



The Rise of Body Positivity and Inclusivity in Fashion Marketing

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ABSTRACT

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The objective of this thesis was to evaluate, observe, and understand how body positivity and inclusivity are implemented into marketing within the scope of the fashion industry, how brands have adapted to these concepts, how consumers perceive these changes, and what valuable improvements can be made further for companies to assess body positivity and inclusivity in a conscious and mindful matter.

The thesis was divided into four parts: theoretical research, quantitative study, a benchmarking company used as an example of successful representation, and conclusions. The theoretical part was based on literature sources, internet findings, and relevant articles. Relevant articles were the primary source of information as body positivity remains a recent phenomenon in a rapidly changing fashion industry. The theoretical knowledge base focused on current events in fashion marketing. To support theoretical claims, a survey-based study was carried out to analyze customer perception and consumer behavior regarding body positivity and inclusivity, and the benchmarking company showcased a successful implementation of those into the business strategy.

Theoretical research helped establish the importance of body positivity and inclusivity in the current market and observe what improvements are yet to be done. The findings of the survey presented first-hand opinions and were exceptionally useful in evaluating consumer behavior and making valuable conclusions from them. The benchmarking company helped understand how a brand should approach body positivity and inclusivity through a real-life applicable example.

The key findings of the research displayed and confirmed the importance of body positivity in fashion marketing for both companies and consumers. The implementation of inclusivity into a brand's fashion marketing strategy is not easy and has its pitfalls, but necessary to take into consideration. Based on the study, fashion brands should ensure their values align with their actions, take those concepts into consideration at every stage of their strategy, and develop more profound understanding of body positivity and inclusivity.

Key words: body positivity, inclusivity, inclusive marketing, customer perception

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1 INTRODUCTION

Body positivity refers to the movement that encourages acceptance of our bodies, regardless of size, shape, skin tone, gender, and physical abilities (Leboeuf, 2019). In recent years, the body positivity movement started gaining momentum and becoming normalized across all industries, including the fashion industry – there has been a large shift in how bodies are represented in society and in the media. (Yeboah, 2020). This thesis focuses on body positivity and inclusivity within the scope of fashion marketing – how strategies have changed in the recent years, as well as how customers perceive and react to those changes. The conversation of body positivity and inclusivity is rapidly growing in relevance and importance, as consumers are increasingly shopping with companies whose values align with their own – and in the case of fashion marketing a profound connection with customers has become essential. (Chitrakorn, 2020). It is now high time fashion retail to prioritize body positivity in their business approach to create customer retention, increase trust of customers, as well as modernize the industry (Luzon, 2019).

1.1 Objective and motivation

This thesis aims to thoroughly observe, analyze, and research body positivity and inclusivity within the fashion marketing scope, learn how fashion marketing is utilizing and implementing body positivity and inclusivity in campaigns, where improvement can be made, and gain valuable consumer insights with the help of quantitative data gathered from a survey that focused on customer perception, perception of importance, customer preferences, and awareness. Voglia, a Finnish fashion brand, is introduced as a successful and positive example of implementation of body positivity and inclusivity within campaigns and marketing strategy as a benchmarking company, with an additional interview with the CEO of Voglia.

The objective of this thesis is to thoroughly analyze, study, and research body positivity within the fashion marketing scope, learn how fashion marketing is utilizing and implementing body positivity and inclusivity in campaigns, and analyze

consumer response on body positivity in campaigns based on customer perception and behavior by gaining firsthand consumer insights. Based on the research, valuable conclusions were made that can facilitate further findings.

The purpose of this thesis was to not only theoretically research body positivity and inclusivity in fashion marketing, but also help companies and marketing professionals introduce body positivity and inclusivity into their brand's objective in an authentic, relatable, and ethical manner.

Body positivity has shown a significant increase in popularity across every industry, as how bodies are portrayed in the media and in society was brought to the forefront over the last few years (Yeboah, 2020). In the recent years, consumers have started to demand more from retailers, and retailers are starting to act on the demands and wishes of their unsatisfied customer base (Luzon, 2019). Therefore, the motivation behind the thesis was to assess the growing relevance of the movement as it ties with how businesses operate, what they present to the consumers, and whether they succeed.

1.2 Research questions

The main objective for findings, and therefore, the question of the thesis was: How have body positivity and inclusivity been implemented into fashion marketing and its operations?

The additional and supportive research questions set for the thesis were as follows:

- 1) How has body positivity changed the way fashion marketing operates?
- 2) Which areas of body positivity and inclusivity in fashion marketing need improvement?
- 3) How are consumers affected by body positivity and inclusivity in fashion marketing campaigns?
- 4) How can brands and companies facilitate and enhance body positivity and inclusivity in their marketing strategies?

1.3 Working methods

This thesis included, but was not limited to, a survey-based study. Multiple working methods were utilized to reach the objective and answer main research questions. First and foremost, for valuable quantitative data a survey in the form of a questionnaire was sustained for female participants from European countries and Russia. The reason for female-oriented demographic was that women are more likely than men to purchase apparel, whether men's or women's (Stuart, 2019). The objective of the survey was to gather real-life information from consumers that choose to purchase clothing from fashion brands online and in stores. All the questions were presented as multiple choice without an option for free choice typing answers, except for the last question where everyone was welcome to type an answer in case they were willing to do so. The answers were then analyzed via SurveyMonkey survey analysis, and the last question of the mandatory part was used to gather qualitative data directly from participants for further use and reflection. This part of the research and the conclusions drawn were crucial for one to understand how body positivity and inclusivity affects a consumer. Consumers are the base of marketing as everything within marketing is tailored directly to attract, influence, and retain the consumer. Customers are important for multiple reasons: firstly, they drive revenues; secondly, without them businesses cannot continue to exist (Kenton, 2021). This data allowed to get firsthand opinions from the target consumer group and can be utilized by companies accordingly.

1.4 Benchmarking company

A Finnish fashion family-owned company Voglia, established in 1983, is used as a benchmark within the thesis with an additional interview with the brand's CEO. Its marketing campaigns, social media visuals, implementation of body positivity and inclusivity are presented in the thesis as an example of how a fashion company operates with body positivity and inclusivity in mind. Voglia can be considered a positive example for multiple reasons: first, they have a solid representation of body types across their website and social media channels. Secondly, their size selection is wide, running from sizes 34 to 50. Lastly, they implement body

positivity across all their campaigns, including hashtags on their social media account such as #BodyAcceptance, #AllBodiesAreValid, and #BodyNeutrality (Voglia, 2021). The brand is dedicated to and strives to take body positivity and inclusivity into consideration within all its processes, from product development such as sizing to promotion and marketing such as website selection and campaigns.

1.5 Main concepts and theory

1.5.1 Body positivity and inclusivity

Body positivity is a movement that advocates the view that people should not be ashamed of the appearance of their body, or any other feature of their physical appearance and aspect, with an emphasis on the size of their body (Collins Dictionary, 2021).

Body inclusivity is the practice and movement providing an access that is equal in the ways opportunities and resources are given to people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as if they have physical or mental disabilities or belong to groups of minorities (Oxford Languages, n.d.). Body positivity encompasses any individual or movement actions which aim to denounce the societal influences and construction of body norms, while promoting self-love and acceptance of bodies of any shape, appearance, and most importantly size instead (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Body positivity as a term originates from the acceptance movement, the origins of which can be dated back to the 1960s (Gulino, 2021).

1.5.2 Inclusive marketing

Marketing is the process of planning and implementing the concept, pricing, promotion and dissemination of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy customers and organizational goals. Marketing directly reflects the business philosophy of an organization. (Burnett, 2010). Inclusivity means including those who might be excluded or marginalized from the majority otherwise (Struve, 2019). Inclusive marketing challenges existing ideas of what a brand usually represents and the ways products are used to satisfy a wider net

— one that may include demographics they may have not been considered before, or have been underrepresented (Sukhraj, 2021). Inclusive marketing includes and revolves around making content that reflects the diverse communities of people who may buy the brand's products in an authentic way. This could mean introducing and featuring advertisement that connects and relates to all people no matter what their race, age, gender identity, sexual orientation are - and any other group they may belong in. (Pittaway, 2020).

1.5.3 Fashion marketing

Marketing represents company's activities which they carry out in order to attract new customers and retain ones that exist. Fashion marketing is a branch of marketing in which the industry conducts advertising campaigns and promotional events of garments and accessories for target customers. (Bhasin, 2019).

Fashion marketing is the application of certain techniques for promotion as well as a business philosophy that puts the customer and potential customer in the center, in order to meet goals of the organization itself (Easey, 2009).

1.5.4 Customer perception

Customer perception is the customer's opinion on one's business or products (Stec, 2021). Customer perception plays an essential role in the business process, from understanding the customers to communicating with them, advertising, their buying decisions, brand loyalty, the extent to which they would be able to recommend a brand as well as their advocacy efforts (Zhang, 2019). According to Ringshall (2021), businesses place a big importance on customer perception for the fact that it directly affects their processes. A change in customer opinion might lead to losses in revenue, market share, and worsening of reputation.

1.5.5 Benchmarking

Benchmarking is a tool for improvement achieved through comparison with other organisations, according to Andersen and Pettersen (1995). Benchmarking as a process is utilized in the research as a way to demonstrate how body positivity

and inclusivity may be implemented. Voglia, a Finnish apparel brand, was selected for the purpose of this benchmarking analysis to support theoretical findings as well as business case examples. The idea is that by understanding how a company completes a process, a business can find ways to make their own processes more efficient (Marr, 2020).

2 BODY POSITIVITY AND INCLUSIVITY IN FASHION MARKETING

2.1 Body positivity overview

Body positivity, as a new term, has several definitions according to various expert opinions. For this particular study, body positivity will be defined as any written or visual message that challenges most common ways of perceiving the physical body in relation to beauty ideals, as well as encourages the restoration of control over your self-image (Cwyran-Horta, 2016). The movement strives to embrace and elevate someone's physique or certain physical characteristics, shifting the emphasis from imposing a sense of insecurity and cleansing one's appearance to unconditional self-love (Chiat, 2021). Body positivity encloses any individual or collective actions aimed at rejecting the influence of beauty standards on society, and instead strives for self-love and acceptance of bodies regardless of their size or appearance (Cwyran-Horta, 2016). The current movement was created by a group of activists who wanted to help people increase their self-confidence and love themselves regardless of their physical appearance and relation to modern beauty standards (Chiat, 2021). Body positivity is associated with self-determination and the elimination of social impact by lessening structural inequalities that make certain bodies seem more valuable than others (Dalessandro, 2016). Since the popularization of the movement, there have been surges in plus-size brands that have extended their sizes by taking larger bodies into account (Yeboah, 2020).

2.2 Body positivity in fashion marketing

The fashion industry is important - almost everyone is a direct consumer of fashion, often visiting retail stores or buying at markets (Hutchison, 2014). According to Luzon (2019), body exclusivity is integrated into the fashion industry. In the case of fashion marketing, there are target customers, but they are not one specific group of customers. In fact, there are several different groups of target customers (Bhasin, 2019). For a long time, fashion was mainly focused on people of "normal size". In retail, options for people of small sizes or large sizes have been and remain limited (Jess, 2021). The change was long overdue – but in recent years, consumers have begun to demand more from brands and will not

tolerate body shaming or insensitivity in culture. This change in perception has a direct impact on fashion marketing: while consumers have become more vocal and critical due to freedom of speech on social media, brands have begun to act on their unsatisfied customer base (Luzon, 2019.)

The fashion industry has played an important role in developing ways to educate consumers about what it really means to fit into society. Most people recognize the fact that the way they dress is reflected in many ways: it makes a first impression, reflects your character and gives an idea of your likes and dislikes. (Hutchison, 2014). With the advent of social networks combined with increased pressure on action, young people are forcing leading retailers not only to be socially responsible, but also to adapt to changing times (Luzon, 2019). The purpose of shifting brands towards body positivity is to accurately represent society, which contributes to the strengthening of confidence and dignity among young people. This can be seen in social media and positive reviews, as well as from one's personal experience. (Gupta, 2019). As the outlook for the body has changed, the fashion industry has improved the supply of plus-size clothing, opting for a market that is more size-sensitive. This change encourages women to be satisfied with their body of any size. Many well-known brands now offer fashion in large sizes, contributing to women's enthusiasm for shopping, but, more importantly, creating a more positive self-image and embracing confidence. (Miller, 2020).

2.3 Body positivity importance

Body positivity is associated with the idea that not everyone has a size 0, as well as with the value that a person has outside of his shape and size. It is also not limited to an individual learning of what a healthy body is, and that appearance is not the only significant feature of an individual. (Kernan, 2018). According to a new Salesforce study, 90% of consumers believe that companies have a strong responsibility to look beyond profits and improve the state of society (Siegel, 2021). The fashion industry is changing and adapting, and its relevance will never decrease, mainly due to fashion influencing a fundamental part of everyone's life – for example, how we are perceived (Hutchison, 2014). Therefore, the fashion industry has a significant impact on society. In a world where bodies are shamed

for not conforming to the norm, well-known influencers and personalities speak out against criticism from the media. Many people, particularly women, have come out against brands for continuing to promote a body image that most cannot achieve. (Pascual, 2020). The body positivity movement and certain activists play an important role in changing how people view their bodies (Humann, 2021). The fashion industry as a whole has only recently begun to change its approach. For a long time, the industry mainly used 'white, young, skinny' models to advertise clothing, as well as in brand commercials on television or elsewhere. As for fashion industry standards, the sample clothing size is usually between 0 and 4 (US sizing), which does not correspond to the average body size. When studies and statistics began to appear showing how these factors negatively affect people, brands began to reevaluate the current state of events. (Humann, 2021).

2.3.1 Psychological importance

It was found that advertising an ideal body type negatively affects the self-esteem and behavior of consumers, while advertising with a body positive campaign positively benefits the self-esteem and behavior of consumers (Bethell, 2020). A recent study conducted by Cohen (2019) showcased that women who viewed positive body images on social media had significantly better body appreciation and overall satisfaction compared to women who viewed images that corresponded to the ideal of thinness (Brathwaite et al., 2021). According to Geerkens (2019), when people receive more positive body messages, they begin to see themselves better by comparing themselves to these posts, rather than when they see toned and 'perfect' bodies. In a world where the prevailing mentality is that a person should be embarrassed by his or her body and striving for the ideal, viewing one's physical aspects as something not only quite acceptable, but also perfectly normal is a powerful message to send (Yeboah, 2020).

2.3.2 Progress

Body positivity involves developing a stable self-image by accurately representing society. Over the past couple of years, several brands have been actively adopting body positivity ideas and diversifying size selection in their business

model. (Luzon, 2019). Recently, there has been an increase in the number of bigger bodies being on front pages in some of world's most popular and largest fashion magazines and advertising campaigns (Yeboah, 2020). The body positive movement and body positive activists play an important role in changing the way people perceive their own body. According to Humann (2021), the more variety and diversity there is in the fashion industry, the better. When brands and companies work with all body types, races, and identities in mind, everyone is satisfied.

The fashion industry is slowly changing for the better, with some clothing brands expanding their size selection, and a lot of campaigns pledging to include less edited images and more diverse models that better represent how people look in real life (Alnuweiri, 2018).

2.3.3 Brands adapting to body positivity

As consumers have become more vocal due to their increased use of social media and critical thinking, companies have begun to act on their unsatisfied customer base (Luzon, 2019). Fortunately, many brands are joining the body positive movement by promoting inclusivity in a variety of ways. One example of brand adaptation could be Nike as one of the largest retailers in the world - NIKE was ranked 341st in the 2019 World's 500 companies list. (Liu, 2021). Nike's recent marketing campaigns are aimed at empowering women and engaging them in sports and recreation. Their promotional materials feature people of different backgrounds, skin colors, and gender identities. This can also be seen on their in-store mannequins, which now include an oversized body, further contributing to their diversity. (Jess, 2021). The rise in body positivity campaigns has enabled and allowed more people to shop with brands that can help them accept themselves as they are. The Internet has embraced the idea and awareness that skinny is not the only body standard in existence. (Pascual, 2020).

2.4 Inclusivity in fashion marketing

2.4.1 Inclusive marketing overview

Inclusive marketing seeks to create a more representative visual culture. It seeks to appreciate and understand different identities, differences, and histories. (Fish, 2016). The best inclusive marketing campaigns aim to bring up the stories of people who have been or have been consistently marginalized or underrepresented in some way (Pittaway, 2020). Inclusive marketing can be defined as the conscious creation of an advertising campaign that respectfully includes and takes into account the complexity of the individuals who make up the target audience. Inclusive marketing grows in line with body positivity itself. However, as the population becomes more outspoken and less tolerant of underrepresentation, as well as more media and communication savvy, it becomes difficult to connect with the audience to create a genuine sense of inclusivity (Dimitrieska et al., 2019). According to statistics for 2020, a total of 44% of consumers believe that it is important that brand values match their own, while 52% of the millennial demographic agree with this. In fact, if a brand is aimed at the younger generation, inclusive marketing is absolutely necessary in order for companies to secure and retain the attention of customers (Pittaway, 2020). In the last decade, there has been an exponential growth in the push towards inclusivity in the fashion industry. The inclusivity movement has taken center stage in all media, from print publications to social networks. (Sinha, 2021).

2.4.2 Size inclusivity

Over the past five years, the push for more inclusivity in fashion has echoed the body positivity movement in its approach to bringing impactful, long-lasting change to the fashion industry (Hudgens, 2021). The philosophy of inclusive size selection will ensure a fun and enjoyable shopping experience for all people, especially when friends of different sizes shop together (Motif, n.d.). Size inclusion supports the brand's commitment to body positivity, and marketing campaigns would not serve their purpose if sizes were not presented in stores accordingly. Therefore, inclusive shops, both online and in-person, are focused on providing a shopping experience equal for each customer regardless of their body size. The

concept of inclusive sizing means overcoming barriers and initiating a new segment approach beyond the "standard" size, which, in turn, gives everyone an equal opportunity to be themselves. (Pignard, 2020).

2.4.3 Inclusivity in fashion marketing social media

The media have been shown to play a significant role in influencing perceived social and cultural norms and standards of beauty (Grabe et al., 2008). Brands should and are expected to start a conversation on social media platforms. Depending on the markets in which they operate, there is a perception that brands should consider body positive and inclusivity in their promotional strategies. People want to feel good and be featured on the platform of their everyday lives, and by using language that helps consumers feel good about themselves, brands can gain attention in an authentic and organic manner. (Oinonen, 2021.) A truly inclusive approach to social media means constantly developing new ways to make content both accessible and diverse, both physically and visibly. People want to be able to access authentic content and see themselves reflected in it. (Gilbert, 2021).

2.5 Business case examples

More companies have started to adapt to body positivity within their marketing campaigns. Aerie, Target, ASOS, Old Navy and other companies started to encourage body positivity and have taken measures to incorporate the body positivity movement into their strategies, both marketing and product. (Gupta, 2019). Well-known brands such as Vero Moda, Universal Standard, and Pink Clove as well as a combination of various leading high street and fast fashion brands expanding their sizes for larger bodies (Yeboah, 2020). By featuring models of different shapes, nationalities, and abilities, these clothing companies have improved their reach to customers, increased their target base, as well as improved their own reputability (Gupta, 2019).

One of the brands known across the world for its approach to body positivity is the US based company Aerie. This brand has been on the forefront of the body

positivity within fashion marketing for a long time and has implemented authenticity successfully - Aerie's annual revenues exceeded \$1 billion in 2020. (Eli, 2021). Aerie is a lingerie and leisurewear brand from the American Eagle division. Aerie has been successful with its body positivity campaigns, as exemplified by the announcement of the first spokesperson, Iskra Lawrence, the face of the brand for body inclusivity. Their inclusive campaign was called AerieREAL. AerieREAL stands for the elimination of retouching images of its models. This decision was made after the company saw how harmful the altered images were to young and impressionable customers. Since 2014, their campaigns have featured models of all shapes and sizes, and the brand's images are free from being retouched: stomach fat, wrinkles, acne, and other "flaws" that would normally be removed from advertisements via Photoshop were all left unretouched. (Milnes, 2019). Jennifer Foyle, executive creative director of Aerie, has said that the company has built a powerful community that they continue to embrace, creating even better opportunities to uplift and support their customers' voices (Eli, 2021). As seen in Picture 1, Aerie implements their body positivity approach into their social media platforms. Launching in 2014, Aerie's original message of body positivity and inclusivity was the central focus of campaigns. AerieREAL marketing campaign use models that are not improved with airbrushing techniques used by competitors who prefer to advertise their clothes with bodies that fit the typical beauty standards. (Kohan, 2020).

ASOS, a British retail corporation, has also incorporated body positivity into its social media strategy, as shown in Picture 2. According to Pace (2018), ASOS has announced that they will start showing the same pieces of clothing on models of different body shapes and sizes. Even being a brand that already sells more than thirty different sizes for almost every item in their catalogue, this feature was considered groundbreaking for women who want clothes to fit their

body better before buying an item.



PICTURE 1. Aerie clothing Instagram campaign



PICTURE 2. ASOS clothing Instagram campaign

2.6 Where improvement is needed in fashion marketing

As more people outside of white, skinny, cisgender women are represented in ad campaigns, it's easy to mistake the shift in marketing for a shift in the culture and business (Gaillot, 2017). Some believe that in the past few years, the movement has been commodified (Eil, 2021). There are several steps retailers can take to

boost body positivity in changing times, especially by taking the emotionally challenging aspect of size into consideration. The first step retailers should take if they choose to adjust to body positivity is to consider all sizes and treat it as the new normal, not as an exception. Many brands have started to include plus-size, petite, and medium-sized products in addition to their traditional-sized clothing. As much as it is important to meet the needs of people with larger bodies in fashion, there are many women and men whose sizes fall somewhere in the middle and remain completely unnoticed. (Luzon, 2019). Even though the body-positive topics that companies promote might seem authentic, often these advertising campaigns are not inclusive enough and still promote the narrative of what acceptable beauty is. Body positivity now seems to have become a free-for-all movement, monetized, and politicized by brands and public figures, and the movement has started to exclude people outside of a certain size and a certain ethnicity out of the conversation, considering that they started the movement and the conversation in the first place. (Ell, 2021).

Other ways in which corporations undermine the positive values of the body can be editing the flaws out of images or using plus-size models that are closer to the standard body (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Quite a few brands have been noticed doing this - they publish body positive content or use certain hashtags under their posts to attract customers, all while not aligning with the values of the movement. (Styx, 2021). However, these are far from the only problems that body positivity faces. Everlane can be used as a real example of the mismatch between the brand's idea and reality that took place in 2018. Everlane is an American clothing retailer that sells primarily online. When Everlane entered the underwear market in March 2018, they included a plus-size model in their advertising campaigns. However, when plus-sized women went online or to the store to purchase the underwear in the ad, they were disappointed to learn that the line had only gone up to size XL (equivalent to size 14 according to the standard size chart). (Blackhart, 2019). A special outfit made for a size 14 runway model, or a photograph of the largest woman who can wear a product made in the usual size range does not solve the structural problem in a way that is meaningful - it only briefly addresses the issue required by our current cultural values. (Mull, 2018). If companies want to become meaningful by embracing bodies of various shapes and

sizes, they also need to create products for these bodies. In this way, their products can align with their marketing efforts. (Pascual, 2020).

Despite the fact that significant noticeable progress has been made in the fashion industry through the efforts of the movement for a positive body perception, it is necessary to improve the inclusion of men and gender nonconforming individuals. The aspect of body positivity for males is largely overlooked. Most male models are white, thin, and able-bodied, and plus-size men are rarely seen in the fashion campaigns in general. (Humann, 2020). Brands continue to misunderstand that identifying a problem and solving it are not the same thing, and if customers are convinced that problems are moving in the right direction, and consumer problems have been internal, then the actual reasons why so many people don't feel good about themselves and being who they are in the world are ignored. (Mull, 2018). The use of "ordinary" models can significantly benefit the improvement of positive self-perception and healthier behavior of consumers. But at the same time, this approach - challenging the industry's stereotypical view of body image and appearance - may just slightly improve the situation by glossing over the problem without really understanding it. (Gatrell, 2015). Even though the movement has made incredible progress for bodies that are often neglected and created tangible opportunities for less privileged people, it has at the same time created its own standard of beauty, which many of the disadvantaged feel they cannot attain or achieve (Ell, 2021). According to Kiefer (2020), the advertising and marketing industry tends to stay ahead of trends and catch up quickly in order to stay relevant and make a profit, but sometimes this can be detrimental to creating long-term and worthwhile changes.

"Today advertisers want to talk to us about health, but what is going to happen tomorrow? What about the "real women" who have had to relearn how to maintain a positive relationship with their bodies when societal trends come and go?" - Kiefer (2020).

3 CUSTOMER PERCEPTION OF BODY POSITIVITY AND INCLUSIVITY IN FASHION MARKETING

3.1 Customer perception overview

Customer perception plays an important role in business, from understanding customers to communicating with them, their purchasing decisions, brand awareness and loyalty, the degree to which they like the brand, and more importantly, their brand recommendation. Marketing by its definition is meant to attract customers and engage and motivate them to purchase through commercial activities, brand interaction, and experiences that will drive actions from them. These tactics are called “brand activations” and take up a significant space in different points of the consumer’s journey. The customer discovers the product, decided how he or she feels about it, gains customer perception, which can be positive or negative, and makes a decision of purchase. (Zhang, 2019). Customers can communicate their desires through social platforms through constant interaction, and this unrestricted access is largely beneficial to all consumers. On the other hand, it also poses a challenge for retailers. Retail professionals now need to express their thoughts on social causes, but only the “correct” ones. (Luzon, 2019). Advertising appeal may can influence purchase intention of consumers, as they perceive this as a type of creativity where as long as the brand can win their acceptance, then they will like the product and purchase it (Wang et al., 2013).

3.2 Customer demand for body positivity

Buying clothes can be stressful and unpleasant for many people. With ever-changing fashion trends, the average person's desire to fit in is at an all-time high. (Luzon, 2019). Consumers who consider themselves obese have stated that, in their opinion, they cannot trust advertising (Koudelka, 2013). Consumers of plus-size clothing currently demand fashionable and modern clothing that are easily accessible in stores and online (Bazaki et al., 2018). Marketers are finding that women are hoping to see real women in advertising now more than ever before (Bowman, 2020). According to Blackhart (2019), as consumers become more aware of the media they consume, they simultaneously gain awareness of the

companies that speak to them in a positive manner. Customers demand not just to see more real people, but they also wish to see people who look exactly like them, and those brands that meet that specific demand see improvements in customer retention, revenue, and other significant benefits. Consumers are increasingly making purchases from companies whose values coincide with their own values. (Chitrakorn, 2020).

Body image is a multidimensional, complex construct, which includes perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about one's appearance (Grogan, 2016). A recent study by Cohen et al. (2019) confirms the various findings that positive media content does indeed contribute to a positive body image for its viewers. However, with the recent changes and the popularization of the movements in marketing campaigns and in the media, more steps need to be taken to embrace body positivity. (Kernan, 2018). Research shows that customers are now 50 percent more interested in non-model campaigns than they used to be in 2016 (Alnuweiri, 2018). Such demand can be seen in the growing popularity and profitability of fashion brands that have successfully managed to incorporate body positivity and inclusivity into their promotional tactics.

3.3 Consumer behavior

Consumer behavior is greatly influenced by body image and self-perception. Psychological, social, and cultural changes all reflect and influence body image, and therefore pose an important, almost essential role in the marketing approach as they have a direct effect on the purchasing decision process of consumers. (Koudelka, 2013). According to Bethell (2020), brand advertising has the power to influence consumers through creating new cultural meanings. Advertising is not just about building and retaining brand awareness and promoting products - it also influences consumer beliefs, core values, and attitudes.

3.4 Customer perception of body-positive marketing campaigns

Marketers are finding that women hope to see real women in advertising currently more than they have ever before (Bowman, 2020). According to Callahan (2019), a study was organized to evaluate women's reaction to a brand Aerie marketing

campaign. For the study, which was published in summer of 2019, the focus was on a marketing campaign by the underwear company Aerie. It was reported the young women really liked the images. The consumers felt an overwhelming, positive effect on their own body image. According to Petrock (2020), consumers from different cultures and minorities react the most positively to content in which they can see themselves and their communities in a positive and realistic way. In fact, almost two-thirds of consumers are more likely to buy a product immediately after viewing its ad, provided that the brand embodies and features diversity and inclusiveness in said advertisement. (Jordan, 2021).

4 RESEARCH METHODS

In order for the thesis to reach its objective, a study was done to help grasp consumer behavior and consumer perception based on body positivity and representation of it in fashion marketing. Real-life, valuable data was needed for this thesis to have a practical recommendation for brands and companies. For this reason, the chosen research method to reach the objective was quantitative research through an online survey. Quantitative research is valuable by gaining objectivity from the collected data (Williams, 2007). The survey was established through a free online service SurveyMonkey as it was found to be the most favorable resource for quick and efficient data collection and fit the objective and the purpose of the questionnaire as a popular tool among students and researchers. (Graw, 2020). The link was be distributed via email and social media direct messages. The questions were based on consumer behavior and perception of marketing campaigns including body positivity. Questions were presented in a simplified manner for an average consumer to give accurate answers. The questions for the survey allowed for personal assessment of importance of body positivity in fashion marketing using multiple choice as well as one voluntary question open for participant suggestions. The primary focus of the study is women as they are far more likely than men to have purchased clothing, both men's and women's, within the last year (Stuart, 2019). The reason for the 18 to 35 age scope was that fast fashion brands often target these generations to gain brand loyalty from a young age into adulthood (Kohan, 2020). For the survey results to be as accurate as research allows, questions were asked in a simplified manner and easy wording – no special terms were used. For reliable research results, a certain criteria must be met: the demographic scope is well-defined, questions in the survey answer to the research question and are presented non-ambiguously, the sample is mindfully evaluated, results are repeatable, and data is collected and analyzed. Surveys are useful in the way that they are inclusive in the types of data that can be further studied, require minimal investment to develop and carry out, and are relatively easy to get accurate results from. (Glasow, 2005).

4.1 Objective for the quantitative study

The quantitative study was organized in order to identify, analyze, and closely inspect customer perception of body positivity and inclusivity in fashion marketing. The objective of the study can be defined as an attempt to closely understand whether body positivity and inclusivity affects consumers and their purchase decisions. The results of this study can be utilized by companies and marketing professionals to navigate their campaigns in a way that satisfies their customer group and builds brand loyalty.

4.2 Survey contents and background

The survey consisted of ten consecutive questions, as can be observed in Appendix 1. The first two questions focused on establishing the respondent's age and country of residence, followed by questions regarding their perception of body positivity and inclusivity as a consumer – evaluating the respondent's level of satisfaction, purchase behavior, perception, and whether they thought there is a need for improvement in fashion marketing. The last question was optional and presented in a free form, asking for the respondent's recommendations for brands and companies. The survey was created using a common free questionnaire tool SurveyMonkey and utilized to gather and analyse results. The link was sent out to women, particularly students, of ages between 18 to 35. The survey was open and available for participation from September 17, 2021, until October 10, 2021 – a total of 24 calendar days. Respondents that had been asked to answer questions directly were then asked to send out to peers within their community. The countries varied (as shown below), however, the primary geographical focus was on participants from Russia and Finland but was not limited to those: participants from the UK, Germany, and various other European countries participated in the survey.

4.3 Survey results

A total of 169 respondents answered the survey. 9 of the participants, however, did not complete it or abandoned the landing page, so their answers did not count

towards the results. 160 answers in total were evaluated, which can be seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Respondents' country of residence by percentage

Country of residence	Number of respondents	Percentage
Russia	57	35.63%
Finland	39	24.38%
United Kingdom	25	15.36%
Germany	11	6.88%
Denmark	9	5.63%
Sweden	8	5%
Spain	7	4.38%
Italy	3	1.88%
Netherlands	1	0.63%

Question 2, as can be seen in Appendix 1, was asking the participant's age. As stated below, the sample group was between the ages of 18 to 35. All the participants fell into the category except for 2 respondents being below the age group (17 years old). 37,5% (60 respondents) fell into the category of ages between 18 to 23. 48,13% (77 respondents) fell into the category of ages between 23 to 28 years of age. Lastly, 14,38% (23 respondents) fell into the category of ages between 28 to 35 years of age.

Have you made a clothing purchase online or in-store in the past 3 months?

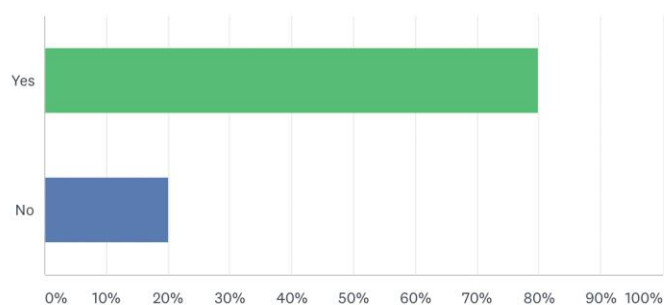


FIGURE 1. Multiple choice question number 3.

128 respondents (80%) have made a clothing purchase online or in-store in the past 3 calendar months. 32 respondents (20%) have not purchased a clothing item in the past 3 months. This question helped us define further results by identifying relevance.

Do you pay attention to what models in marketing campaigns look like?

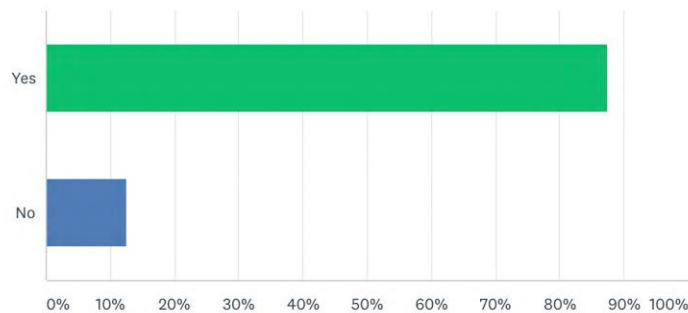


FIGURE 2. Multiple choice question number 4.

140 respondents (87,50%) answered that they pay attention to what models in marketing campaigns look like. Such a result was higher than initially expected, which might have to do with the sample group being women of a certain age. Only 12,50% of the respondents (20) felt indifferent towards what models look like in campaigns.

On a scale from 1 to 10, how important is the representation of all body types in marketing campaigns for you?

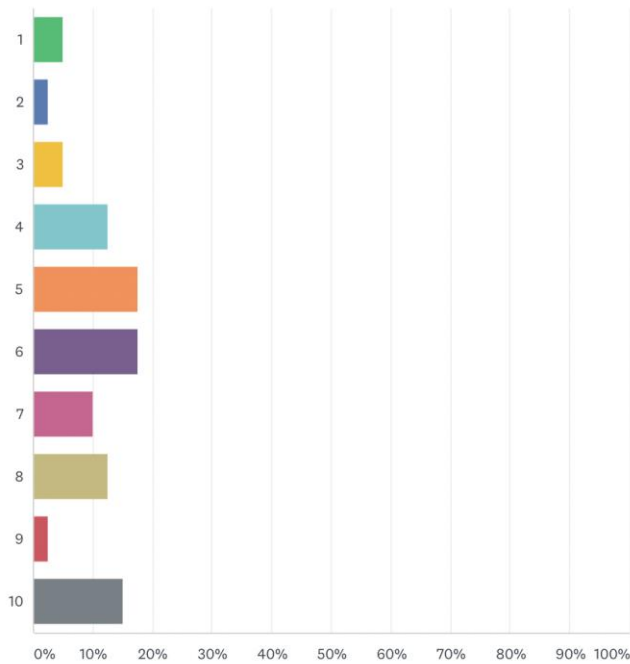


FIGURE 3. Multiple choice question number 5.

The next question was presented as a multiple-choice assessment of importance of representation of all body types in a marketing campaign. Participants were free to choose any number from 1 to 10, with 1 being of least importance and 10 being the highest importance. 40 respondents evaluated the importance of representation between 1-4 (lesser scale of importance). The majority, 72 respondents, settled for a moderate level of importance, which varied from 5 to 7. Finally, 48 respondents chose highest level of importance of body representation in marketing campaigns. Calculated by percentage, 25% evaluated a low level of importance. 45% fell into the middle level of importance. 30% of the respondents fell into the high level of importance category.

Are you less likely to purchase a clothing item if the brand only shows "ideal" slim body types?

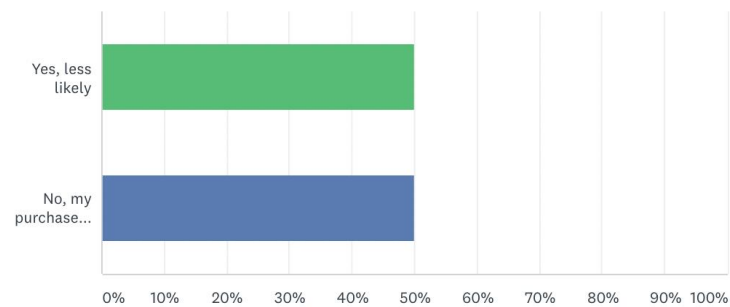


FIGURE 4. Multiple choice question number 6.

The question stated “Are you less likely to purchase a clothing item if the brand only shows “ideal” slim body types? The results were divided equally. 80 respondents (50%) answered “Yes, less likely”, meaning a brand showing exclusively “ideal” body types in campaigns affects their purchase decision negatively, influencing their decision towards looking for another clothing brand. The other 80, however, said “No, my purchase doesn’t depend on it”, meaning they will still proceed with their decision regardless of what a model looks like in a campaign.

Are you more likely to purchase an item if a model in the campaign has an "average" realistic body type?

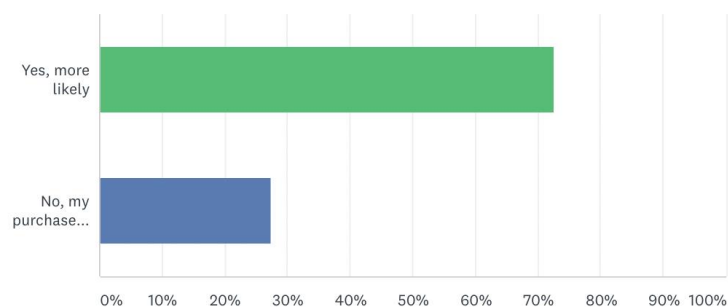


FIGURE 5. Multiple choice question number 7.

Similar to question 6, this was an opposing question to approach from a different perspective: Are you more likely to purchase an item if a model in the campaign has an “average”, realistic body type?

116 of the 160 respondents, which makes a total of 72,50% answered yes, more likely. The other 44 (27,50%) participants went with “No, my purchase doesn’t depend on it”.

Do you feel like fashion marketing has room for improvement when it comes to body type representation and inclusivity?

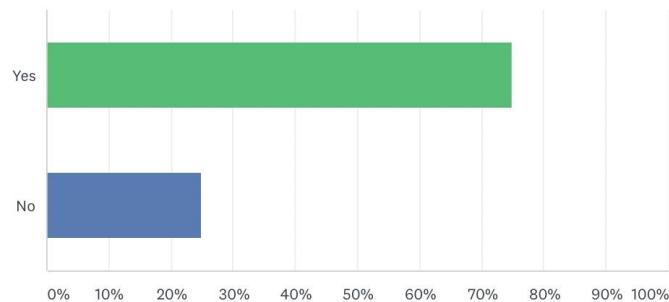


FIGURE 6. Multiple choice question number 9.

When asked “do you feel like fashion marketing has room for improvement when it comes to body type representation and inclusivity?” 120 (75%) of the respondents answered “yes”. The other 40 (25%) replied “No”, meaning they are satisfied with the current state of events.

The last question stated, as seen in Appendix 1 “If you answered yes to the previous question, what would you recommend companies do to improve their approach to body positivity?” and required a type-in answer. Due to the nature of the question, only 29 of the respondents answered. The rest of the answers were either empty or did not have any relevance to the question asked.

Out of 29 replies, they could be divided into three main groups: sizing, diversity, and authenticity. Some of the answers were as follows:

- “More diversity across campaigns, because oftentimes it’s one social media post every once in a while”
- “Actually diversify models, not just 95% of slim white women and 5% of everyone else”
- “Body positivity includes not Photoshopping of airbrushing models”
- “Plus size is not just XL, it’s 3X, 4X and more”
- “Prettier clothes for plus size women, not just basics”

- “We can tell when it’s done just for marketing and not because brands care about us”.

4.4 Survey analysis

The survey demonstrated clear results and provided significant understanding of what a customer is looking for and what their perception of body positivity and inclusivity in fashion marketing is. Both multiple-choice questions and free-choice questions were equally useful in analysing body positivity from the perspective of consumers and potential customers.

4.4.1 Multiple choice analysis

The most significant quantitative results were derived from question number 4 (Figure 3). It answered the main relevant question of the survey research and its objective: do customers pay attention to what is presented to them in terms of body positivity in fashion marketing campaigns? 87,50% agreed that they do, and that it makes a difference. According to question 6 (Figure 4), people’s decision to purchase a clothing item is not influenced or determined by whether a campaign is body-inclusive or not. This, perhaps, can be contributed to the fact consumers are used to what they see in advertising, as not all brands have adapted inclusivity. However, the opposing question, which stated whether one is more likely to purchase a clothing item if a model presented has an “average” body type rather than the “ideal” – and 72,50% agreed that they are more likely to. The conclusion derived from the two questions can be that though people’s purchase decisions are not affected by whether it’s presented on an ideal-looking body, they are more likely to proceed with the purchase if a model has an average body type. Thus, body positivity does contribute to a better customer experience. This shows that body inclusivity and positivity are significant driving forces in making people purchase something they perhaps would not purchase or recommend otherwise.

Only 7,50% of the sample group were fully satisfied with current body representation in fashion marketing campaigns. The rest were either moderately satisfied, or entirely unsatisfied. Additionally, 75% of the total group of respondents believe

there is room for improvement in how fashion brands approach body positivity in their marketing campaigns and strategy. This shows a significant demand for more inclusivity, more representation, and more diversity across different ages and countries within the scope of this demographic.

4.4.2 Free-form question outcomes

As seen in Appendix 1, the last question of the survey was “If you answered yes to the previous question, what would you recommend fashion brands do to improve their approach to body positivity?”. As the question was voluntary, 29 free-choice replies were given out of 160 survey participants. Many of them presented similar answers, such as “Diversity” and “More diversity”. Similar results were grouped and then divided into three main factors that had been mentioned: diversity, authenticity, and sizing. 9 replies had the word “size” or “sizing” in them, making 31% of the responses to do with sizing issues. Some of the replies were as follows:

- “Mid-size options” – Russia, age 24.
- “Average size is just as important as plus size” – Finland, age 20.
- “Plus-size is not only XL, but also 3X, 4X and more” – Germany, age 21.

6 replies had the word “diversity” or “inclusivity” in them, making 20,69% of the replies to do with diversification. Some of them were as follows:

- “Diversify all campaigns, not select ones” – Finland, age 21.
- “Actually diversify models not just 95% of slim white women and 5% of others” – Russia, age 23.
- “Oftentimes it’s just one social media post every once and again, we need diversity across all campaigns”. – Denmark, age 27.

Five replies had the word “authenticity” or “honesty” in them, making 17,24% of the replies to do with brand authenticity. Some of the replies were as follows:

- “Less Photoshop” – Russia, age 18.
- “Social media activism” – Finland, age 29.
- “We can tell when it’s just for marketing and not because brands care about us” – Russia, age 18.

4.5 Quantitative data conclusions

Based on the research and the survey, conclusions were drawn with the perspective of the consumer taken into consideration. According to the answers, body positivity is essential in how a customer perceives a brand, and though body positivity or lack thereof cannot be defined as the main driving motivation for purchase, the presence of it in campaigns significantly increases chances of purchase, satisfaction, and retention of the consumer. Based on the survey, only a small percentage of consumers are satisfied with the current state of body positivity and inclusivity in fashion marketing. The majority believe that there is still room for improvement regarding sizing, diversity, and authenticity in fashion and apparel marketing and the manner of companies approaching those.

Consumers recognize that though efforts made in fashion marketing over the past years have been positive and beneficial, some brands approach body positivity with the mindset of carelessness and misunderstanding, whereas customers would prefer to see real change.

Consumers are finding it essential for all fashion campaigns to represent various types of bodies and physical features authentically and casually rather than selective, infrequent, or conceptual portrayals of body positivity and inclusivity and a “forced” image, as in specifically claiming to be a body positive brand. The findings of the survey and conclusions drawn from it correlate with the main theoretical findings and support the claims made throughout the research.

5 BENCHMARKING COMPANY

Benchmarking plays a useful role in supporting and reinstating theoretical findings of the research. Benchmarking is a way of discovering what is the best performance being achieved in a particular company (Stroud, 2014.). To apply theoretical research and connect relevant findings with a real-life business example, Voglia, a Finnish fashion brand is used as a positive benchmarking case of body positivity and inclusivity within fashion marketing and brand strategy.

5.1 Voglia overview

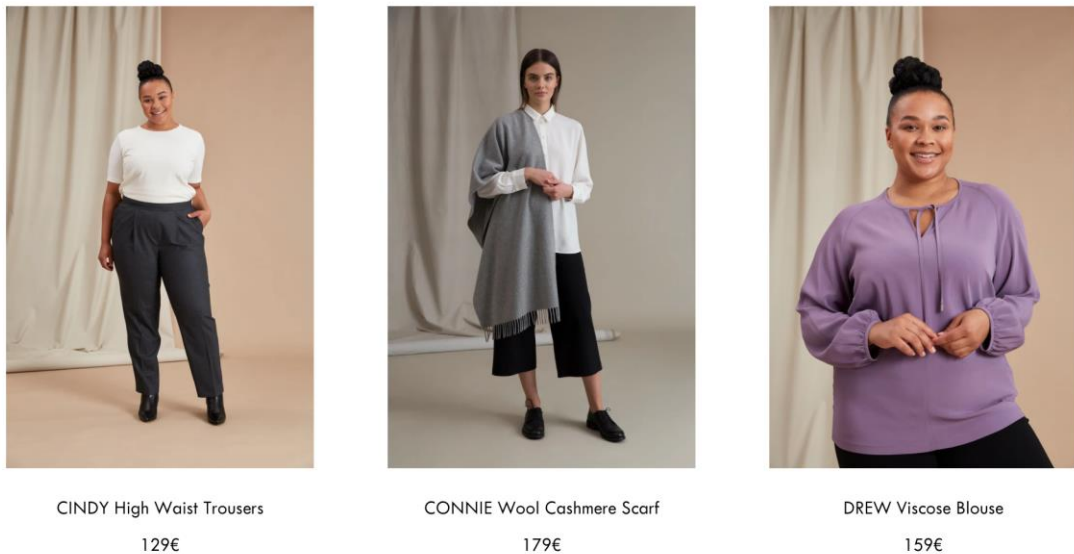
Voglia Oy designs and produces women's clothing and sells products in its boutiques and online shop. The main office of Voglia is in Lammi, Finland, and the company has stores throughout Finland, from Helsinki to Oulu. (Truivare, n.d.). The company's slogan is: Finnish brand making responsible fashion since 1983. Comfortable and timeless design for people who change the world (Voglia, 2020).

"I am honored to be the new CEO of Voglia, following the footsteps of my father Markku Virtanen, and his father, Pertti Virtanen. My grandfather had had a longtime dream of starting a new clothing concept, and Voglia was founded in 1983. Fittingly, he named the company Voglia, meaning desire, a strong will."
– Katriina Virtanen, CEO of Voglia Oy.

5.2 Voglia's approach to body positivity

As can be seen in Picture 3, Voglia features models of average and plus size measurements on their website among the range of clothing available for purchase. Rather than making announcements or excluding certain individual groups as "plus-size" or "regular size", the models in campaigns and on the website are presented in a casual manner, next to one another, and not advertised as an innovative phenomenon or separated into inclusive or non-inclusive campaigns. Drawing a conclusion to consumer opinions mentioned in the free-choice question of the survey analysis, Voglia can be seen as a brand that is

consistently succeeding in what a lot of brands are failing to achieve – implementing body positivity within their strategy in an accessible, non-complex, authentic manner and not excluding certain individuals and body shapes in favor of others. “Average size is just as important as plus size” - as one of the respondents from Finland answered when asked for suggestions for fashion brands to excel at body positivity. Voglia’s sizing for clothing is available from sizes of 34 to 50, making it easy for individuals of plus and average size to shop for clothing and accessories.



PICTURE 3. Voglia Website

5.3 Voglia on social media

Voglia implements body positivity across all their campaigns, including hashtags on their social media such as #BodyAcceptance, #AllBodiesAreValid, and #BodyNeutrality, as can be seen in Picture 4. Additionally, the brand presents their models in Instagram posts diversely – women of average and plus size bodies are featured in the exact quantity as “regular”, traditional model-looking women. Most of the time, both types are presented alongside each other (Picture 5). The brand is dedicated to and strives to take body positivity and inclusivity into consideration within all its processes, from product development such as sizing to promotion and marketing such as website campaigns and media activity.



PICTURE 4. Voglia Instagram Hashtags



PICTURE 5. Voglia Instagram Post

5.4 Voglia CEO's opinion

Katriina Virtanen, the CEO of Voglia, was interviewed with questions relevant for the research in order to get a first-hand perspective on the brand's approach to body positivity and inclusivity. When asked whether she considers body positivity and inclusivity as something of high importance in Voglia's brand strategy, Katriina answered:

“Yes. Communicating for a good cause is important and I think it is the duty of brands. We must help progress towards a more accepting society. From a business perspective, offering a more diverse product range is also more economically viable.”

The follow-up question asked whether Katriina believes fashion marketing has a long way to go before inclusivity and body positivity are the standards and in what ways brands could excel at those. The answer was:

“Big changes always take time. The history and old norms sit tight, and certain things only develop in the rhythm of generational development. Brands should live together with the change always and even prefer to be little ahead of it, perhaps.”

The final question asked whether Voglia has received positive feedback and reaction from customers in regard to size inclusivity and portrayal of body positivity in their campaigns. Katriina answered:

“We have received a lot of positive feedback! Of course, there are always opponents. In addition, these are sensitive things for others that involve a lot of personal feelings. In principle, these campaigns have helped the customer choices, size issues, and purchasing decisions.”

6 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This thesis was conducted with the aim to comprehend, analyze, and assess how body positivity and inclusivity are implemented in fashion marketing. Online and literature sources were used for the theoretical part of this research with most of the resources being published in the last two years due to the rapidly changing and growing nature of fashion marketing and its relevance, as well as body positivity being a new phenomenon. To assess customer perception and consumer behavior within the body positivity and inclusivity in fashion marketing scope, a survey-based study was organized. The answers were evaluated in accordance with research questions and confirmed most theoretical findings, specifically ones that address where fashion marketing needs improvement – diversity, authenticity, and sizing. The quantitative data also confirmed that consumers want to see more representation and bigger change in how brands approach body positivity. Several business case examples, such as social media presence of certain brands, as well as a Finnish apparel brand Voglia used as a benchmarking company were implemented into the study to demonstrate a real-life example of how fashion marketing works with body positivity and inclusivity in mind.

With the global increase in relevance of body positivity and inclusivity among most areas of daily life, the fashion industry and its marketing strategy have been undergoing tremendous change that has been noticed, seen, and evaluated by consumer. Body positivity is something consumers want to always see in fashion marketing – and recently, what used to be an option for brands to utilize has shifted into a market demand. As of today, without body positivity and inclusivity in the business strategy, companies are undermining their chances of success on the market, as consumers are turning away from companies whose values don't align with theirs. In fact, most customers believe that brands are not doing enough. Though the overall change has been positive and received good feedback due to body positive campaigns, ongoing conversation, expansion of sizing and availability for plus-size people, there is still room for improvement as there are pitfalls brands are prone to, the most significant of which are lack of diversity, selective portrayal of body positivity, lack of proper sizing, mismatch between campaigns and brand's products, as well as lack of authenticity and transparency.

These issues can be fixed through first and foremost listening to consumer's demands and needs, striving for improvement, expanding size base, and fulfilling the values companies claim to stand by. The most important development suggestion would be to start communicating with the consumer and accepting constructive criticism. Brands should be aware of their pitfalls and make conscious efforts to improve, adapt, and act accordingly - constantly and consistently.

The study provides a starting point for brands and marketing professionals to evaluate their approach to body positivity and inclusivity and presents a foundation for future investigation on how those will change in the future in an ever-changing environment of fashion and marketing at large. The thesis highlights the importance of implementing body positivity and inclusivity for a fashion brand to build a strong relationship with the customer, adapt to social and cultural changes, and succeed in its current and future ventures. Companies would benefit tremendously by paying attention to their customer's needs and demands as well as increasing their level of non-forced authenticity. The thesis reached its objective by answering research questions with validated information from various relevant sources as well as the viewpoint of the consumer. Based on the findings and data analyzed, it can be concluded that body positivity and inclusivity are essential in fashion marketing and have changed the way companies operate forever. While significant progress has been made, more development and growth are underway when it comes to authenticity, sizing, alignment of values with actions, and general representation.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Survey

Body Positivity and Inclusivity in Fashion Marketing

* 1. Your location/country of residence? 

* 2. Your age? 

3. Have you made a clothing purchase online or in-store in the past 3 months? 


Yes

No

4. Do you pay attention to what models in marketing campaigns look like? 

Yes


No

5. On a scale from 1 to 10, how important is the representation of all body types in marketing campaigns for you? 


- | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 6 |
| <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 7 |
| <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 8 |
| <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 9 |
| <input type="radio"/> 5 | <input type="radio"/> 10 |

6. Are you less likely to purchase a clothing item if the brand only shows "ideal" slim body types? 


- Yes, less likely
- No, my purchase doesn't depend on it

7. Are you more likely to purchase an item if a model in the campaign has an "average" realistic body type? 

- Yes, more likely
- No, my purchase doesn't depend on it

8. How satisfied are you with the current fashion campaigns in terms of their portrayal of body types? 

- Unsatisfied
- Moderately satisfied
- Fully satisfied

9. Do you feel like fashion marketing has room for improvement when it comes to body type representation and inclusivity? 

- Yes
- No

10. If you answered yes to the previous question, what would you recommend fashion brands do to improve their approach to body positivity? 

