2023). Attractiveness can be categorized in different ways; there are external and internal factors of attraction. External factors include physical and sexual attraction, facial beauty, and cuteness (Rodgers et al., 2019; Hornik, 1992; Kuraguchi et al., 2015). Internal factors include the qualities regarding personality that one might find attractive, such as intelligence, creativity, confidence, and professionalism (Driebe et al., 2021; Watkins, 2017). Pioneer researcher of physical attractiveness, Thomas Cash, believes that different body parts have a greater impact on the overall judgement of one's attractiveness. Cash conducted several studies regarding "beautyism," the concept he created for the stereotype that beautiful people are good in nature. Throughout his research, he found that physical attractiveness is a significant predictor of people's attributions, attitudes, and behaviors toward others (Rodgers et al., 2019).

Social, cultural, and interpersonal factors all influence the perceptions of attractiveness (Rodgers et al., 2019). According to Cash (2005), attraction is socially constructed based on media, peers, and family. The media has a great impact on the standards of attractiveness. Existing literature shows that women tend to have more social consequences than men regarding physical attractiveness (Cash et al., 1977). Even in the early 21st century, the media depicted extremely thin women and hyper muscular men (Boyd & Murnen, 2017; Levine & Murnen, 2009). This unrealistic portrayal of highly attractive bodies in the media can distort society's idea of attractiveness. Additionally, it can alter individuals' attitudes regarding self-worth and identity (Boyd & Murnen, 2017). Certain stereotypes vary across cultures, but regardless of the target audience, messages in the media can have unintentional negative effects. Some examples of these negative effects are body dissatisfaction and psychological distress, such as body anxiety (Borau & Bonnefon, 2016; Murakami & Latner, 2015).

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Body Size

The impact of the appearance, specifically body size, of the model is one factor that this paper aims to analyze. Along with other researchers, Cash believes that body shape and size influence one's overall attractiveness. Body shape and size can be defined in many ways, including body mass index (BMI), slim versus plus spectrum, apple versus pear shape, and waist-to-hip ratio (Cornelissen et al., 2015; Song & Ashdown, 2013; Stunkard et al., 1983; Thoma et al., 2012). Stunkard, Sorensen, and Schulsinger (1983) introduced a nine-level figure rating scale, which displays slim (1) to large (9) female body size (Song & Ashdown, 2013). The current research will adapt this method to analyze female body size.

Self-perception of body size often differs from one's actual body size (Song & Ashdown, 2013). Many individuals are not satisfied with their own bodies; most women in the United States experience body dissatisfaction (Murakami & Latner, 2015). Body dissatisfaction is associated with increased psychological distress. Although individuals of all body sizes experience it, multiple researchers found that excess weight also contributes to greater body satisfaction (Annis et al., 2004; Sarwer et al., 1998; Schwartz & Brownell, 2004). Body dissatisfaction is often accompanied by fat talk, which is the verbal expression of dislike for one's own weight (Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994). According to research, partaking in fat talk may help women gain approval in social settings (Tompkins et al., 2009). Participating in fat talk may be a way for women to seek validation and feel accepted. However, at least one research investigation found that those who do not engage in fat talk are perceived more positively than those who do (Tompkins et al., 2009). This exemplifies the disconnect in society regarding the stigma and relationship between fat talk and body dissatisfaction. The current research aims to investigate how consumers stigmatize different body types in fashion brands.

Despite the ideal body image changing over time, thin individuals are still considered more attractive. Frequently, advertisements create unrealistic beauty standards by depicting ideal female bodies (Borau & Bonnefon, 2016). The unattainable beauty standard of advertisement models can greatly impact audiences and has been attributed to an increase in body anxiety and disorders in female viewers (Borau & Bonnefon, 2016).

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The portrayal of female bodies in advertising is a major societal concern as it can negatively impact the viewer's self-image (Borau & Bonnefon, 2016; Halliwell, 2015). The present study will analyze the differences between ideal female models and non-ideal female models in advertising, and the impacts the appearance of the advertising model poses on an individual's well-being, such as body anxiety.

Body Anxiety

Body anxiety, according to Borau and Bonnefon (2016, p. 460), involves “feelings of worry and concern about one's own body image, or negative judgements about one's own body image.” When women view ultra-thin, female bodies on social media, they can experience body anxiety (Borau & Bonnefon, 2016). Body anxiety causes undesirable outcomes, including psychological distress and eating disorders (Borau & Bonnefon, 2016). Existing work indicates that the use of natural models in advertising would decrease the effects of body anxiety (Borau & Bonnefon, 2016). Interestingly, Diedrichs and Lee (2011) found that women undergo less body anxiety when they view advertisements with average-size models. Another study found that women experienced less body anxiety when they viewed two images side by side; one image of the digitally altered, thin female model, and one image of the original, unaltered female model (Borau & Bonnefon, 2016).

The findings of these studies are significant to marketers because advertisements that evoke improved affective states usually result in better advertising performance (Borau & Bonnefon, 2016). Lower body anxiety is an improved affective state, and women will feel lower body anxiety when they are exposed to an advertisement that shows a natural model (Borau & Bonnefon, 2016). On a larger scale, marketers that incorporate models that are included on a broad spectrum of body size will not only have a positive effect on advertisement performance, but also protect the well-being of their female viewers. In turn, this will contribute to decreasing the prevalence of psychological distress and eating disorders due to body anxiety (Borau & Bonnefon, 2016).

Body Positivity in Marketing

Brands in the United States have been shamed for depicting unrealistic beauty standards due to the identified negative effects this practice poses on individuals. To this end, there have

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been many campaigns that are labeled as body positive or body inclusive. For example, the American clothing brand Skims launched a Fits Everybody campaign for shapewear that was released in nine shades and sizes XXS to 4XL, designed to fit every body. Despite efforts to promote body diversity, Skims received backlash for not being diverse enough. People mocked the campaign for selecting four thin, conventionally pretty women to promote the new product. This is just one example of the gap between marketers and consumers on the topic of body positivity. Other brands, such as Aerie by American Eagle adopt a different approach to body positivity by providing individuals with disabilities an opportunity to advertise Aerie's lingerie products. Aerie launched the Aerie Real campaign in attempt to build confidence in women and encourage competitors to do the same. See Figures 1 and 2.

The existing literature shows that unrealistically, thin models are posing negative effects on consumers' self-perception and well-being. Additionally, research shows that incorporating natural, unedited models will decrease some of the negative effects, such as body anxiety. Although plus-size individuals are welcomed by society, the present study aims to analyze how consumers perceive models of different body sizes. Considering the current research on the appearance of models, the usage of unrealistically thin models in advertising, and the negative effects it can pose on an individual's well-being, this paper proposes the following research questions:

1. What are the consumers' perceptions on the model's body size and shape?
2. What are the consumers' perceptions of the plus-size model's attractiveness in terms of professionalism, well-being, and lifestyle.

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METHOD

This research seeks to explore how consumers perceive models of different body sizes in the fashion industry. Considering the research goal, a content analysis will be conducted. The nature of a content analysis requires a coding team of two to three human coders to manually analyze the content.

Description of Sample

A convenience sample of 20 popular brands in the women's fashion and fitness industry were chosen for analysis. In order to include a variety of products, the broad fashion industry was segmented by product type into the following five categories: sportswear, activewear, outerwear, sleepwear, and lingerie. After the product categories were defined, four of the most popular brands in each category were selected. The sportswear category included Nike, Adidas, Reebok, and Under Armor. The activewear category included Lululemon, Athleta, Fabletics, and Alo Yoga. The outerwear category included The North Face, Columbia, L.L. Bean, and Patagonia. The sleepwear category included Victoria's Secret, Sleeper, Skims, and Aerie by American Eagle. The lingerie category included Calvin Klein, Skims, Aerie, and Victoria's Secret. Following the brand selection, five female models from each brand were chosen to represent the brand. The categorical variables are shown in Appendix, Table 1.

Model Inclusion Criteria

Each brand's website was perused to identify five models that were wearing the product specific to the category. The models were all female and varied in terms of body size and race. In total, the sample included 100 different models.

RESULTS

Coding of Models

Using a coding scheme modeled on Hussin, Frazier and Thompson (2011), the models were coded and categorized according to the “Fat Stigma.” Three undergraduate students from a large northeastern university conducted the coding. The main concepts of the coding scheme were designed to measure the model’s features, beauty attributes, and perception of the model’s well-being and lifestyle. Two judges blind to the purpose of the study were trained by the main judge in the use of the coding scheme. Following training, both judges coded all the models independently. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using two-way mixed intra-class correlation coefficients for the continuous measures and percent agreement for categorical measures. The results are reported in Appendix, Table 2.

Description of Models’ Body Size

To determine consumers’ perceptions of the model’s appearance, the presentation of women’s bodies was examined. Based on a modified version of the nine-level rating scale of female body size introduced by Stunkard, Sorensen, and Schulsinger (1983), the models were classified on a 5-point scale of slim (1) to plus (5). The intra-class correlation between the three judges was .92. The data was summarized by the averaged ratings of body size for each product category. The results showed slight variation in the average body sizes between each category. The results are reported in Appendix, Table 3. However, there was not a specific category that stood out on the plus-size side of the spectrum of the rating scale.

Description of Models’ Body Conceptualization

Due to the overall summary not providing a clear representation of how different brands incorporate thin versus plus-size models, two brands with the most compelling results from each category were chosen by the main judge. The ratings for body size, overall attractiveness, and perceived professionalism, well-being, and lifestyle were analyzed side by side. These five measures are considered indicative of differences in emphasis on appearance. Specifically, thin models would have a slimmer body size, higher overall attractiveness, greater perceived professionalism, better well-being, and healthier lifestyle.

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The overall attractiveness of the model was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from ugly (1) to pretty (5). The intra-class correlation between the three judges was .89. Consistent throughout each brand, thin models were prettier than large models. As previously mentioned, attractiveness can be defined in many ways. To include more than one measure of attractiveness, body attractiveness and facial attractiveness were assessed. In addition, professionalism, well-being, and lifestyle were assessed to determine if these factors are related to overall attractiveness.

For professionalism, models were classified on a scale of amateur (1) to professional (5). For example, models in the sportswear category were considered more professional if they were physically fit, had toned muscles, and appeared to be professional in their respective categories. The intra-class correlation between the three judges was .87. Consistent with the measure of overall attractiveness, the slimmer models were considered more professional than the larger models.

The judges were asked their perception of the model's well-being on a scale of poor (1) to excellent (5). The intra-class correlation between the three judges was .85. When compared to the plus-size models, the thin models had a greater perceived well-being. This finding was consistent throughout each brand. However, the difference between well-being of the thin and plus-size models in the activewear category were only slight. Since a content analysis does not explain why, this is up for interpretation until further research is done. One way to interpret the smaller significance in well-being is because of the type of product being advertised. Activewear brands such as Lululemon and Athleta pride themselves on not only being active in their products but also practicing a healthy lifestyle and advocating for well-being.

For lifestyle, the judges were asked their perceptions of the model's lifestyle on two different scales, unhealthy (1) to healthy (5), and not ideal (1) to ideal (5). The intra-class correlation between the three judges was .85. Consistent with the other measures, the slimmer models were considered to have a healthier, and more ideal lifestyle.

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In addition, the relationship between body size and the following variables were analyzed: overall attractiveness, model's well-being, model's lifestyle (healthy), and model's lifestyle (ideal). Table 9 in Appendix shows Pearson's correlation. The results show the negative correlation between body size and attractiveness, well-being, and lifestyle. For example, females with slim bodies are associated with prettiness, excellent well-being, and a healthy, ideal lifestyle. In contrast, females with larger, or plus-size bodies are associated with ugliness, poor well-being, and an unhealthy, nonideal lifestyle. The variable that has the highest negative correlation with body size is ideal lifestyle (-0.92), closely followed by healthy lifestyle (-0.90). The lowest correlations with body size are overall attractiveness (-0.61) and well-being (-0.76).

DISCUSSION

In conclusion, the research reported here is consistent with previous work documenting societal stereotypes of female bodies. Existing literature demonstrates that the use of plus-size models may increase feelings of representation in plus-size consumers. However, the current study exemplifies how consumers generally perceive plus-size models to be less attractive than thin models, with poor well-being and unhealthy, nonideal lifestyle. The current study uniquely contributes to the literature by showing the differences in consumers' portrayal of thin female models in comparison to large female models and highlights that including plus-size models is not an effective marketing mechanism without a mindset shift in consumers.

Marketers that wish to enhance the relationship with their target market and boost purchase intention may be interested in learning how female consumers perceive models in advertising. Brands may desire to use a wider variety of models in advertisements if female consumers find models of a comparable size to be more trustworthy. More favorable opinions of the models could lead to more favorable opinions of the product; for instance, buyers may believe that products are more appealing. Overall, incorporating different body types is proven to be a successful approach to portray body inclusivity in marketing; however, the current study shows that a more accurate depiction of body inclusivity would be more comprehensive regarding race, lifestyle, and abilities. The representation of plus-size models in the fashion industry are worthy of further research.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Figures

Figure 1: Skims' Fits Everybody Campaign

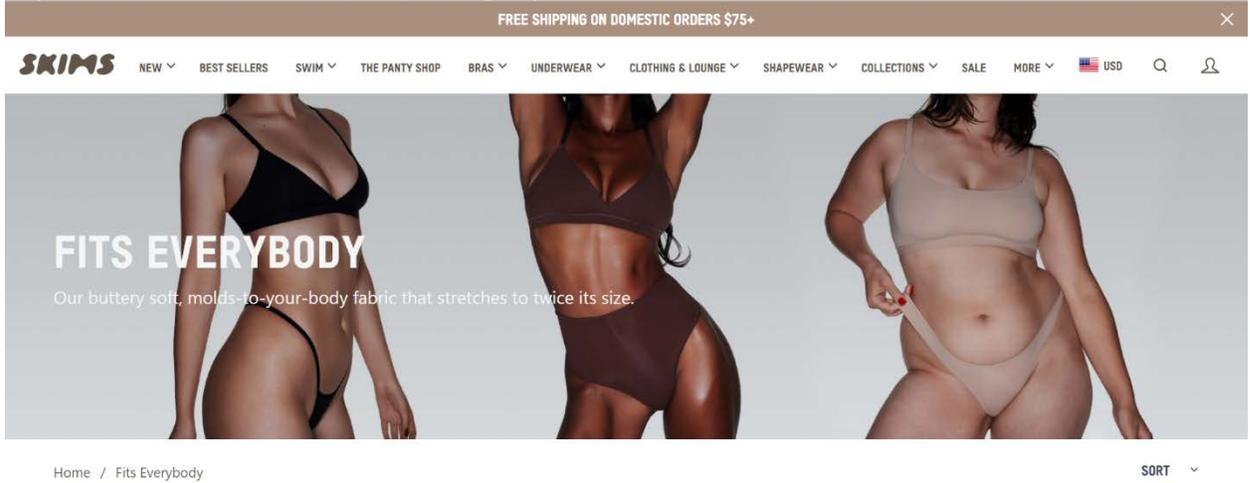


Figure 2: Aerie REAL Models



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Appendix B – Tables

Table 1: Brands per Product Category

| Sportswear | Activewear | Outerwear | Sleepwear | Lingerie |
|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Nike | Lululemon | The North Face | Victoria’s Secret | Calvin Klein |
| Adidas | Athleta | Columbia | Sleeper | Skims |
| Reebok | Fabletics | L.L. Bean | Skims | Aerie |
| Under Armour | Alo Yoga | Patagonia | Aerie | Victoria’s Secret |

Table 2: Inter-rater Reliability

| | Reliability (Kappa or ICC) |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Body Size | 0.92 |
| Overall Attractiveness | 0.89 |
| Professionalism | 0.87 |
| Well-being | 0.85 |
| Lifestyle | 0.85 |

Table 3: Summary of Average Ratings per Product Category

| | Sportswear | Activewear | Outerwear | Sleepwear | Lingerie |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Body Size | 2.13 | 2.02 | 1.97 | 2.18 | 1.98 |
| Overall Attractiveness | 3.12 | 3.02 | 2.93 | 2.93 | 3.10 |
| Professionalism | 3.33 | 3.12 | 3.00 | 3.08 | 3.40 |
| Well-being | 3.38 | 3.20 | 3.13 | 3.12 | 3.42 |
| Lifestyle | 3.62 | 3.32 | 3.23 | 3.28 | 3.62 |

Table 4: Average Ratings for Sportswear Brands, Nike and Reebok

| | Nike | | Reebok | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | Slim Model | Plus Model | Slim Model | Plus Model |
| Body Size | 1.33 | 4.00 | 1.00 | 3.67 |
| Overall Attractiveness | 3.67 | 3.00 | 3.33 | 2.67 |
| Professionalism | 3.00 | 1.00 | 4.67 | 1.67 |
| Well-being | 3.33 | 2.00 | 3.67 | 2.00 |
| Lifestyle | 4.00 | 2.00 | 4.33 | 2.00 |

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Table 5: Average Ratings for Activewear Brands, Lululemon and Athleta

| | Lululemon | | Athleta | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | Slim Model | Plus Model | Slim Model | Plus Model |
| Body Size | 1.00 | 4.00 | 1.00 | 3.33 |
| Overall Attractiveness | 2.33 | 1.67 | 3.00 | 2.00 |
| Professionalism | 2.33 | 2.00 | 3.00 | 1.33 |
| Well-being | 3.00 | 2.00 | 3.00 | 2.67 |
| Lifestyle | 3.00 | 2.00 | 3.00 | 2.67 |

Table 6: Average Ratings for Outerwear Brands, The North Face and Columbia

| | The North Face | | Columbia | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | Slim Model | Plus Model | Slim Model | Plus Model |
| Body Size | 1.00 | 3.33 | 2.00 | 2.33 |
| Overall Attractiveness | 2.33 | 1.67 | 3.00 | 2.00 |
| Professionalism | 2.33 | 2.00 | 2.67 | 1.33 |
| Well-being | 3.00 | 2.00 | 3.33 | 2.67 |
| Lifestyle | 3.00 | 2.00 | 3.00 | 2.67 |

Table 7: Average Ratings for Sleepwear Brand, Skims

| | Skims | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | Slim Model | Plus Model |
| Body Size | 1.00 | 4.00 |
| Overall Attractiveness | 3.33 | 1.67 |
| Professionalism | 3.67 | 1.33 |
| Well-being | 3.33 | 1.67 |
| Lifestyle | 3.00 | 1.33 |

Table 8: Averaged Ratings for Lingerie, Skims and Aerie

| | Skims | | Aerie | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | Slim Model | Plus Model | Slim Model | Plus Model |
| Body Size | 1.00 | 4.33 | 2.67 | 1.00 |
| Overall Attractiveness | 3.33 | 1.33 | 2.33 | 4.00 |
| Professionalism | 3.00 | 1.00 | 1.67 | 3.67 |
| Well-being | 3.33 | 1.67 | 2.33 | 4.00 |
| Lifestyle | 3.33 | 1.33 | 2.67 | 4.33 |

Table 9: Pearson's Correlation for Body Size

| | Body Size Pearson's Correlation Coefficient |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Overall Attractiveness | -0.61 |
| Model Well-being | -0.76 |
| Model Healthy Lifestyle | -0.90 |
| Model Ideal Lifestyle | -0.92 |

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