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Does One Size Fit All?

Brand Strategies for Plus-size Labels in the Fashion Industry

by

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Abstract

Purpose: With increasing obesity rates and the change of beauty ideals within society, the plus-size fashion market currently enjoys a massive upturn and many established fashion retailers realise the opportunities within this ever more important segment. However, the integration of plus-size brands can be challenging as being plus-size is still stigmatised. Therefore, it is surprising that current literature, and even less brand management literature, has not sufficiently regarded this recent development even though the choice of brand strategy is one of the main drivers of brand equity and further influences the image and reputation among customers. Hence, the purpose of this thesis is to investigate the phenomenon of plus-size branding in the fashion industry from a customer and company perspective. Therefore, the aim of this research is to analyse different brand architecture strategies in the context of plus-size branding to guide brand managers in the choice of strategy when entering the new segment.

Methodology: This study examines the viewpoints of company representatives and plus-size and straight-size customers. To gain insights into the business perspective we conducted four in-depth interviews with current or former employees of leading fashion retailers, namely Dressmann XL, Hugo Boss, Marc Cain and a German fashion retailer. Moreover, we conducted in-depth interviews with six plus-size customers and referred to the findings of four interviews with straight-size customers conducted during the course Qualitative Research Methods and supplemented the results with social media observations.

Findings: The results have shown that there is no ‘One Size Fits All’ plus-size brand strategy and that every strategy has benefits and drawbacks that can guide brand managers in their decision and mainly refer to three aspects. Firstly, brand managers need to consider the existing resources such as store space, the mother brand asset as well as business operations since certain brand strategies require enormous commitment in terms of investment. Secondly, the brand’s target group is a crucial factor to take into account as preferences vary among different age groups, size ranges and shopping types. Those preferences especially refer to the labelling of the brand, the store and website concept and the use of models. Finally, brand managers have to consider their brand’s concept, mainly the specialisation of the product offering and the positioning and identity of the brand.

Original/value: Within the brand management literature the topic of plus-sizes has been neglected so far, despite its massive importance due to the growing target market. Moreover, this thesis includes perspectives of plus-size and straight-size customers as well as of company representatives and further considers social changes regarding beauty ideals and social stigmas which are of growing relevance within society. Hence, this thesis is the first of its kind to analyse brand strategies within the plus-size fashion industry and to provide a holistic view on the topic of plus-size branding.

Keywords: Plus-Size, Brand Architecture, Brand Strategy, Fashion Branding, Brand Portfolio

Limitations: The sampling is the main limitation of the study. In his respect, further research should include the perspectives of different kinds of customers in terms of age and buying behaviour and companies in terms of positioning, target groups and chosen plus-size brand strategies.

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1. Introduction

This chapter describes the problematisation of plus-size branding, the focus and purpose of our study and how the thesis is structured.

Rising obesity rates and the change of beauty ideals within society have urged established fashion retailers to adapt their product offering and enter the plus-size market. Even though this segment is projected to grow steadily, the integration of plus-size brands is challenging due to the stigma connected to plus-sizes. However, because of this stigma and since brand strategy is the main driver of brand equity, there is an urge to study what fashion brands have to consider when choosing a brand strategy for the extension into the plus-size segment, especially due to the lack of literature in that field.

1.1 Background

Beauty and beauty ideals have always been a topic of great interest over the past centuries. As illustrated by a recent study, only 4% of women worldwide would describe themselves as beautiful (Unilever, 2019). Whereas this number has increased from 2% since 2004 (Unilever, 2019), these figures are disturbing considering the fact that not feeling beautiful is strongly related to low self-esteem, self-worth, and happiness as a study by Etcoff, Orbach, Scott & D'Agostino (2004) demonstrates. The authors illustrate that beauty represents a main source of concern for women compared to almost every other dimension of life. This results in the avoidance of social activities such as going to the beach, shopping for clothes or even self-actualising activities, for example stating one's opinion, attending a job interview, or going to a doctor (Etcoff, Orbach, Scott & D'Agostino, 2006).

Even though beauty might be subjective and perceived differently by one person than another (Furnham & Swami, 2007), there are certain norms, namely beauty ideals, that people use to measure themselves by when reflecting on their own appearance (Solomon, 2018a). If their beauty is not reflected within those beauty ideals portrayed in images that mass media confronts them with, women tend to feel excluded (Etcoff et al. 2004). At the same time, women state that the media and advertising push unrealistic norms of beauty which are unattainable for most people (Etcoff et al. 2004; Harrison, 2003). Despite the fact that beauty ideals anchored in our society are far from reality (Harrison, 2003), 78% of girls worldwide feel pressured to look like what society regards as beautiful (Unilever, 2019). Simultaneously, the pressure for men to attain extreme ideals of beauty, such as being extremely muscular, has increased as well and a similar development of growing dissatisfaction with their own appearance can be observed among men as they compare themselves to these illustrations of ideal bodies (Blond, 2008; Solomon, 2018). However, due to the fact that literature is clearly concentrated on females and women compare themselves more

often to others and evaluate their appearances more negatively than men, this thesis focuses on the perspective of western women (Calogero, Boroughs & Thompson, 2007).

Due to the high societal pressure, many purchase decisions are driven by the desire of consumers to live up to those expectations (Solomon, 2018b). For example, women use products that make them physically good-looking such as hair care products, perfume, body moisturizer, and facial care products (Etcoff et al. 2004) or undergo dieting and cosmetic surgeries (Etcoff et al. 2006) whereas men for example engage in the use of steroids to represent these ideals (Blond, 2008; Solomon, 2018b). Thus, it is crucial for brands to understand and track current beauty ideals to be able to offer appropriate products that consumers require in order to match up to those yardsticks (Solomon, 2018a). In the context of strategic brand management, this importance has also been stressed by Kapferer (2012) who believes in establishing meaningful rather than relevant brands and states that “to become meaningful brands must capture the deep social changes that affect the ideals and aspirations of consumers, or rather people” (p.210). This is even more important as today’s products might be outdated tomorrow since beauty ideals have consistently evolved over time and may vary among different cultures (Solomon, 2018a).

In particular, it was found that the majority of women is drastically less content with their body weight and shape than with their physical attractiveness overall (Etcoff et al. 2004). This focus on body weight and shape can also be observed in the development of beauty ideals over time. Whereas in the early 1800s women strived to look delicate and pale, the curvy Marilyn Monroe embodied desirable beauty in the 1960s (Solomon, 2018b). Ever since the 1960s, women in media have become skinnier (Solomon, 2018b; Sypeck, Gray, Etu, Ahrens & Mosimann, 2006). In contrast to this, in recent years, beauty standards have been moving away from the less shapely look (Solomon, 2018b), leading to the acceptance of curvier women within society and a change in mind-set towards beauty which is captured in for example the body positivity movement (Cheng, 2017; Etcoff et al. 2006; Khutoretsky, n.d). Moreover, the issue of body weight and shape becomes even more important considering the increase in obesity rates in society (1.9 billion adults were overweight worldwide in 2016) (WHO, 2018). Therefore, the size and shape of today’s average woman strongly differs from what it used to be decades ago (Christel & Dunn, 2016; Solomon, 2018a). Whereas in 1985 the most commonly bought dress was US size 8, it is a US size 16 today (Christel & Dunn, 2016). Since women with US size 14 and up are usually considered plus-size (Plunkett, 2015), it is further stressed that this fact illustrates that average western women wear plus-size clothes (Christel & Dunn, 2016).

Forceful trends, such as the aforescribed trend of rising obesity rates and changing beauty ideals, provide opportunities in new categories and subcategories (Aaker, 2011). Hence, the plus-size apparel segment has been one of the fastest growing online fashion segments in the United States (which will hereafter be referred to as US) in 2015 (Statista, 2019a) and is projected to increase steadily also in other countries such as the United Kingdom (which will hereafter be referred to as UK) (PwC, 2017). Thus, it poses a great market potential for fashion retailers to respond to

changing needs by integrating plus-size brands into their brand portfolio. The expansion into the plus-size segment is a crucial opportunity to take into consideration for fashion retailers as missing new trends can have a devastating impact on their brands (Kapferer, 2012). In addition, extending the range and developing new brands is vital to target new audiences and broaden the offer for existing target groups (Varadarajan, DeFanti & Busch, 2006) and stay relevant (Aaker, 2011).

The growth of the plus-size segment further indicates that there is a shift in society and that past beauty ideals have been questioned, as indicated by PwC (2017). According to them, the growth of the plus-size segment can be explained by five key drivers. Firstly, they found that the target market is growing because of the aforementioned rising obesity rates as well as increasing body confidence of the target group which is due to growing coverage of the plus-size market on mainstream media. According to PwC (2017), the price represents the most important purchase criterion and therefore, the entering of value retailers makes plus-size shopping affordable and consequently promotes purchases. In addition to that, the study revealed that plus-size shoppers prefer to purchase online and thus contribute to an increase in online sales. Finally, the growth can be explained by the launch of new brands and sub brands and their innovations across the end to end customer journey (PwC, 2017). Reflecting on these growth drivers, the attractiveness of the plus-size fashion segment becomes even more evident since obesity rates are projected to increase (OECD, 2017) and beauty ideals are evolving towards a curvier look (Solomon, 2018b).

Nevertheless, 65% of women state that they feel that the needs of plus-size women are ignored (ModCloth Blog, 2014). In the past, many brands neglected to offer appropriate collections or located them in unattractive spaces in their stores despite the great need and potential for plus-size fashion (Peters, 2014) as well as the strong willingness of plus-size shoppers to spend more money on clothing if designers offered plus-size options (Statista, 2019b). Now, more and more established fashion retailers have grasped this development and are thus addressing the needs of plus-size shoppers. Those fashion retailers have chosen different brand strategies to serve plus-size customers. For example, H&M has launched a new sub brand named H&M+ (H&M, n.d.). ASOS has a similar concept, serving female plus-size shoppers with their sub brand ASOS DESIGN Curve and male plus-size customers with another sub brand called ASOS DESIGN Plus (ASOS, 2019a; ASOS, 2019b). The fashion retailer MANGO, on the other hand, created an entirely new brand that is endorsed by the parent brand: Violeta by MANGO (MANGO, 2019). There are also some specialist brands which solely serve the (male and female) plus-size customer e.g. HIGH AND MIGHTY or Curvissa (PwC, 2017).

Even among brands that have been resistant to enter the plus-size segment for a long time, there appears to be a shift. Abercrombie & Fitch, for example, did not want overweight people wearing their clothes (or representing their brand) and thus did not stock larger sizes (Lutz, 2013) as chief executive Mike Jeffries states “we [Abercrombie & Fitch] go after the attractive, all-American kid.” (Gunn, 2016, n.p.). However, even though their size range cannot be considered plus-size as

it stops at US size 12, the company recently started showing curvier women on their website (Abercrombie & Fitch, n.d.) and Instagram profile (Abercrombie & Fitch, 2019).

This can be regarded as a very positive development since a majority of women worldwide state that

... a change in the portrayal of beauty ideals and communication when they were growing up would have been welcomed ... [and that they wished that] they had seen girls and women in magazines that looked more like them (Etcoff et al. 2006, p.52).

Furthermore, a majority of women worldwide demand the media and brands to portray “women of different body weights and shapes, ages, and everyday women as well as models” in their advertising (Etcoff et al. 2004, p.45).

1.2 Research Question, Aim and Objectives

As more and more fashion retailers are entering the plus-size segment, it is interesting to observe their approach from a strategic brand management perspective and to investigate their motivation and concerns when choosing different brand strategies. This is of particular interest since the chosen brand strategy can impact brand image and reputation among customers (Dacin & Smith, 1994) and because “A company’s brand portfolio strategy combined with their brand architecture are the main drivers of the brand equity” (Santos, 2018, p.3). Furthermore, considering the long term negligence of plus-size women and the promotion of size zero beauty ideals in the fashion industry (Calogero, Boroughs & Thompson, 2007), the question of how consumers perceive those retailers entering the plus-size segment persists. As statistics show, plus-size shoppers would perceive designers more positively if they included plus-size apparel in their lines (Statista, 2019b). However, we do not understand which brand strategy might trigger the most positive brand perception and experience. Moreover, we do not know why companies decide to choose certain brand strategies and what could be the most recommendable approach when entering the plus-size market. Investigating this topic is even more important since, despite the increasing relevance of plus-size branding, research has neglected this topic so far (Peters, 2014). Therefore, our study is guided by the following research question:

What do fashion retailers have to consider when choosing a brand strategy for the plus-size market?

In order to answer this question, the following sub questions need to be addressed:

- *What are the preferences when it comes to plus-size branding among plus-size and straight-size customers?*
- *What are the reasons for choosing specific plus-size brand strategies from a business perspective?*

By answering these questions the aim of this thesis is to gain a better understanding of the currently chosen brand strategies, potential other brand strategies, and the opinions of direct and indirect customers as well as company representatives about different brand approaches within the plus-size fashion industry. Based on that, this thesis aims to guide fashion retailers in their decision to choose the most appropriate brand strategy when entering the plus-size market. With those findings, we intend to contribute to the literature of strategic brand management and fill the gap in plus-size brand research.

1.3 Outline of the Thesis

Considering the lack of literature in the field of plus-size branding, we have to orientate ourselves towards other disciplines for theories that may be adapted to plus-size branding. To achieve the aim of the research, it is necessary to understand how beauty ideals have evolved and can be defined and further, a brand's role and responsibility in this context. This is described in the first part of the literature review (Chapter 2) by taking into account socio-cultural as well as consumer behaviour literature.

Furthermore, it is vital to define brand architecture, a concept which belongs to traditional brand literature, and apply it to the context of plus-size branding. The third chapter, which is the second and main part of the literature review, discusses the input of different authors on brand architecture but is mainly based on Aaker and Joachimsthaler's (2000) four brand strategies (the house of brands, the branded house, sub brands and endorsed brands) which are examined using examples of plus-size brand strategies that have currently been chosen by fashion retailers. Within this chapter, literature of fashion branding, retail management and communication management has also been considered.

The aforescribed two theoretical chapters provide the necessary insights for the empirical part of this thesis, which covers the customers' and companies' opinions on plus-size branding, presented in Chapter 4. As explained in the methodology chapter, four company representatives, six plus-size customers and four straight-size customers were interviewed for this study. The results of our research guide brand managers in their decision of choosing the most appropriate plus-size brand strategy and are presented and compared to theory in chapter 5. Finally, the thesis is concluded with a summary, limitations and managerial implications. Figure 1 illustrates the structure of the thesis.

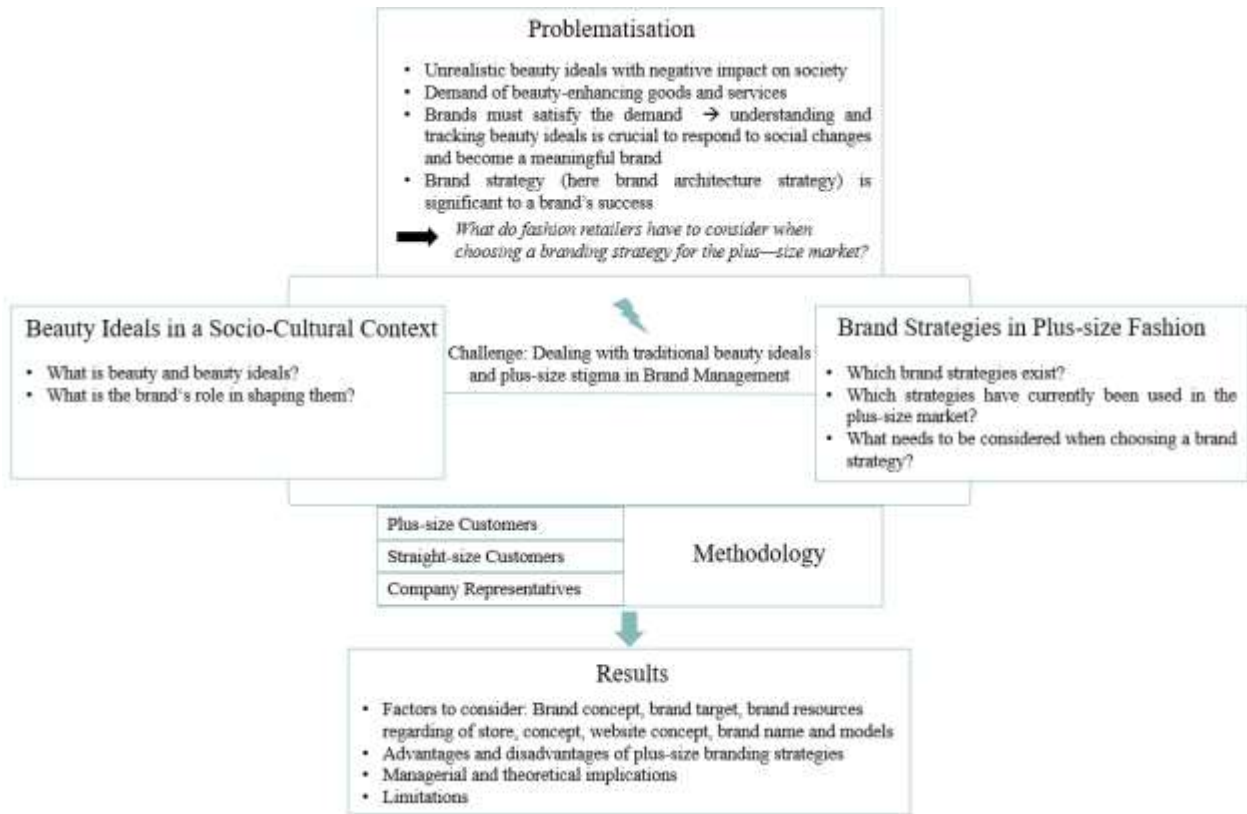


Figure 1: Frame of Reference (Own Figure, 2019)

2. Literature Review Part One: Beauty Ideals in a Socio-Cultural Context

This chapter explains how beauty ideals have been evolving towards a curvier look in recent years but emphasises that being plus-size is still connected to negative connotations within society. It is further stressed that brands play a crucial role in shaping beauty ideals, especially because they classify who can be considered plus-size and who cannot, and tremendously shape present beauty ideals through advertisement and their offering.

2.1 Defining Beauty and Beauty Ideals

The topic of beauty is becoming more relevant for society and consumers (Widdows, 2018). It “defines meaning and identity, constructs the self, structures daily practices, and [determines] which individuals are valued (or not)” (Widdows, 2018, p.1). This definition emphasises the relevance and meaning beauty has in today’s society as it has even become a part of consumers’ identities. Beauty ideals can be regarded as the norms reflecting the current characteristics which are valued within society and illustrate the ‘perfect’ version of beauty (Greenleaf, Starks, Gomez, Chambliss & Martin, 2004; Solomon, 2018b; Widdows, 2018). However, beauty ideals are influenced by culture and are thus defined differently by each society. Hence, they are dynamic constructs that evolve over time (Calogero, Boroughs & Thompson, 2007; Scott, Bentley, Toveé, Ahamed & Magid, 2007; Solomon, 2018b). The construction of a popular taste and the fashion industry hereby are interdependent. On the one hand, the fashion industry has a significant impact on what society defines and accepts as beautiful (Poorani, 2012) and on the other hand, brands have to understand the meaning of current beauty ideals to address needs and desires by the society (Kapferer, 2012; Solomon, 2018b). Beauty ideals constitute how society assesses the world (Bourdieu 1984; Hildebrandt & Latner, 2007; Widdows, 2018) and in the context of this thesis, what is considered plus-size and how plus-size is perceived and valued by society. As present beauty ideals act as a reference point of beauty in society (Solomon, 2018b), it is vital to consider how beauty ideals are defined, how they evolved over time, their meaning for society and further companies’ roles in shaping them, which will be illustrated in the following chapter.

To fully understand the concept of beauty ideals, how they are shaped by and are simultaneously shaping societal standards, it is necessary to first define beauty and beauty ideals. The interest in physical beauty has been an everlasting topic of interest throughout history (Furnham & Swami, 2007). Tracking back to the sagas of the Greek gods, beauty played a significant role (Furnham & Swami, 2007). The question of beauty has ever since been addressed, awakening the interest of Pythagoras, one of the greatest scientists of our times (Furnham & Swami, 2007). He was one of the first to address the question of beauty, leading to the establishment of beauty ideals based on a mathematical attempt to understand beauty as a question of the right proportions (Furnham &

Swami, 2007). According to Pythagoras, the right proportions create harmony which is the base for aesthetics (Stakov, 2006). Euclid of Alexandria is said to have been the first to define the 'Golden ratio' around 300 Before Common Era which illustrates this harmonic relation (Livio, 2003) and which can be understood as the first rule to assess beauty objectively and hence establish beauty ideals. According to Euclid, harmony is achieved if a distance is divided into two parts whereas the ratio between the smaller part to the larger part is equivalent to the ratio between the larger part and the whole distance (Livio, 2003). This idea of beauty was portrayed in art and architecture in the following decades as for example illustrated in Da Vinci's Mona Lisa (Furnham & Swami, 2007).

However, there are many different endeavours to define beauty and beauty ideals, we attempt to create an overarching understanding by reviewing various definitions and concepts within the literature. Solomon (2018b) defines the concept as following:

An ideal of beauty is a particular model, or exemplar, of appearance. Ideals of beauty for both men and women may include physical features (e.g., a well-rounded derriere for women or a well-defined six-pack for men) as well as clothing styles, cosmetics, hairstyles, skin tone (pale versus tan), and body type (petite, athletic, voluptuous, etc.). (p.222)

The author further argues, that those sets of characteristics change over time and are influenced by different cultures and therefore, beauty ideals can vary greatly between different countries so that no general consensus of beauty exists. This goes along with Calogero's, Boroughs' and Thompson's (2007) definition of beauty ideals, who state that:

Broadly defined, beauty ideals represent culturally prescribed and endorsed 'looks' that incorporate various features of the human face and body, and thus define the standards for physical attractiveness within a culture (p.261).

This example indicates that, if one's appearance matches a certain understanding or norm of beauty which is reflected in beauty ideals, one can be considered beautiful. The belief that beauty ideals are context dependent and can change over time is further supported by Scott et al. (2007) who discovered that preferences of men regarding women's appearances can change and are thereby influenced by local norms. Finally, they conclude that no general preferences exist but that the assessment by men of women's beauty is rather context dependent. This implies the alternation of beauty ideals, as men's preferences can be understood as a reflection of such ideals and norms. Moreover, Hildebrandt and Latner (2007) point out that beauty ideals are largely influenced by social groups. Solomon (2018b) further elaborates that mass media as well has a great impact on the establishment of beauty ideals.

As these definitions so far focus rather on physical characteristics, Etcoff et al. (2004) revealed that the society regards beauty as not only being limited to such physical appearances but also as including inner qualities such as "happiness, kindness, confidence, dignity and humor" (p.36) which should be reflected in present beauty ideals.

According to Bourdieu (1984), beauty and art are concepts created by society. He argues that people gain an understanding of these concepts by comparing similar objects to others that are considered aesthetic and reflect a popular taste which is universally accepted within society. Hence, according to the author this taste constitutes what is beautiful and what is not. Bourdieu (1984) further argues that as a consequence, taste leads to the establishment of contradicting classifications such as ugly and beautiful that people use to assess the world. Moreover, he elaborates that these classifications illustrate concepts which help to structure society and their surroundings. Therefore, we conclude that beauty concepts can be understood as structuring society in a similar way as they define what is beautiful and what is not and thus, establish a classification of beauty which people either comply with or not. Hence, one needs to be aware that present beauty ideals represent a mainstream taste and that they structure society in order to evaluate how brands should position themselves within this structure.

Based on these definitions it can be summarised that beauty ideals:

- reflect a certain norm or standard of appearance and attractiveness that responds to the mainstream taste
- incorporate physical features and also inner qualities
- are context-dependent
- change over time
- are influenced by social groups and mass media
- are a way to structure society based on classifications of beauty

As a consequence, beauty is assessed in relation to these ideals, whereas a higher accordance leads to a higher assessment of beauty (Hildebrandt & Latner, 2007; Solomon, 2018b). Hence, beauty is dependent on present beauty ideals and constructed by society and media.

2.2 The Evolution of Beauty Ideals

To illustrate the dynamics of beauty ideals over time, we will highlight the most important developments throughout history in the following abstract. Due to the increasing promotion of western beauty ideals through international mass media, global norms of beauty gained in similarity among different cultures (Sutton, 2009; Widdows, 2018) which is why we mainly focus on the evolution of western (female) beauty ideals.

In the Renaissance period between 1400 and 1700 Alternating Current, the ideal woman was portrayed as full, curvy and rather pale (Calogero, Boroughs & Thompson, 2007; Petty, n.d.) as captured by Botticelli's painting 'The Birth of the Venus' portrayed in Figure 2 (Calogero, Boroughs & Thompson, 2007).



Figure 2: Botticelli's 'The Birth of the Venus' (LivItaly Tours, 2019, n.p.)

However, in the 19th century, the norm changed into a slimmer appearance of women promoting rather unrealistic beauty ideals (Calogero, Boroughs & Thompson, 2007). By that time, a thin waist was considered the new norm and women of all classes made use of corsets to adapt to these bizarre standards of body images as Figure 3 illustrates (Calogero, Boroughs & Thompson, 2007; Solomon, 2018b).



Figure 3: Beauty Ideals in the 19th Century (Festooned Butterfly, 2013, n.p.)

In the late 19th century to the early 20th century this ideal changed to the image of a rather curvy and healthy looking woman (Calogero, Boroughs & Thompson, 2007). Nonetheless, in the 1920s, the look of skinny, rather boyish looking females was considered appealing within society (Calogero, Boroughs & Thompson, 2007). During that time the penetration of mass media ensured the manifestation of current norms and lead to a homogenisation of beauty ideals in western culture (Calogero, Boroughs & Thompson, 2007). In the 1950s and 1960s, Marilyn Monroe represented the ideal woman with a large bust and a slim waist as depicted in Figure 4 (Calogero, Boroughs & Thompson, 2007; Solomon 2018b).



Figure 4: Marilyn Monroe (Daily Mail, 2014, n.p.)

Later in the 1960s, the ideal of slim women began to arise and skinniness continued to be considered beautiful in the following decades (Calogero, Boroughs & Thompson, 2007; Owen & Laurel-Seller, 2000; Petty, n.d.). This ideal became extreme in the 1990's, where supermodels such as Kate Moss embodied the size zero look as Figure 5 shows (Petty, n.d.).



Figure 5: Kate Moss (The Fashion Medley, 2013, n.p.)

Particularly the ubiquitous illustration of these beauty standards by mass media and fashion brands increased the pressure for women to comply with these norms (Poorani, 2012). Simultaneously, the expanding illustration of muscular men within TV shows or advertisements increased the pressure for men (Blond, 2008) to comply to a beauty ideal of men with six-packs (Solomon, 2018b).

This beauty trend had negative consequences on society, triggering anorexia among models and leading to the stigmatisation of overweight people (Groskop, 2013; Hildebrandt & Latner, 2007; Poorani, 2012; Samuel, 2017). For example, negative characteristic traits such as laziness have been linked to being overweight (e.g. Chen & Brown, 2005; Greenleaf et al. 2004; Puhl &

Brownell, 2001). This further led to the establishment of classifications within society where overweight people have been discriminated (Hildebrandt & Latner, 2007) and being overweight was perceived as bad while thinness was linked to characteristics which are valued in western society such as self-discipline and motivation and are perceived as good (Greenleaf et al. 2004). This way, the society is classified as good and bad or motivated and lazy based on its body shape. Some authors suggest that the stigmatisation of heavy people is due to the amount of space they need (Bourdieu, 1984; Fuller, 2017), for example other people might feel disadvantaged in certain situations such as sitting next to a plus-size person on a plane. However, this cannot be considered as universally true as research focusing on the perception of tall people implies that being tall is associated with favourable characteristics such as prestige, attractiveness (Boyson, Pryor & Butler, 1999), intelligence or ambition (Chu & Geary, 2005). Further, it is interesting to observe that neither excessively tall nor petite people are stigmatised (Chu & Geary, 2005) even though they do not comply with the norm.

As a result, public debates started to arise (Groskopf, 2013; Samuel, 2017). Consequently, consumers began to demand designers and media to promote a healthier and more realistic depiction of beauty (Etcoff et al. 2004; Samuel, 2017). As a reaction to the shifting social opinion as well as to the many scandals in the modelling world, linked to anorexia in the fashion industry, Spain was the first country to include this topic in its legislation by releasing a law in 2006 to ban models that were too thin (Sykes, 2017). The Spanish government further introduced a law that prohibits the advertisement on public television channels of “plastic surgery, slimming products and some beauty treatments” (Tremlett, 2010, n.p.) before 22.00 o’clock to prevent children and young teenagers from trying to live up to unhealthy beauty ideals (Tremlett, 2010). Further, leading designer brands such as Dior and Gucci agreed that they would ban size zero models from the catwalk starting in 2017 (Samuel, 2017). Consequently, a contradicting development towards the representation of curvier models could be observed again in the past years (Solomon, 2018b). Even though present beauty ideals still favour slim but more toned women and muscular men (Solomon, 2018b), the developments in the past years towards the acceptance of a curvier look changed societal standards and lead to the reflection upon previous stigmatisation, promoting a more open-minded concept of beauty (Kessel, 2018; Khutoretsky, n.d.; Shire, 2015).

As mentioned previously, the study by Etcoff et al. (2006) supports this development and shows that the definition of beauty is becoming more complex, also considering inner qualities in addition to physical appearances. This change in perception of beauty is reflected by the ‘Body Positivity’ movement also referred to as ‘Body Neutrality’ or ‘Fat Acceptance’ movement, which tries to encourage people to love and accept their body, be self-confident and fight for the acceptance of curvier bodies in society (Brown, 2019; Pelican News, 2017). Simultaneously, more and more fashion brands began to depict plus-size models, promoting inclusiveness of people of different sizes (Bazilian, 2016). Bazilian (2016) emphasises that this change can also be observed in the media landscape, for example in Sports Illustrated. She further states that when the magazine first

illustrated a plus-size model in 2016, the editor emphasised that ‘Beauty is not one size fits all’ (n.p.). Bazilian (2016) finally argues that given these changes in society and the fashion industry, plus-size becomes more popular and companies begin to react to the changing demands of society.

2.3 The Brand’s Roles in Shaping Beauty Ideals

Since fashion brands provide society with advertisements through media on a daily basis, they have a major responsibility in shaping beauty ideals. Furthermore, as they have the power to classify what is plus-size and what is not through their sizing systems and thus exclude certain people from their offering, fashion brands additionally influence societal beauty standards. Therefore, it is necessary to explain their impact on establishing norms of beauty in the following paragraphs.

2.3.1 Development and Meaning of Dress Sizes

As it can be observed from the size zero era, dress sizes are a major part of beauty ideals and classify different body shapes based on sizes. The sizing system embodies a normative rule and determines what part in society people of certain shapes and sizes belong to (Laitala, Klepp & Hauge, 2011). The system refers to body measurements which reflect to which extent customers fit into the current ideal of beauty and further, how much self-control they hold (Laitala, Klepp & Hauge, 2011). Due to the personal meaning of sizes for consumers (Laitala, Klepp & Hauge, 2011; Widdows, 2018), it is interesting to observe how the integration of plus-size lines, which are outside of popular beauty ideals are perceived, and what meanings they hold for plus-size as well as straight-size customers. To understand the role of plus-size lines within the fashion industry and among consumers, it is vital to understand how regulations for dress sizes have been established and further how plus-size is defined. The following section will briefly outline the development of dress sizes.

Before Ready-To-Wear clothing was developed, clothes were produced by consumers themselves or professional tailors and were adjusted to the individual body measurements (Laitala, Klepp & Hauge, 2011). When later on retailers began to establish themselves in the Ready-to-Wear segment, still no standardised sizing system had been developed and many retailers relied on their own system, roughly differentiating categories such as children, adolescence and older people (Draude & Döring, 2012; Stampler, 2014). However, with the beginning of wholesale production, the need for a universal sizing system grew in order to give customers guidance as well as optimise production, by providing standardised sizes to categorise different kinds of body shapes and fits, as the previous system was neither precise nor standardised (Beazley, 1997). In order to establish a sizing system, multiple countries conducted national research where they sampled measurement data from thousands of participants which were analysed and categorised (Beazley, 1997), leading to numerous national sizing systems based on scientific studies (Laitala, Klepp & Hauge, 2011).

In the following years as brands gained more power, multiple fashion retailers started to develop their own sizing system with a focus on their core customer group (Murray, 2016). This development led to the establishment of non-standardised systems with apparel sizes varying between different brands, eventually leading to confusion and frustration for shoppers (Murray, 2016). One reason for this development is that more and more brands started to engage in vanity sizing, which means that their sizes are labelled smaller than they used to be and, for example, sell a former size eight now as a size six (Aydinoğlu & Krishna, 2012). This way of sizing particularly gained popularity due to the positive mental effects on customers since increased self-esteem led to positive buying behaviour (Aydinoğlu & Krishna, 2012). Contradictory to this kind of labelling, some retailers label sizes bigger than they actually are, as they try to appeal to only trendy and thin customers (Laitala, Klepp & Hauge, 2011). One example for this is Gucci. When checking their online store it might seem as if they offered plus-size apparel since some clothes range up to size XXL (Gucci, 2016). However, having a closer look at their size guide, it becomes evident that what they define as XXL actually corresponds to a US size 12, which is not plus-size according to international sizing standards (Gucci, 2016; Sizeguide, 2017a).

As our research focuses on plus-size fashion lines, it is crucial to have a standardised understanding on what is considered plus-size. Due to the fact that multiple sizing systems exist, we rely on international sizing standards and, for convenience only, do not take into account variations in sizes between different fashion brands. Table 1 summarises the different sizing systems for women and defines what is considered plus-size based on sizing standards in western countries.

Table 1: Overview of International Sizing Systems for Women (adapted from Sizeguide, 2017a)

S-M-L	Country		
	US	UK	Germany
S	2-4	6-8	32-34
M	6-8	10-12	36-38
L	10-12	14-16	40-42
XL	14-16	18-20	44-46
2X	16-18	20-22	46-48
3X	20-22	24-26	50-52
4X	24-26	28-30	54-56

 Plus-size
  Straight-size

According to Statista (2017), in the US plus-size generally starts from size 10 or 14 depending on the sizing system. As the majority of big fashion retailers such as ASOS, Zalando or H&M define plus-size as size 44 (according to the German sizing system) and above (ASOS, 2019a; Christel & Dunn, 2016; H&M, n.d.; Plunkett, 2015), for our research we consider plus-size as US size 14 and above which equals size L, 44 in Germany and size 18 in the UK for women’s apparel (Sizeguide, 2017a). For men, plus-size lines start at XXL (ASOS, 2019b; Dressmann, n.d.) which refers to 48 in the US and UK and 58 in Germany (Sizeguide, 2017b) which is summarised in Table 2. Based on this definition, straight-size shoppers are defined as consumers wearing smaller sizes than those regarded plus-sizes.

Table 2: Overview of International Sizing Systems for Men (adapted from Sizeguide, 2017b)

	Country		
S-M-L	US	UK	Germany
S	34-36	34-36	44-46
M	38-40	38-40	48-50
L	42-44	42-44	52-54
XL	46	46	56
2X	48	48	58
3X	50	50	60

 Plus-size  Straight-size

Whereas the original purpose of sizing systems was to give guidance and create ease for customers (Beazley, 1999), it now rather transformed into a tool to assess oneself and further compare oneself to the ideal clothing sizes in our contemporary society (Christel & Dunn, 2016; Laitala, Klepp & Hauge, 2011). Further, garment sizes reflect beauty standards as they categorise body shapes that are socially accepted and exclude those that are not, reflecting the stigmatisation of body measurements that do not correspond to contemporary beauty ideals (Laitala, Klepp & Hauge, 2011). Therefore, the integration of plus-size lines is expected to hold a personal meaning within society as well as plus-size customers.

2.3.2 The Influence of Advertising on Beauty Ideals

During the last decades, brands illustrated unrealistically skinny flawless looking women in their campaigns (Bell & Dittmar, 2011; Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008). The ubiquitous presentation of such beauty ideals consequentially creates a reference point for many women when assessing their

own beauty, often leading to dissatisfaction (Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008; Solomon, 2018b). According to Bell and Dittmar (2011) “negative body image emerges as a result of perceived environmental pressure to conform to culturally-defined body and beauty ideals” (p.478). They further argue that mass media reinforces such ideals by promoting unrealistic images which are unattainable for most women. As a consequence, women feel increasingly pressured to start dieting and working out in order to fulfil those beauty standards which eventually lead to a dissatisfaction with their own body, low self-esteem, or even a disordered eating behaviour (Etcoff et al. 2004; Etcoff et al. 2006; Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008; Poorani, 2012; Sypeck, Gray & Ahrens, 2004).

Similarly, men face comparable consequences and pressure. As the illustration of men within advertisements or movies has become more muscular, research begins to focus on the impact of such illustrations on men’s well-being as well (Blond, 2008; Miller & Halberstadt, 2005; Morrison & Morrison, 2003). According to Blond (2008), the confrontation with pictures of ideal men has negative consequences for men’s own satisfaction whereas images of overly muscular models have the most influence. Simultaneously, it can be observed that more men start to engage in activities to optimise their appearance such as cosmetic surgery or use of steroids (Blond, 2008; Solomon 2018b). Even though a direct impact of media on these developments has not been proved yet, it is crucial to be aware of possible negative effects on men’s as well as women’s well-being by media (Blond, 2008).

More studies address this phenomenon and consider the prominent role brands and mass media play in developing beauty ideals (Bell & Dittmar, 2011; McLean, Paxton & Wertheim, 2016). McLean, Paxton and Wertheim (2016) further highlight the influencing role that advertising plays:

It has been established that media, and particularly advertising, influence attitudes, decision making, and behaviours ... Specifically, meta-analyses have confirmed that greater exposure to appearance-focused media in experimental and correlational studies is associated with higher levels of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating attitudes. (p.10).

This further stresses the major impact that not only mass media but equally companies have in establishing unhealthy beauty ideals, triggering body dissatisfaction and negatively influencing well-being. This is due to the fact that the advertisements of brands which use pictures of beautiful and thin women or muscular men raise the desire in customers to correspond to such images and makes models to role models (Poorani, 2012). Consequently, brands create a reason for purchase as especially women believe that the use of such products will make them equally beautiful (Poorani, 2012; Solomon, 2018b; Sutton, 2009).

Considering the changes in society, which are reflected in the rise of social debates and developments such as the body positivity movement, brands are increasingly pressured to respond to these changes. As the study by Etcoff et al. (2004) showed, women demand media to change the way they represent beauty. Further, the study found that women feel like current beauty ideals are narrow and hope that the next generation will apply a broader concept of beauty. This is in

accordance with another study by Etcoff et al. from 2006 in which women stated that they desire the promotion of a more variable concept of beauty, including different skin colours and sizes. Moreover, the study showed that women desire the illustration of models that respond to a more realistic and relatable appearance. Additionally, as Grabe, Ward and Hyde (2008) state, the use of average-sized models for advertisements can reduce anxiety among women. Hence, companies play a prominent role in enhancing women's body dissatisfaction and well-being as the repetitive illustration of the same type of beauty in advertisements will be internalised by society and perceived as ideal (Sutton, 2009).

However, the way how companies react on those changes is not only relevant in terms of societal well-being but also in terms of strategic brand management, since brands are obligated to be aware of changing social norms which could pose business opportunities. Kapferer (2012) points out that in times of a changing world and high consumption societies where consumers and retailers have increasingly gained power, brands need to find new ways to engage customers. According to him, whereas in the past, concepts such as Unique Selling Proposition and differentiation were sufficient for a brand's success, today's brands must even more add meaning to consumers' lives instead of just relevance. The author further stresses that to charge a price premium, a brand must be engaged by something else except selling products. Thus, brands must be able to answer the question 'why do we exist?' instead of 'why should one buy our product instead of the competitor's?' (Kapferer, 2012). The importance of 'why' is further highlighted by other authors such as Sinek (2009). Moreover, Kapferer (2012) emphasises that meaningfulness can be achieved by understanding "the deep social changes that affect the ideals and aspiration of consumers, or rather people" (p.210). According to this view, fashion brands which are entering the plus-size segment have a chance of both being relevant by expanding into a new category and broadening their target group (Aaker, 2011), as well as meaningful (Kapferer, 2012) as their product offering addresses the needs of an increasingly important segment which resulted from deep social changes that have led to changing beauty ideals.

Therefore, reflecting social changes in regards to altering beauty ideals is on the one hand important to stay relevant (Aaker, 2011; Kapferer, 2012) and on the other hand, poses the opportunity to influence the society positively (Etcoff et al. 2006; Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008). Further, the promotion of more realistic beauty images can have a positive impact on the brand image and sequentially on the buying behaviour since it enhances self-esteem among customers and promotes linkage of positive feelings to the brand (Durgee, 1986).

3. Literature Review Part Two: Brand Strategies in Plus-size Fashion

The first part of the literature review has illustrated that being plus-size is connected to a big stigma and that it is a very sensitive and personal topic for target customers. Taking this information into consideration, it becomes evident that branding the plus-size offering can be challenging. With more and more fashion brands entering the plus-size segment, it appears that, besides the great market potential of the plus-size segment, the uncertainty in regards to branding decisions is high. Therefore, it is crucial to apply the topic of plus-size fashion to a brand management perspective. Hence, this chapter explains how the integration of plus-sizes can grow a brand and defines the integration of plus-sizes as brand extension. Furthermore, the different strategies for extending the brand are explained, focusing on Aaker and Joachimsthaler's (2000) four Brand Relationship Spectrum strategies applied in the example of plus-size fashion retailers. Finally, this chapter outlines the aspects to take into consideration when choosing one of the four strategies.

3.1 Brand Portfolio: Growing the Brand through Line and Brand Extension

Kapferer (2012) argues that brand management is

... a balance between preservation, renewal, extension and growth of the prototype on the one hand, and on the other the creation of new products and services to capture new circumstances of use and new customers, and to open new segments. (p.205)

Especially in the fashion industry, brand management is of great significance as the brand is one intangible asset that mainly drives consumers' purchase decisions (Jin & Cedrola, 2017). The main strategic decisions that have to be made in brand management relate to brand portfolio and brand architecture (Kapferer, 2012). Firstly, the determination of the brand portfolio, which is the decision about which brands to retain, eliminate or add e.g. through the establishment of new brands or by extending the line/range or brand is of significant importance (Kapferer, 2012). Secondly, brand strategy regards the establishment of the brand architecture, which is the process of designing and managing a portfolio of brands in order to increase its efficacy, clarity and value (Aaker, 2004; Dooley & Bowie, 2005; Kapferer, 2012; Varadarajan, DeFanti & Busch, 2006) as well as brand image and reputation (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2009; Varadarajan, DeFanti & Busch, 2006). Furthermore, it can promote synergies and leverage (Aaker, 2004). Therefore, it becomes clear that brand strategy has an impact on various factors and is thus an important aspect to consider when fashion retailers enter the plus-size segment, as outlined in the following paragraphs.

Aaker (2004) emphasises that

The brand portfolio needs to be capable of adapting existing brands, perhaps by adding sub brands [sic] or endorsed brands, and even creating new brands when needed to support offerings that are needed to maintain relevance. (p.34)

Thus, extending the brand into another product category and/or price segment is a crucial decision in brand portfolio strategy (Aaker, 2004) and a necessary step to grow the brand (Kapferer, 2012). Whereas harvesting existing customers is a probable short term solution for brand growth (Kapferer, 2012), it will not be regarded in this chapter since entering the plus-size segment aims to target a new audience that has different body measurements and needs. Instead, the following paragraphs will outline possibilities of line and brand extension. It is crucial to note that there are plenty of models available to assess *whether* extending the range or brand into a new segment is advisable which can be used by fashion brands interested in the plus-size segment. Our thesis on the other hand concentrates on *how* to extend the range using different brand strategies. Therefore, a short introduction to the concepts of line/range and brand extension is sufficient.

3.1.1 Line or Range Extension

Among consumer products, line and range extensions (the terms will thereafter be used interchangeably) account for the majority of new product launches and thus, this concept represents the most frequent form of innovation (Kapferer, 2012). When extending the range, brands acknowledge the evolving expectations of consumers and adapt accordingly (Kapferer, 2012). As a result, the brand extends its market and customer base by multiplying its product versions, for example, formats, sizes, tastes and flavours or physical forms (e.g. liquid and powder-based detergents) and thus, segments its market more narrowly (Kapferer, 2012). As Aaker and Keller (1990) clarify, line extension is an approach which uses a current brand name to enter a new market segment in the same product class. Diet Coke represents a prominent example of a line extension of the Coca-Cola Company's star product, the Coke (Kapferer, 2012). Following this strategy, product and brand managers can save time and money compared to launching a new brand (Kapferer, 2012). However, as Reddy, Holak and Bhat (1994) argue, in order for line extensions to be successful, strong advertising and promotional support must still be provided. On the contrary, this strategy also encompasses drawbacks, such as the dilution of the range logic due to uncontrolled range extension which can result in *hyper-segmentation* (Kapferer, 2012). This further leads to consumer confusion, decreasing customer loyalty (Rubinson, 1992 cited in Kapferer, 2012) and cannibalisation of existing products (Reddy, Holak & Bhat, 1994). However, as Kapferer (2012) states "It [the brand] deepens its problem-solving ability more or less to the same customers, for the same need and consumption situation [through line extension]" (p.265). Thus, an extension into the plus-size segment cannot be considered a line extension as the target audience for the new product offering changes.

3.1.2 Brand Extension

In contrast, according to Aaker and Keller (1990), using the brand name on a different product category can be termed brand extension. Kapferer (2012) further explains that brand extension occurs when brands penetrate a new market with an already existing brand that was originally developed for another category. Brand extension differs from the formerly described concept as it represents a real diversification into new product categories, targeting different clients and hence, has a considerable impact on the whole company (Kapferer, 2012). In comparison to line extensions, brand extensions pose a higher financial and image-damaging risk as the brand is extended into new and unknown markets (Chen & Liu, 2004; Kapferer, 2012; Martínez & de Chernatony, 2004). In contrast, it is applicable for firms that want to avoid new product launch failures by leveraging positive image transfer from an established brand (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Batra, Lenk & Wedel, 2010).

Another differentiating characteristic is that brand extensions target a market that is different in terms of new competitive situation, success factors, target groups, categories of need, and usage situation (Kapferer, 2012). In this respect, it can be differentiated between horizontal and vertical brand extensions. Firstly, horizontal refers to a situation in which brands extend to a currently not penetrated product category which is comparable to its current price and quality level (Kim, Lavack & Smith, 2001). Examples include fashion brands which stretched their brands to accessories and jewellery (Kapferer, 2012). Secondly, whereas the vertical extension does not penetrate a new product category, the brand is offered at an either higher or lower price or quality level (Kim, Lavack & Smith, 2001), as for example Donna Karen's lower budget fashion brand DKNY (Jin & Cedrola, 2017). One crucial aspect to consider is that every brand extensions requires adaptation of some brand aspects and the reconsideration about the brand's meaning (Kapferer, 2012). This is due to the fact that the brand's promise must be able to be embodied in different products and different categories. Therefore, a single product-based promise must develop to a larger brand benefit so that the brand can be stretched effectively (Kapferer, 2012). Especially in the fashion industry, brand extensions are the most commonly chosen strategy to grow a brand (Jin & Cedrola, 2017).

Literature illustrates that it is difficult to draw a line between the two concepts and that it is easy to disagree in a discussion whether the new product can be considered a line or brand extension (e.g. Kapferer, 2012). However, taking these insights into consideration, we argue that fashion brands' decision of extending into the plus-size market should be regarded a brand extension if they use the same brand to appeal to the new target group, hence following a branded house strategy rather than a house of brands strategy as described later in the chapter. This is due to the fact that the new customer segment varies from the original target group in terms of body measurements and probably also in terms of needs and desires. Additionally, the competitive situation differs from the straight-size segment since specialist brands exist that only cover the

plus-size segment, as further described in chapter 3.3.5. Alternatively, fashion brands also have the option to create a new brand for the new plus-size segment. However, in that case, they would not follow a brand extension strategy.

When extending the brand, managers must consider how many products to attach to one single brand, how these brands should relate to each other and how the quality should vary among different products (Dacin & Smith, 1994). Thus, it becomes obvious that brand extension is closely related to the concept of brand architecture, which will be elaborated in the next chapter.

3.2 Brand Architecture

Once fashion retailers have taken the decision to extend into another product category, as for example the plus-size segment, they need to consider how to handle the extension and which strategy to choose (Kapferer, 2012). Thus, it has to be determined whether to launch a new or extend an existing brand (Aaker, 2004). As a result, decisions regarding brand architecture have to be made (Kapferer, 2012). However, first it is essential to gain a basic understanding about the concept.

3.2.1 Defining Brand Architecture

Changing market dynamics and new business strategies have urged companies to re-examine the structure, management and relationship between different brands in their portfolio to leverage existing brands and have thus led to increasing importance of the concept of brand architecture (Petromilli, Morrison & Million, 2002).

Keller (2015) explains that “The brand architecture strategy for a firm provides guidance as to which products and services a firm should introduce and how they should be branded in doing so.” (p.702). As stressed by Muzellec and Lambkin (2009), brand architecture is a static framework that helps to cluster complex collections of brands. Additionally, Keller (2015) as well as Santos (2018) suggest that the aforementioned clustering takes place mentally in the minds of the customers and thus helps customers to determine the location of each brand in the brand portfolio, their characteristics and value propositions. Brand architecture involves decisions regarding the number of applied brand levels, the relationship between the corporate- and the product brand, the visibility of the corporate brand’s coexistence on all the communicational touchpoints, and the degree of international standardisation of the brand architecture (Kapferer, 2012). Whereas Aaker (2004) and Santos (2018) regard brand architecture decisions as part of the brand portfolio strategy, other researchers have defined it as a separate concept which relates to brand portfolio (e.g. Kapferer, 2012).

3.2.2 Major Elements of Brand Architecture

There are certain terms, which are significant to understand for the concept of brand architecture. The following abstract will elaborate on the most important ones:

Corporate brand

The corporate brand mainly determines the brand architecture, as it is the brand at the highest level in any company (Santos, 2018), and has become increasingly important within the last years since consumers request transparency about the company behind the products (e.g. Roper & Fill, 2012). It "... reflects its [the corporation's] heritage, values, culture, people and strategy." (Aaker, 2004, p.16).

Brand portfolios

The brand portfolio consists of all masterbrands, endorsed brands, sub brands etc. (a thorough description will follow in chapter 3.3) that are managed by the organisation internally as well as external brands that are internally managed e.g. branded sponsorships (Aaker, 2004). It allows the establishment of a strategy for every brand and to identify underperforming brands and the necessity for repositioning (Santos, 2018).

Brand scope

The extent to which the brand can be transferred to other markets and categories can be defined as the brand scope, whereby the most critical decision regards the masterbrand (Aaker, 2004).

Brand hierarchies

The hierarchy illustrates the company's brand strategy (Santos, 2018) and outlines the levels associated with the branding of products, namely as corporate brands, family brands, individual brands, modifiers (Brexendorf & Keller, 2017), and product descriptors (Keller, 2015). The horizontal dimension of the hierarchy represents the brand scope by portraying sub brands and endorsed brands as part of the umbrella brand (Aaker, 2004). In contrast, the vertical dimension reflects the number of brands used for each market and category (Aaker, 2004).

Driver role

The brand which contributes most to driving the purchase decision and enhancing the user experience takes on the driver role (Aaker, 2004). It can either be the masterbrand, endorser brand, sub brand, and even descriptor or a combination of several brands (Aaker, 2004). For example, a purchase decision for an Audi A3 may be driven by the brand name Audi, whereas A3 can also have an influence.

3.3 Different Forms of Brand Architectures

One of the first to define brand strategies was Olins (1989 cited in Dooley & Bowie, 2005), who developed three basic portfolio structures: monolithic, endorsed and branded. According to him, whereas in the branded structure, sub brands are detached from the corporate brand, in the monolithic structure the corporate umbrella brand is merely extended to sub brands. He further describes that the so called endorsed structure lies in the middle and describes a brand that has a unique identity related to the corporate identity.

Other researchers have built upon this foundation and have continued the discussion on brand architecture. For example, Kapferer (2012) proposes six types of brand strategies depending on the degree of diversity that a brand can supply under its name. He categorised them according to the degree of power and differentiation as depicted in Figure 6. At one extreme is the corporate masterbrand and at the other the product brand (Kapferer, 2012). Both strategies have only one brand level, either the corporate brand itself or the product brand without identification of the corporate brand (Kapferer, 2012). The strategies in between these extremes represent a compromise between power and differentiation by offering two or more brand levels and the opportunity to establish daughter brands with a clearly differentiated identity (Kapferer, 2012).

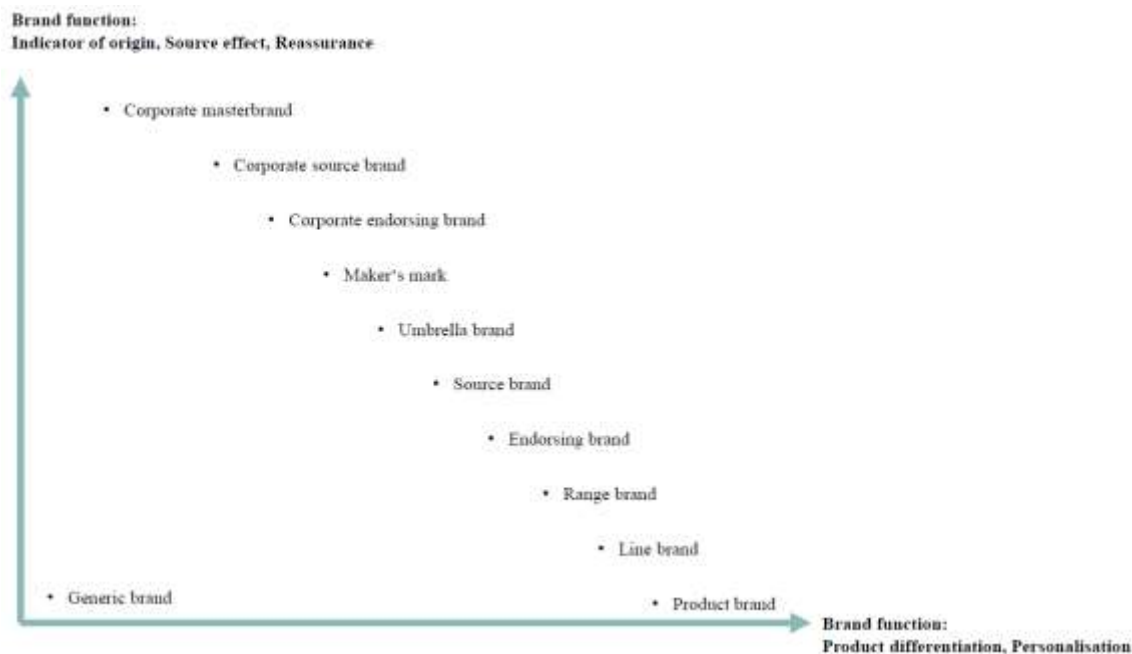


Figure 6: Different Brand Strategies (adapted from Kapferer, 2012)

Similarly, Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) introduced the Brand Relationship Spectrum consisting of four main strategies and nine sub strategies which focus on the different driver roles that brands can play in purchasing decision making (Figure 7). This model represents the theoretical basis to which we adapt our research as we believe that the four strategies are easy to understand and very straightforward. Whereas the house of brands strategy equals the product

brand or endorsing brand strategy, the branded house strategy can be compared to the corporate umbrella or corporate source brand strategy (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Kapferer, 2012). Thus, the position on the spectrum determines the degree of separation in terms of strategy execution and customer perception and the allocation of the brand drivers (Aaker, 2004).



Figure 7: The Brand Relationship Spectrum (adapted from Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000)

Moreover, in order to be able to consult on choosing the most appropriate plus-size brand strategy for fashion brands and hence achieve our research aim, it is necessary to observe how fashion retailers have currently branded their plus-size labels. Thus, we will explain the four different brand strategies by Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) using examples of the plus-size fashion industry. Therefore, we have looked at brands that, according to different statistics (Statista, 2019c; Statista, 2019d; Statista, 2019e; Statista, 2019f), are the leading apparel brands worldwide, in Europe and in Sweden in particular. We wanted to find out if they offer apparel size US 14 and up and in what way they are branding it by analysing their product offering. As a result, we have clustered the following brands according to their chosen brand strategy: Nike, Zara, Adidas, H&M, Louis Vuitton, UNIQLO, Hermès, Gucci (Statista, 2019c); Marks & Spencer, Primark (Statista, 2019d); KappAhl, Lindex, Dressmann, Gina Tricot, Cubus (Statista, 2019e); and Abercrombie & Fitch (Statista, 2019f). Besides these fashion brands, we have also included some other brands which we personally have regarded as interesting, namely, MANGO and ASOS since the two were one of the first retailers to enter the plus-size market (PwC, 2017). Furthermore, we have included some of the specialist brands which solely serve the plus-size customers (PwC, 2017).

Literature has shown that in reality, companies do not adopt one single strategy but apply a hybrid strategy, which is a mix of all four options (Aaker, 2004; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Kapferer, 2012; Petromilli, Morrison & Million, 2002; Santos, 2018). Hence, one brand can represent range, umbrella, parent or endorsing brand depending on the product (Kapferer, 2012). However, we have not considered mixed strategies but instead classified them according to Aaker & Joachimsthaler (2000) as separate brands, endorsed brands, masterbrands with sub brands or masterbrands with descriptors.

3.3.1 House of Brands Strategy

Containing independent and detached brands with their own identity, name, and style, the house of brands strategy represents the option with the highest degree of separation from the mother brand since every new brand requires its own 'house' and has its own driver role as executed by

Procter & Gamble for example (Aaker, 2004; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). This strategy focuses on targeting a niche market rather than achieving economies of scale that come with brand extensions into various segments (Aaker, 2004; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). This is based on the belief that several independent brands perform better when aggregated than if they were promoted under one common brand (Petromilli, Morrison & Million, 2002). Other benefits include the avoidance of association transfer from one brand to another, the emphasis on innovation and the circumvention of conflicts regarding distributing multiple products in the same segment (Aaker, 2004; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Furthermore, the company has a higher likelihood of becoming market leader and increasing market share as well as enhancing the perceived differentiation among different brands (Kapferer, 2012). On the other hand, it requires high advertising investments (Aaker, 2004).

Retailers that apply a house of brands strategy and have thus created separate brands to cater to plus-size shoppers include e.g. Simply Be and HIGH AND MIGHTY (both owned by the N BROWN GROUP PLC (N BROWN GROUP PLC, n.d.)), Curvissa (owned by Otto Group (Otto Group, 2019)) or Yours and BADRHINO (both owned by Yours Clothing (Yours Clothing, 2019)) (PwC, 2017). Most of those specialists' sizes start at UK size 16 and range up to 36. Figure 8 illustrates Simply Be's Instagram profile. Examples of the other aforementioned brands can be found in Appendix A.

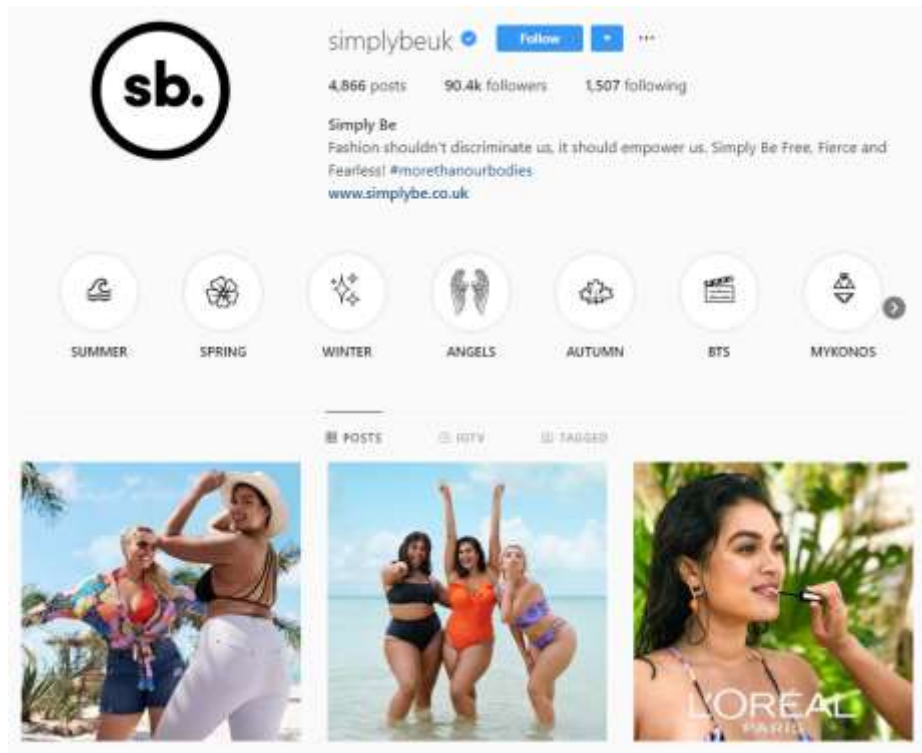


Figure 8: Instagram Profile of Simply Be (Simply Be, 2019, n.p.)

3.3.2 Endorsed Brand Strategy

According to Keller (2015), brands which pursue an endorsement strategy feature brand elements of the corporate brand in some way on the package, signage or product appearance, but there is no linkage to the corporate brand in the individual brand's name. Thus, the distance between the corporate and the individual brand is growing (Keller, 2015), and the two brands are more independent from each other (Aaker, 2004; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). However, as Aaker & Joachimsthaler (2000) argue, the endorser can be more (linked names such as the prefix Mc for McDonald's or strong endorsers such as Polo Jeans by Ralph Lauren) or less (token endorser e.g. Nestlé) prominent (Aaker, 2004; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Thus, Keller's (2015) definition refers to token endorsers. Furthermore, the endorser has less influence on the purchasing decision and mainly assures that the endorsed brands will keep the endorser's brand promise (Aaker, 2004; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000).

A fashion brand which we consider to follow an endorsed brand strategy is Dressmann. The retailer serves male plus-size customers with their brand Dressmann XL by offering sizes from 2XL to 9XL (Dressmann, n.d.). The endorsed brand Dressmann XL is not only categorised separately on the web shop but also has separate physical stores as shown in Figure 9 (Dressmann, n.d.). Thus, we would consider Dressmann XL as being considerably independent from its parent brand Dressmann even though the brand name strongly links the daughter to the parent brand. What is outstanding compared to other retailers offering male apparel is that male plus-size models can be observed in the web shop (Dressmann, n.d.).



Figure 9: Dressmann XL Store in Bergen, Norway (Own Figure, 2019)

Similarly to Dressmann XL, Violeta by MANGO is a separate female apparel brand endorsed by its parent and offers sizes up to 2XL promoted by plus-size models (MANGO, 2019). As portrayed in the logo, Violeta is far more prominent than its endorser (MANGO, 2019). Moreover, Violeta by MANGO is sold in a spatially separated area within the MANGO stores as well as in fully

branded shops as shown in Figure 10 (Fashion United, 2014) and categorised separately on the MANGO web shop which further demonstrates the distance from MANGO (MANGO, 2019).



Figure 10: Violeta by MANGO Store in Eindhoven, Holland (Wille, 2015, n.p.)

3.3.3 Sub Brand Strategy

Keller (2015) states that “Sub brands [sic] combine two or more of the corporate brand, family brand or individual product brand names.” (p.709) and thus points out that sub branding is a combination of different brands from different levels. The sub brand is created to provide a better fit for a particular product or segment by differentiating from the masterbrand through the addition of an attribute dimension or a personality element (Aaker, 2004; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Hence, the sub brand and masterbrand are more intertwined with a lower degree of separation and generally both drive the purchase decision with the masterbrand being the more influential driver (Aaker, 2004; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). The main benefit of this strategy is that sub brands provide the potential of associations transfer from the company or family brand and at the same time allow for the development of new brand beliefs which enables distinct positioning in the new category (Keller, 2015). Those shared associations are triggered by emphasizing similarities or fit between the parent brand and the sub brand with new and existing brand elements for example in product form, shape, graphics, colour and versioning (Keller, 2015) and can be a risk and opportunity at the same time (Aaker, 2004). Sub brands also trigger enthusiasm when a new innovation is launched (Aaker, 2004; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Nevertheless, as Keller (2015) highlights, sub branding also demands high marketing spending. He further stresses that sub branding is only recommendable when clearly beneficial for the company. This is the case when the sub brand has major driver role in the purchasing decision, mostly equal to the masterbrand (Aaker, 2004; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Otherwise, adapting too many sub brands might lead to confusion and brand dilution (Petromilli, Morrison & Million, 2002).

For example, H&M has created the sub brand H&M+ to market its plus-size offering whereby selected items range up to size 4XL (H&M, n.d.). For women’s apparel plus-size models are used (H&M, n.d.). However, this is not the case for the portrayal of the men’s plus-size apparel. Figure 11 portrays the plus-size section on H&M’s website (H&M, n.d.). Figures of other sub brand strategy examples are included in Appendix A.

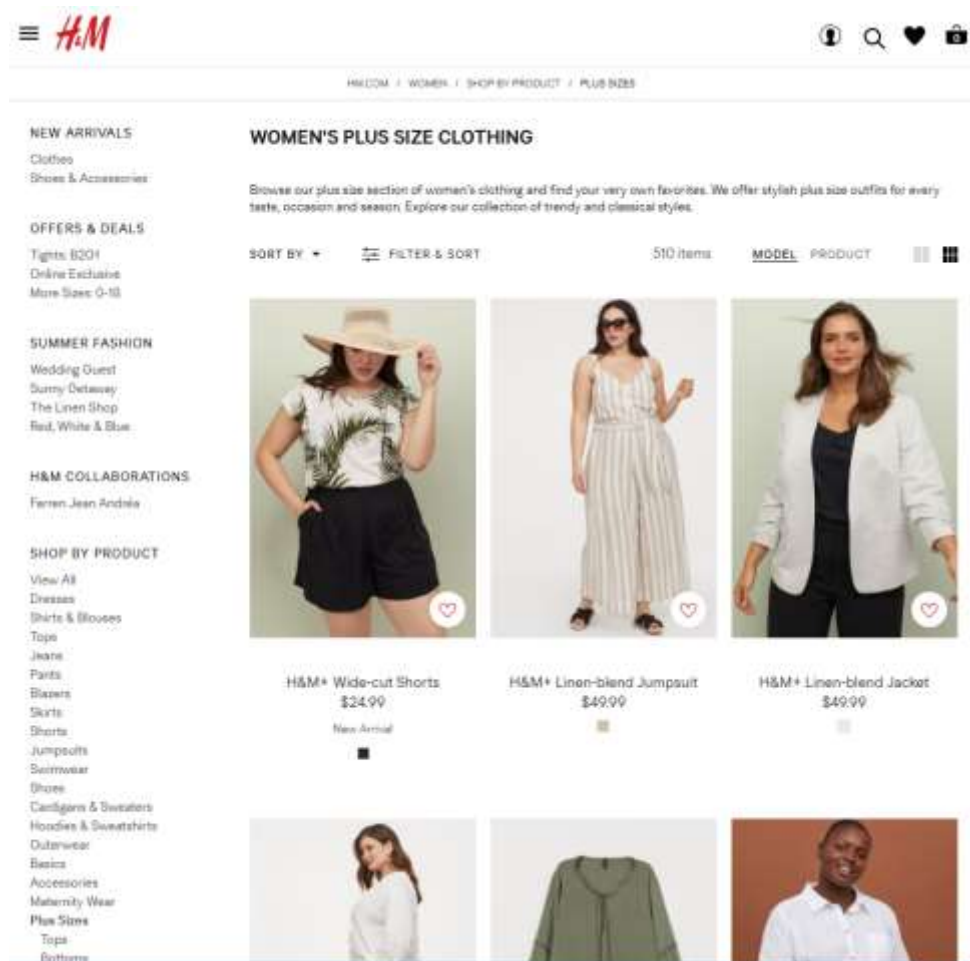


Figure 11: H&M+ Offering (H&M, n.d., n.p.)

Another example following the sub brands strategy includes Marks and Spencer which have established a separate collection for their female plus-size segment under the brand ‘Curve’ (Marks and Spencer, 2019a). It is categorised on their website’s navigation menu under the section ‘Fit Type’ along with ‘Maternity’ and ‘Petite’ apparel (Marks and Spencer, 2019a). This collection includes apparel pieces in UK sizes 18 to 32 (Marks and Spencer, 2019a). Furthermore, the clothes are promoted by plus-size models (Marks and Spencer, 2019a). The men’s plus-size collection is promoted similarly, with the only difference that it is labelled as ‘BIG & TALL’, ranges up to 4XL but does not show plus-size models (Marks and Spencer, 2019b).

Similarly, KappAhl targets plus-size women with their sub branded collection ‘XLNT’ under which apparel in German sizes 44 to 56 is offered also using curvy models to portray the clothes (KappAhl, n.d.). The online retailer ASOS also follows a sub brand strategy, adding the descriptor ‘Curve’ to its private label brand ASOS DESIGN for its plus-size collection (ASOS, 2019a). ASOS DESIGN Curve offers selected pieces up to UK size 30 (ASOS, 2019a). For their male plus-size product offering ASOS DESIGN uses another brand descriptor, namely ASOS DESIGN Plus (ASOS, 2019b). Interestingly, it can be observed from ASOS DESIGN Curve, KappAhl XLNT and H&M+, especially from the lingerie category, that those brands show ‘real bodies’ refraining from the use of Photoshop (ASOS, 2019a; H&M, n.d.; KappAhl, n.d.).

However, it must be noted that it is difficult to distinguish sub brands and brand descriptors in that sense and thus, we argue that some of the above mentioned examples, for instance H&M+ and Marks and Spencer BIG & TALL or Curve, could also be classified as branded house strategies using brand descriptors.

3.3.4 Branded House Strategy

Alternatively to the house of brands, the branded house stretches one masterbrand over a set of products while using only descriptors (Aaker, 2004). This strategy represents the lowest degree of separation and occurs when the masterbrand is the main driver and is thus not modified by a sub brand (Aaker, 2004). In contrast, descriptors used with the masterbrand have limited or no influence on the purchasing decision (Aaker, 2004). Whereas a branded house strategy promises lower investments through the establishment of an existing brand, it also hinders specific targeting and enables negative spillover effects and inconsistency in brand management (Aaker, 2004). As Dooley and Bowie (2005) summarise, high brand awareness, cost saving and increased branding consistency are the benefits of the branded house strategy.

Some of the most established fashion brands worldwide use a branded house strategy for the plus-size target. Nike offers plus-size articles for both men and women in its online shop (Nike, 2019). However, the majority of products is for females and ranges up to German size 58-60 (Nike, 2019). We could observe that whereas for women, curvy and realistic models have been used as depicted in Figure 12, the men’s plus-size products are promoted by straight-size models (Nike, 2019). Furthermore, the plus-size category is more prominent in the women’s website navigation (Nike, 2019). Besides categorising it separately on the website, plus-size apparel is sold under the Nike brand (Nike, 2019), following a branded house strategy.

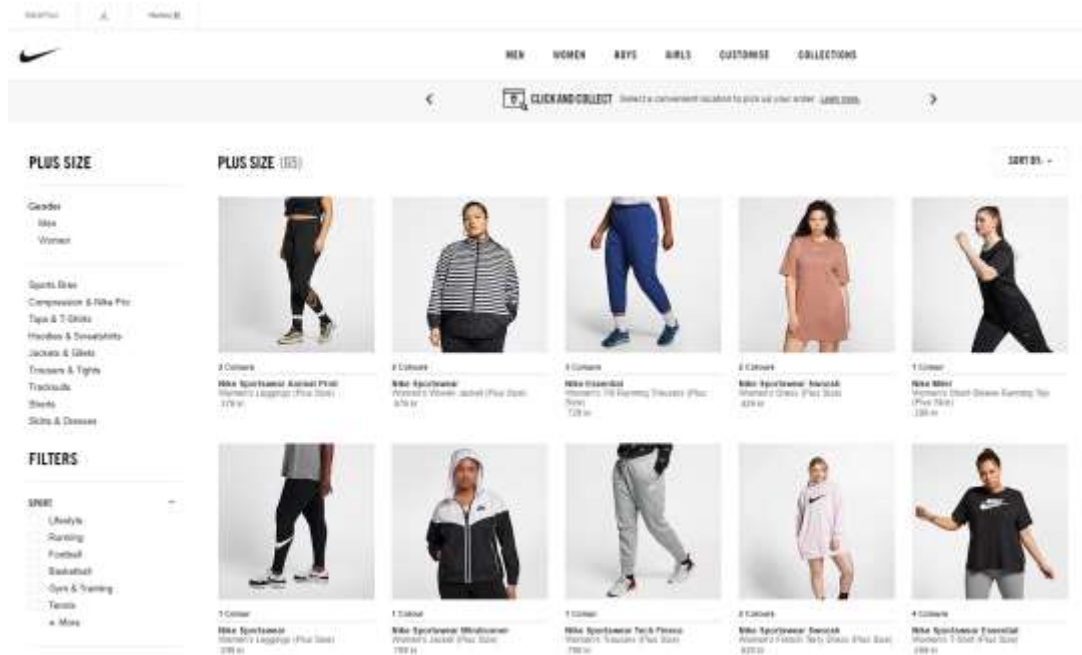


Figure 12: Nike's Plus-size Offering for Women (Nike, 2019, n.p.)

Alternatively, Adidas sells selected items up to size 3XL, illustrating the offering on straight-size models under one common brand and in the same online category (adidas, 2019). UNIQLO does it in a similar way as Adidas by making selected apparel available in sizes up to 3XL under its own brand in a separate online section 'extended sizes' (UNIQLO, n.d.). Notably, the extended sizes section also includes extra small sizes (UNIQLO, n.d.). In contrast, the luxury brand Hermès does not have a separate section for plus-sizes on its web shop (Hermès, 2019). Additionally, Hermès also does not use plus-size models to promote their clothes which are partly available up to German size 50 for women (Hermès, 2019). Furthermore, Primark incorporates female and male apparel in sizes up to 2XL into their existing brand (Primark, 2017). Under their section added sizes, Lindex offers female apparel up to German size 54 even though promoted by straight-size models (Lindex, n.d.). Additionally, apparel up to size 2XL can be purchased from Gina Tricot and Cubus (Cubus, n.d.; Gina Tricot, n.d.). All of the aforementioned examples are illustrated in Appendix A.

3.3.5 Summarising Plus-size Brand Strategies

Reflecting on the currently applied plus-size brand strategies, it is noteworthy that even though some brands offer plus-size apparel, the clothes are rarely shown in the example of realistic plus-size models. This is even rarer in male plus-size apparel. Furthermore, it can be detected that the brand names for the plus-size segment vary to a great extent. Whereas some companies decide to emphasise the actual size e.g. Dressmann XL or KappAhl's XLNT, others give more discrete names to their plus-size brands that focus more on a plus-size body's shape e.g. ASOS DESIGN

Curve, Marks and Spencer’s BIG & TALL or Curvissa or that are not explicitly descriptive of plus-sizes e.g. Violeta by MANGO.

Brands for which we could not find any plus-size offerings include: ZARA (ZARA, n.d.), Louis Vuitton (McCall, 2018), and Abercrombie & Fitch (Abercrombie & Fitch, 2019). As mentioned in chapter 2, Gucci also does not offer plus-size even though one could get the impression from their online shop that they would (Gucci, 2016). This indicates that more exclusive brands might tend to refrain from entering the plus-size market. Furthermore, what becomes evident in Figure 13 is that the branded house strategy is currently the most commonly chosen strategy. Only a minority of fashion brands enter the commitment and take the risk of creating brands that are more separated from the parent brand e.g. Dressmann XL or Violeta by MANGO. Taking the brands that we have looked at into consideration, it can be observed that no established fashion brand can be found in the list of house of brands strategy. On the contrary, only highly specialised fashion brands cater solely to the plus-size segment. Hence, it is intriguing to study the motives that companies have to make those choices. Equally, it is of interest to conduct research on customers’ perceptions of those strategies. However, before doing that, it is necessary to theoretically reflect on aspects that have to be taken into consideration when choosing a brand strategy in general.



Figure 13: Brand Strategies of Fashion Retailers for the Plus-size Segment (adapted from Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000)

3.4 Choosing a Brand Strategy: Benefits and Drawbacks

Choosing the right brand architecture is critical to a brand’s success. Hence, many researchers offer guidance in making this decision (Aaker, 2004; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2015). Whereas each type of brand architecture has advantages and disadvantages and each researcher focuses on slightly different aspects when giving advice for the selection of brand strategy, the current literature agrees that there is no single ‘best strategy’ as the decision is highly context-specific and depends on many variables (e.g. Kapferer, 2012).

For example, Kapferer (2012) suggests three factors to consider: the product or service, consumer behaviour, and the firm's competitive position. Aaker (2004) adds that market trends also have to be taken into consideration. This is supported by Petromilli, Morrison and Million (2002), who state that brand strategies must match and reinforce the firm's overall business goals and hence, different business strategies oblige different brand architectures.

Kapferer (2012) further points out that the choice of architecture is determined by the market, its level of segmentation and the need for support of the corporate brand. In addition to that, Varadarajan, DeFanti and Busch (2006) elaborate that the degree of tangibility of the product influences the decision. Another influencing factor is brand equity and brand identity (Aaker, 2004; Petromilli, Morrison & Millon, 2002).

When is it recommended to follow a strategy leaning towards the left side of the spectrum?

If the brand follows a business model that is focused on innovation and modernity, it is recommended to give product brands the freedom to develop their own shapes and characteristics and thus follow a house of brands strategy (Kapferer, 2012). Furthermore, in highly segmented mass markets, where products are characterised by a high degree of similarity, product brands can contribute to differentiation (Kapferer, 2012). Brand strategies further affect the value of a company (Kapferer, 2012). In some industries, for example in the cosmetics sector, a house of brands strategy might be of higher value (Kapferer, 2012). Determining which brand takes which role in influencing the purchasing decision depends on the level in the brand architecture which plays the leading role in driving the purchase decision (Kapferer, 2012; Dooley & Bowie, 2005). Therefore, a house of brands architecture is recommendable if each sub brand has a driving role (Aaker, 2004; Dooley & Bowie, 2005). However, clarity decreases with the increasing number of levels in the brand architecture (Kapferer, 2012). Consequently, Keller (2015) suggests that more than three brand levels might trigger confusion and mental overload among consumers. This is supported by Kapferer (2012) who also highlights the importance of removing any dispensable levels. Furthermore, he stresses that a new brand should only be developed if it is considerably different to the other product brands, if it emphasises strong technological, sociological, and cultural breakaway or if the parent brand does not (yet) provide an image that is appropriate for the target market. This might indicate that first movers in the plus-size market, who want to highlight the social change of increasing body shape and evolving beauty ideals, or fashion brands such as Abercrombie & Fitch, which might not offer an appropriate image due to its history of promoting size zero, should consider launching a new brand instead of stretching an existing brand.

When is it recommended to follow a strategy leaning towards the left side of the spectrum?

Viewed from the consumer's perspective, a study by Alba & Hutchinson (1987) suggests that those target audiences who possess more prior knowledge within a product category tend to concentrate more on the product attributes rather than the product category. Thus, consumers who are less experienced within a product category might appreciate a simple branded house strategy (Dooley

& Bowie, 2005). Additionally, Aaker & Joachimsthaler (2000) claim that a branded house strategy is more affordable for small or short-lived businesses. Since it takes time and money to establish a product brand, it is advisable to follow a single brand strategy for goods with a short product life cycle or in case of absence of sufficient funding (Kapferer, 2012). This strategy, or a source brand strategy with two brand levels, is also advisable for companies that want to emphasise competence, power, its employees expertise or underlying culture and if the added value is linked to reputation (Kapferer, 2012). If the corporate brand is more in focus, for example in a branded house strategy, the gain from a brand sale is higher from an investment perspective (Kapferer, 2012; Rao, Agarwal & Dalhoff, 2004; Roper & Fill, 2012) and customer loyalty might also be stronger (Kapferer, 2012). However, the branded house strategy also requires more coordination and power structures (Aaker, 2004; Kapferer, 2012).

Considering this information, Keller (2015) proposes a framework that helps to choose the right brand strategy. According to him, there are three steps which are involved in developing a brand architecture strategy. The first step is to define the brand potential which includes formulating a brand vision, defining the brand boundaries (e.g. which products and services should be supplied under one brand and which needs should be satisfied to avoid ‘over-branding’) and crafting the brand positioning. Secondly, the potential can be exploited by identifying opportunities for brand extension. Finally, the development of a brand architecture strategy involves the decision on how to brand new products and services e.g. in terms of names, looks, and other branding elements. All brand strategy decisions should be assessed according to possible relevance and differentiation. If the new brand is neither relevant nor differentiated, it might not deserve the right to be a brand on its own.

Aaker (2004) also provides input for the selection of a brand strategy and thus, suggests answering three questions:

Will the existing brand enhance the offering? Will the offering enhance the brands that define the offering? Is there a compelling reason to generate a new brand (whether it be a stand-alone brand, an endorsed brand or a sub brand [sic])? (p.63)

Strategies on the left side of the Brand Relationship Spectrum are recommended if the answer to the first and second question is positive and to the third question negative (Aaker, 2004). On the contrary, strategies that move towards the house of brands are preferable if the first two questions are answered negatively and the final question positively (Aaker, 2004). Thus, when heading towards a branded house strategy, the masterbrand must add (by transferring associations, credibility and visibility and by generating economies of scale) or gain value to the new product (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). In contrast, a house of brands strategy is justifiable if the new brand creates and owns individual associations, represents a new, diverse product or if the customer bond of the acquired brand is strong and difficult to transfer (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000).

4. Methodology

In the following abstract we elaborate on our philosophical underpinnings in this research and give a detailed outlook on our research approach, design, data collection, underlying research ethics, data analysis, and lastly the limitations of our research design. Taking on a constructionist point of view using a case study strategy, we investigated the research topic using a holistic approach which takes into account multiple perspectives, namely company representatives and straight-size as well as plus-size customers through the conduction of in-depth interviews and online observations.

4.1 Research Philosophy

Every research project holds certain assumptions made by the researchers in regards to the nature of knowledge and how it can be developed (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson & Jaspersen, 2018) which strongly influences the formulation of the research question, the choice of method and interpretation of results (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). As such, it is necessary to guarantee transparency about the ontological and epistemological position to justify the chosen research design (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018).

We believe that the phenomenon of more and more retailers including plus-size lines in their offering and the acceptance of this strategic decision by customers holds different perspectives and does not correspond to one single truth. This perspective is further supported by Roper and Fill (2012) who propose that the perception of brands by different audiences varies among them and leads to the establishment of multiple brand images. As a result, there may never be one single answer to the research question and the research design has to allow for the gain of insights into multiple perspectives and their underlying reasoning. Therefore, it is vital to understand the development of the phenomenon of plus-size branding and explore its meaning from different perspectives (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith et al. 2018; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012).

Further, even though beauty ideals are concepts constructed by society and might influence the perception of brands and their offering, we reckon that the perceptions of brands entering the plus-size segment and the reasons for companies to choose different brand strategies are individually constructed and will vary among different points of view. This further emphasises the necessity to investigate the perspective of multiple stakeholders which are involved in this phenomenon.

Additionally, we believe that such meanings will not just vary between different target groups but also between individuals within those target groups as meaning is constructed individually and influenced by individual values and previous experiences and can moreover differ from time to time and place to place (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). It is thus crucial to guarantee strong diversity among individuals within those target groups to further capture multiple perspectives. As

a result, we will take on a relativist and constructionist standpoint (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018) within this study and aim to explore the phenomenon of plus-size integration from multiple viewpoints, hence the business and customer (plus-size and straight-size customers) perspective.

4.2. Research Approach and Strategy

Our philosophical standpoint strongly influences the research approach and thus requires in-depth gathering of opinions by multiple stakeholders (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). It is therefore necessary to take on an exploratory stance to gain a deeper understanding about the research topic by asking open questions and fully discover the nature of the phenomenon and its meaning (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). Consequently, our research relies on a rather small sample which aims at including different perspectives to the phenomenon and therefore, we follow a qualitative research strategy (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). In order to understand the complex social phenomenon of plus-size branding, we follow an exploratory case study research strategy which makes it possible to investigate the topic in a real-life context and explore the ‘how?’ and ‘why?’ of a research question (Yin, 2003). Considering Yin’s (2003) advice on when to choose which research strategy, we believe that a case study strategy is the most appropriate and more favourable over other strategies such as experiments or history which are also recommended for research aiming to explore the ‘how?’ and ‘why?’. This is due to the fact that control of behavioural events is not required and the phenomenon of plus-size branding is a contemporary event that takes part in the development of beauty ideals (Yin, 2003). Thus, different stakeholders that take part in the construction of the phenomenon of plus-size branding represent multiple cases.

By exploring which strategy to choose when entering the plus-size market, a combination of qualitative data collection methods in the form of in-depth interviews and online observations were applied. Based on our findings, our study aims to derive new knowledge and build a conceptual framework that makes sense of the phenomenon. Therefore, we take on an inductive approach as we used our findings to derive a new theoretical framework rather than use existing theory as a basis for our findings (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that we use existing theory, namely Aaker and Joachimsthaler’s (2000) Brand Relationship Spectrum, as a lens for our research and apply it into the context of plus-size branding in order to derive new theory. As Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012) emphasise, this means that we started with the collection of data and subsequently explored which themes our research material contained to build a conceptual framework based on relationships between data. According to the authors, the greatest strength of this approach is that it focuses on the ‘why?’ instead of the ‘what?’ which matches our research strategy and helps to understand how people make sense of the world. Hence, as the authors further emphasise, an inductive approach enables us to find alternative ways to understand and explain the phenomenon under investigation.

This understanding is in contradiction with a deductive approach, where, according to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012), researchers use theoretical frameworks to guide their data collection and analysis. Further, they elaborate that an abductive approach can be classified in between an inductive and a deductive approach as it collects data in order to generate or modify existing theory which will be tested with additionally collected data afterwards. Even though some authors voice that an inductive approach can be difficult for researchers with limited experience (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012), we believe that this strategy is the most appropriate one for our research considering the lack of theory and research on plus-size branding. Due to the novelty of our research topic, so far no theoretical framework exists that could present a basis for the conduction of our research as we have to rely on theory from related research areas and hence, we consider an abductive or deductive approach as inappropriate.

4.3 Research Design

The research design explains what data was gathered, how and where from (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). As Yin (2003) suggests, the following five components need to be included in a case study research design: research question, units of analysis, propositions (if any), the logic linking the data to the propositions, and the criteria for interpreting the findings. However, we decided that within this research the latter three components will be treated in separate chapters.

4.3.1 Research Questions

As stated in the Introduction chapter, our research is guided by the following question: *What do fashion retailers have to consider when choosing a brand strategy for the plus-size market?*

In order to answer this research question it is vital to investigate the business as well as the customer perspective. However, customers do not only consist of direct customers, namely plus-size shoppers, but also of straight-size shoppers since many brands follow a branded house strategy and thus target two types of shoppers with the same brand. Hence, the following sub questions need to be addressed:

- *What are the preferences when it comes to plus-size branding among plus-size and straight-size customers?*
- *What are the reasons for choosing specific plus-size brand strategies from a business perspective?*

4.3.2 Units of Analysis

As a result of the questions that this research aims to answer, the unit of analysis is threefold as depicted in Figure 14. Thus, plus-size customers, straight-size customers, and company representatives represent the groups of individuals which are studied as cases within this multiple-case study. Those three groups of people are thus the primary units of analysis.

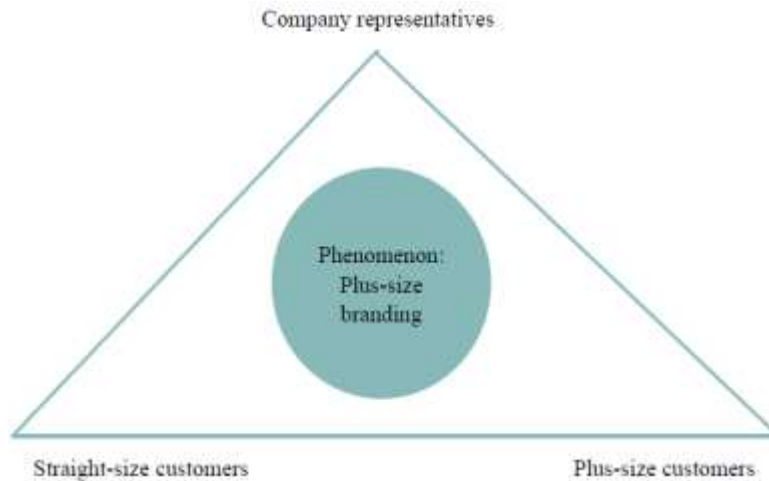


Figure 14: Units of Analysis (Own Figure, 2019)

As Yin (2003) argues, definitions of cases are needed for multiple-case studies to guarantee that the study stays within feasible limits. As he points out, especially when the cases consists of groups of people, it is crucial to define who does not belong to these groups of people and who does. Thus, Table 3 gives an overview about the definitions of the units of analysis.

Table 3: Definitions of the Units of Analysis (Own Table, 2019)

Company Representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees of fashion brands that offer plus-size apparel and of brands that do not offer plus-size apparel and in any way deal with the plus-size fashion segment or could potentially deal with the decision to target the plus-size segment • This includes employees from various positions such as Brand Managers, Category Managers as well as Fashion Designers or members of the executive board and management team
Plus-size Shoppers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People who wear size XL and up (which corresponds to US size 14-16, UK size 18-20 and German size 44-46 for women's apparel and US as well as UK size 46 and German size 56 for men's apparel) • Current as well as potential customers of brands that offer plus-size apparel
Straight-size Shoppers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People who wear size L and down (which corresponds to US size 10-12, UK size 14-16, and German size 40-42 for women's apparel and US as well as UK size 42-44 and German size 52-54 for men's apparel) • Current as well as potential customers of brands that offer plus-size and straight-size apparel and of brands that offer only straight-size apparel

Capturing these multiple perspectives and exploring the phenomenon has been possible by gathering qualitative data in the form of natural language data (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018) and applying a mixture of methods to collect the opinions and experiences of diverse individuals (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). To study each of the three cases, we conducted in-depth semi-structured qualitative telephone or in-person interviews with company representatives and plus-size customers and further used insights from a previous pilot study with straight-size customers which were further complemented with findings from online observations as Figure 15 illustrates. The reason for triangulation is that, in the case of straight-size shoppers, the answers

provided in an interview might correspond more to what is socially acceptable to say and think than to their actual opinions and perceptions and thus, it is essential to observe their comments in an environment where they can act more anonymously.



Figure 15: Methodology (Own Figure, 2019)

We regard qualitative interviews as the most appropriate method since the setting requires the collection of in-depth information on individual perspectives and the need to understand underlying driving factors that make up certain viewpoints (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Thus, the possibility of a direct interaction with the participants is vital. Moreover, plus-size fashion is a sensitive topic which is still stigmatised in society and could prove to be difficult for a group discussion. Therefore, we believe that in-depth interviews are the most appropriate method to gather data for our research aim.

As Yin (2003) stresses, each of the units of analyses might require a slightly different data collection strategy. Therefore, the data collection is described separately for each of the units of analysis.

4.4 Data Collection Company Representatives

4.4.1 Sampling

One of our key focuses is to observe different strategies brands undertake in integrating plus-size lines and to further understand the reasons for choosing a certain strategy. As illustrated in the literature review, there are multiple options how plus-size categories can be integrated in the existing portfolio and hence, we believe that it would be most valuable to consider companies with different kinds of strategies. Moreover, we believe that the positioning strategy represents a major factor which is crucial for companies to consider when integrating plus-size. However, we were also aware that gaining access to leading fashion retailers would be difficult due to our limited resources and amount of time. Further, we had to rely on the willingness of brand representatives to take part in our study. Therefore, we applied a maximum-variation sampling combined with an ad-hoc sampling strategy (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). This means that we contacted numerous employees of companies which chose different strategies to integrate plus-size in their offerings

and of companies which do not serve the plus-size market yet but might be affected by the overall trend and might consider to enter the market eventually via LinkedIn (Figure 16). This is due to the fact that retailers which decided against entering the plus-size market can provide useful insights on reasons that can hinder such a decision. Based on their responses, we selected those companies which presented the highest variety in possible strategies taking into account their price and positioning strategy as well.

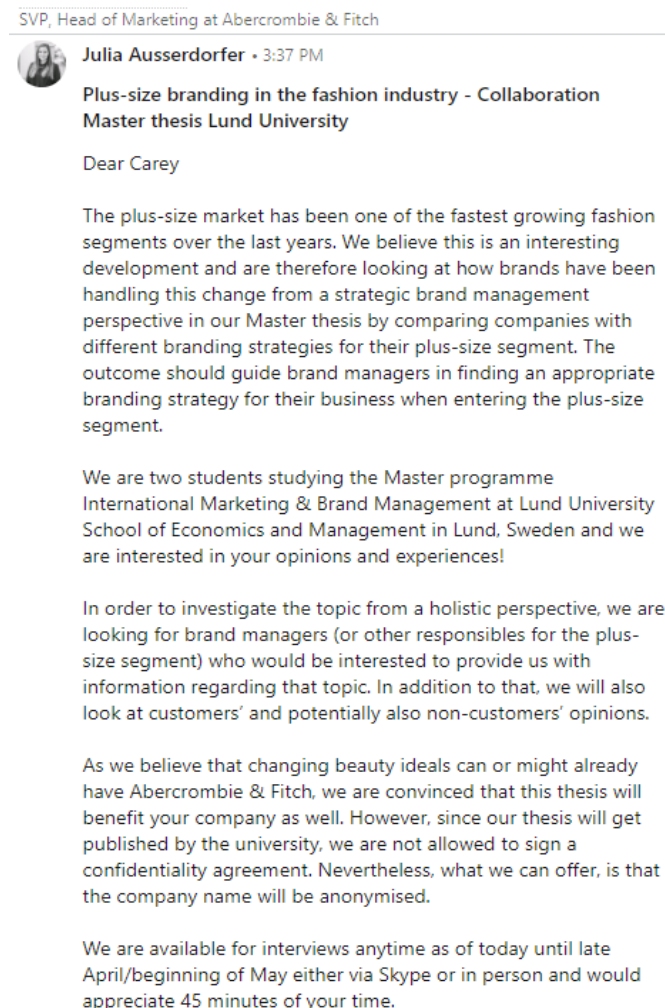


Figure 16: Contacting Potential Interviewees via LinkedIn (Own Figure, 2019)

Table 4 provides a summary of all participants, whereas some of them requested the company name to be anonymised.

Table 4: Summary of Interview Participants for Company Representatives (Own Table, 2019)

Company	Job Position of Interviewee	Targeting Plus-size?	Brand Strategy	Price Segment	Target group men/women?	Interview
Dressmann	Driftchef Dressmann XL	yes	Endorsed brand with separate stores	Low price segment	Men	10.5.2019
German Fashion Retailer (= Brand B)	Fashion Designer	yes	Endorsed brand (by Brand A) with separate stores	Middle price segment	Women	01.5.2019
Hugo Boss	Former member of the Executive Board	no (only for some designs)	Integration of bigger sizes up to size 46 for particular designs	Price premium segment	Both	24.4.2019
Marc Cain	Managing Director	no (only for some designs)	Integration of bigger sizes up to 46 for particular designs but only available online	Price premium segment	Women	03.5.2019

4.4.2 Research Setting

Due to the limited time resources company representatives have in their everyday lives, we decided to undertake mediated telephone interviews to increase flexibility. Additionally this method also appeared to be best suited due to the fact that some of the retailers are located outside of Sweden. Because of our limited resources in terms of time and finances, it would not have been possible to realise in-person interviews outside of Sweden. Consequently, if we would have limited our sampling to companies located in Sweden, we would have lost potential interesting interview partners and hence, mediated interviews posed a sufficient method to overcome such related distance issues and provided us with more flexibility when selecting interview partners.

During the interview both researchers were present and introduced themselves to the interviewee. We further explained that while one researcher would lead the interview, the other researcher would observe the interview, take notes and might also ask follow up questions in the end. This way, the second researcher could listen to the interview in more detail and could take notes of important insights to base follow up questions upon.

4.4.3 Interview Structure

When planning an interview one of the first things researchers have to decide upon is the structure of the interview (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). The aim of the conducted interviews is to get an understanding of the point of view and sense making of each individual participant which we believe can only be accomplished if we tailor our questions to the specific situation and the interviewees' responses which is in alignment with Easterby-Smith et al.'s (2018) approach.

However, we also defined some key areas that had to be covered in every interview to make it possible to compare different opinions later on. Therefore, according to Easterby-Smith et al. (2018), we relied on a semi-structured interview for which we prepared questions to cover a specific selection of topics but could also pose follow-up questions that were tailored to the specific responses.

To ensure that the questions were easy to understand and to assess the length of the interview, we tested the interview guidelines in advance and made changes accordingly. Additionally we translated the guidelines into German in case German-speaking participants would feel more comfortable to conduct the interview in their mother tongue. All the other interviews were conducted in English.

Due to the fact that we on the one hand considered the points of view of companies which have already entered the plus-size market as well on the other hand of those that have not, we relied on two different interview guidelines. Depending on the aforementioned characteristic, different considerations were of importance to understand why companies decided to follow a particular brand strategy. This included questions about the brand's general offering and positioning, their present brand strategy for the plus-size market (or in the case of companies not targeting the plus-size segment, which barriers they perceive and which strategy they would choose if they did). This was followed by the discussion of an example of a retailer which targets the plus-size segment and uses a different strategy to do so. Here, we focused on the perceived benefits and drawbacks for different strategies. Further, the interviewees should elaborate if this kind of strategy would fit to their own brand.

For interview partners of companies that do not offer plus-size, we discussed another example of a plus-size retailer so that they were provided with examples of a company following a branded house and an endorsed brand strategy. This kind of questioning made it easier for us to comprehend what understanding the employees have of their own positioning, their brand's image and also of different branding strategies. The detailed interview guidelines can be found in Appendix B.

4.5 Data Collection Plus-size Customers

4.5.1 Sampling

As our literature review emphasises, body weight is a highly sensitive topic. This is especially true for overweight people who are object of stigmatisation and often develop low self-esteem as they do not correspond to the kind of beauty that is valued in contemporary society. Therefore, it becomes clear that the selection of plus-size interviewees had to be very careful and well thought-through. Due to the fact that the two of us cannot be considered plus-size shoppers, this might make plus-size interviewees uncomfortable and thus, it is especially important to choose the right strategy when approaching plus-size people. As the chance that unfamiliar people, whom we could

for example approach in the streets, could feel as if their body types were judged, we decided to contact potential participants in our close environment. This strategy had two major advantages. Firstly, we already knew which of those people we had access to would feel comfortable talking about plus-size shopping and their own experiences linked to this topic which improved the selection process. Secondly, we have already formed a personal relationship with the interviewees and therefore, it was easier to address them in a more sensitive way. Furthermore, due to this close relationship, it was easier for participants to open up, give honest answers and to not be ashamed of talking about being a plus-size shopper.

To ensure validity it is important to consider diverse points of view (Saunders, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012; Yin, 2003) and hence, include people with a diverse set of characteristics. Due to the fact that all the interviewees in our immediate surrounding were either from Germany or Austria and were about the same age group we further wanted to address participants from different nationalities and age groups to make our sampling more diverse and consider as many different points of views as possible. To find suitable interviewees, we created a post in local Facebook groups for students to ensure that we could include young people. This way, we did not have to address people directly and at the same time, we could increase the probability that the participants would feel comfortable to talk about such a sensitive topic as the participation relied on a voluntary basis. To increase the variety of participants, we analysed the Facebook profiles and selected those respondents, which presented the highest diversity in terms of gender, nationality and professional background. Our intention with this post was to give plus-size customers the chance to approach us directly and discreetly via a private message as illustrated in Figure 17.

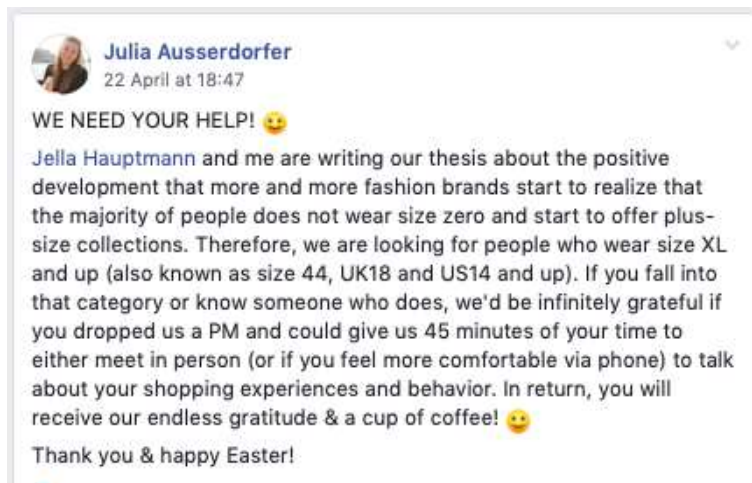


Figure 17: Facebook Post (Own Figure, 2019)

Hence, we followed an ad-hoc sampling strategy in combination with a maximum-variation strategy as we relied on volunteers as well as people in our close environment but selected those participants which presented the greatest diversity (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Table 5 summarises which plus-size customers took part in our interviews.

Table 5: Summary of Interview Participants for Plus-size Shoppers (Own Table, 2019)

Name	Gender	Age	Nationality	Occupation
Gerald	Male	55	Austria	Chef
Yasemin	Female	55	Turkey	Waitress
Tanja	Female	54	Germany	Fashion Designer
Bernd	Male	24	Netherlands	Student of Entrepreneurship and Innovation
Carlotta	Female	23	Norway	Student of Media and Communications
Linda	Female	24	Sweden	Student of Animal Ecology

4.5.2 Research Setting

As mentioned previously, the topic under investigation is highly personal and sensitive, especially for people who do not correspond to beauty ideals. To gain valuable insights and understand the sense making, values and feelings of plus-size participants in regards to plus-size brand strategies, it is vital to provide a setting that makes interviewees feel comfortable, so that they feel secure to speak freely. As our sample exists partly of people from our personal surroundings outside of Sweden, it was not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews with all participants and we had to rely on mediated interviews via telephone or Skype in some of the cases. We believe that, especially in conversations with plus-size customers, our research benefited from this approach, as interviewees might feel more comfortable in their private surroundings and hence, speak more freely about their personal experiences and feelings. Both researchers took part in the interview whereas one researcher led the interview and the other one took notes. This procedure was especially necessary due to the fact that some of the participants had close relationships to one of the researchers and hence, a second person was needed to observe and interpret the information objectively.

In contrast, for those interviewees who live in the area of Lund, we arranged face-to-face interviews. It was vital that the interviewees could feel comfortable during the whole interview to get the most honest answers and understanding of their points of view (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). To increase the sincerity of our post we suggested to meet at a public cafe that offered a relaxed and quiet surrounding. During the interviews again both researchers were present and explained their roles during the interview whereby one researcher guided the interview and the other researcher took notes, observed the participants reactions and prepared some follow-up questions if unclear arguments arose.

4.5.3 Interview Structure

For the interviews with plus-size participants we also followed a semi-structured interview approach for which we prepared some key topics that should be covered during the interview. Further, we also tested the topic guidelines beforehand and conducted changes accordingly as described before. Again, we provided the possibility to conduct the interview either in German or in English for German speaking participants.

In the beginning of the interview we asked some icebreaker questions to create a relaxed atmosphere and provide a more sensitive start into the interview. Afterwards, we introduced the interviewee to the developments in plus-size fashion and asked about their opinions on that. Later on, we introduced the example of Dressmann XL and talked about their perception of the concept of a separate store before we introduced two examples of fashion retailers which chose different strategies to enter the plus-size segment. To make it easier for the participants to relate to these strategies, we selected different examples of branded house strategies and endorsed brand strategies depending on the gender of the participants in order to find out how they perceive the strategies in comparison. For example, whereas men could relate better to the web shop of Dressmann XL since solely male fashion is offered, women were provided with a brand which follows a similar strategy as Dressmann XL but specialises on women's apparel, namely Violeta by MANGO. We first introduced the concepts of the different retailers and showed the participants pictures of their online website, asking them to describe their perceptions, thoughts and feelings. Additionally, we used the technique of laddering up and down to understand the participants' opinions and underlying concepts (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Further, we asked plus-size customers to compare the different concepts and elaborate on perceived advantages and disadvantages of these strategies. Lastly, we asked them where they see potential for improvement for the future and what needs they as plus-size customers have that companies should react upon. The detailed interview guidelines can be found in Appendix B.

4.6 Data Collection Straight-size Shoppers

As Aaker (2011) argues, managing the perception of the category or subcategory, namely the perception of plus-size fashion, is crucial in order to influence purchases within that category. We believe that straight-size shoppers also hold images of the plus-size category, especially if it is offered under the same brand that they also shop from. Therefore, we share the opinion that it is vital to include the perceptions of indirect customers in our research as well. To capture the opinions of straight-size shoppers, a mixed method consisting of in-depth interviews and online observations has been applied as illustrated in Figure 18. This is due to the fact that it is estimated that the answers gathered during the in-depth interviews might not reflect the interviewees' true opinions. Therefore, the interviews were supported by online observations of straight-size

shoppers' comments in a more anonymous setting, where they do not have to worry about what is socially acceptable to say and think.



Figure 18: Mixed Method Straight-size Shoppers (Own Figure, 2019)

4.6.1 Sampling and Platform Evaluation

In-depth interviews

The in-depth interviews with straight-size shoppers were conducted as a pilot study during the course Qualitative Research Methods. Thus, we interviewed people of different age, gender, professional backgrounds living in Lund or in the surroundings in order to include as diverse perspectives as possible following a maximum-variation sampling approach combined with an ad hoc sampling approach (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). This means that we focused on selecting highly diverse participants but at the same time depended on the access to people due to shortage of time (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). To find suitable interviewees, we created a post in one of the local Facebook groups calling for participation in our research project illustrated in Figure 19.



Figure 19: Calling for Interviewees in a Facebook Group (Own Figure, 2019)

Depending on the responses, we selected those potential participants specifically that met our criteria of high diversity considering factors as nationality, gender and professional background. Thus, we analysed their Facebook profile to find out if they met those criteria. Based on this approach we have conducted interviews with the people described in Table 6.

Table 6: Summary of Interview Participants for Straight-size Shoppers (Own Table, 2019)

Name	Gender	Nationality	Age	Occupation
Marietta	Female	Greece	24	Student of Biomedicine
Charlotte	Female	Germany	25	Student of Development Studies
Zane	Female	Latvia	27	Student of Social Sciences
Rasmus	Male	Sweden	24	Student of International Marketing and Brand Management

Online Observations

As online observations have been applied as a method to supplement the results of the interviews with straight-size shoppers and since it does not deal with individuals particularly, a hidden participation in social media discussions has been chosen (Skageby, 2011). This means that we did not actively take part in the discussions but rather took into consideration the comments users made under specific social media posts. Thus, we have decided to analyse six Instagram posts that show plus-size models by Abercrombie and Fitch. This brand has been chosen since it is highly controversial and its initial targets were attractive straight-size shoppers only, as described in the Introduction. Furthermore, our interviewees have sometimes referred to the brand when talking about a particular beauty ideal as Abercrombie & Fitch seems to embody flawless beauty. Therefore, we have considered it interesting to observe Abercrombie & Fitch's customers' opinions of plus-size in general and the fact that the brand displays curvy models. When collecting the data through screenshots, it is important that the material is treated confidentially and names are anonymised (Skageby, 2011).

4.6.2 Research Setting

In-depth interviews

It was vital that the participants felt comfortable during the entire interview. Furthermore, since the interviewees were found on Facebook and might have been concerned about the sincerity of the post, it was important to meet in a public place. Therefore, we arranged a meeting in a not too highly frequented cafe that offered a relaxed atmosphere. Both researchers joined the interview whereas one guided the interview and the other observed the interviewee and took notes.

Online Observations

The social media platform Instagram and hence Abercrombie and Fitch's posts of plus-size models represented the setting for the online observation. This platform was chosen since statistically it is the sixth most popular social network worldwide (Statista, 2019g) and we regard it the only among those six most used platforms that is not primarily used for private, direct communication but rather for sharing content. Thus, we believe that opinions are made publicly available easier. In order to collect the data, both researchers analysed the conversations that took place in the form of comments under the posts but did not participate in any of the discussions.

4.6.3 Interview Structure

Also, for interviews with straight-size customers a semi-structured interview approach was chosen for which interview guidelines were created in advance (Appendix B). The guidelines were tested in advance to assess the length of the interview and if the questions were easy to understand. Sequentially, the guidelines were adapted accordingly. The interviews were conducted in either German or English depending on the preferred language of the interviewee.

Interviewees were guided to the topic carefully by asking ice-breaker questions before getting to the core questions of the research. When moving on with the interview, we showed the interviewees illustrations of plus-size models and let them describe their perceptions, thoughts and feelings on the illustrations. Finally, we showed an example of the website of a fashion retailer which recently entered the plus-size segment but mainly targets straight-size customers. This made it easier for the participants to relate to specific perceptions and emotions. We decided to choose H&M as the brand is widely known in Sweden as well as internationally which aided our approach of interviewing culturally diverse people. This way, we hoped to reveal relevant associations of the participants view towards H&M and their plus-size brand H&M+. Furthermore, we intended to apply laddering up and down, to gain extensive knowledge of the interviewee's points of view, underlying assumptions and constructs (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018).

4.7 Validity, Reliability and Generalisability

As our study is of exploratory nature, we do not have any study propositions (Yin, 2003). However, Yin (2003) points out that "Instead of propositions, the design for an exploratory [case] study should state the purpose, as well as the criteria by which an exploration will be judged successful." (p.22). As he further states, the quality criteria for exploratory case studies can be judged according to construct validity, external validity (which can also be referred to as generalizability) and reliability.

4.7.1 Construct validity

In order to increase construct validity, we focused on using multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2003). Consequently, we decided to conduct a multiple-case study instead of a single case study. Thus, we were able to include the perspectives of companies, direct and indirect customers (Easterby et al. 2018). Furthermore, we have reviewed the results with the key informants and adjusted them accordingly (Yin, 2003). To further enhance validity, we have applied triangulation by using different data collection methods (Easterby et al. 2018).

4.7.2 Generalisability/External validity

Generalisability in case study research refers to analytical rather than statistical generalisation and thus results need to be generalised to some broader theory (Yin, 2003). Hence, we have paid attention to guarantee a high diversity within the cases so that the results are applicable to a broad range of fashion brands. Firstly, we have selected company representatives from brands that are highly diverse from each other regarding their chosen brand strategy for the plus-size segment, price strategy and brand positioning. Furthermore, it was crucial to include multiple perspectives from different job positions rather than only those of brand managers to understand perceived opportunities and challenges from various perspectives within the company. Secondly, we have interviewed a broad range of plus-size shoppers who have diverse perspectives due to their professional background, nationality, age and gender. Thirdly, the same criterion of diversity among interview partners has been applied for straight-size shoppers.

4.7.3 Reliability

Reliability refers to the fact that results need to be reproducible by other researchers (Yin, 2003). Thus, it is crucial for us to stay transparent, objective and reflexive during the research process, especially during data collection and analysis, and to document the research process properly e.g. by audiotaping the interviews and transcribing the main quotes of the interviews and discussing the findings together. Due to the fact that we audiotaped and summarised interviews and further mutually discussed our individual framings we can ensure the reliability of our study.

4.8 Data Analysis

Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) refer to framing as the approach one chooses to make sense of the research material and connect information. The authors argue that in applying a certain frame, we limit ourselves to a specific kind of information that can be observed and hence, shape our analysis immensely. Therefore, it is vital to elaborate on the underlying framings of this research to ensure clarity and transparency.

Before one can start to analyse the research material it is important to prepare the data and systematically organise it, which is especially important in a qualitative study (Easterby-Smith, 2018; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). To do so, we saved the audio tapes in folders classifying which stakeholder perspective they refer to. Additionally, the interviews had to be summarised so they could be analysed in the following and were also organised according to the different perspectives.

To summarise the interviews, both researchers listened to the audio tapes together, took notes of the content of the interviews and transcribed those quotes that they perceived to be vital for the further analysis as they refer to a key topic or understanding of plus-size branding. This way, we could firstly, provide greater objectivity when exploring the research material and secondly, ensure that all important quotes would be transcribed and thus, no important insights would be neglected. After each interview was summarised, we discussed key insights and how they relate to previous findings. As suggested by Saunders, Lewis and Thorpe (2012) this way of grouping insights is important to make sense of data in order to link different insights later on in the research process. Further, the authors point out that this procedure is a valuable preparation to eventually create a concept that structures the research material in a way to answer the research question sufficiently. This approach is further in line with our inductive research approach as we base the derivation of a theoretical concept on our data collection instead of using theory as a basis to frame data in a certain way (Saunders, Lewis & Thorpe, 2012).

To analyse our research material it is vital to begin with the identification of themes and sub-themes as basis to understand the research material, structure concepts and to establish a coherent and holistic theoretical framework (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). According to Ryan and Bernard (2003) the creation of themes is essential due to three reasons: firstly, for a valuable analysis as it enables the researcher to describe, compare and explain their findings. Secondly, an illustration of how themes were established is needed to make research transparent and assessable and lastly, to create an explicit way of communicating which can be understood across various disciplines. As the authors suggest, one way to identify themes is to read through the research material and mark different themes with specific colours throughout the text. Within the interview summaries we looked for repetition in topics which were referred to when participants described certain perceptions or experiences as a basis for themes as suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003).

To do so, we decided to first explore the research material separately, took notes and derived our own individual meaning from it. Afterwards, we met to discuss our framings and interpretation. Due to the fact that every researcher applies a different framing to information we could ensure to consider different ways of framing the information and create a solid base for the subsequent analysis and creation of a conceptual framework. This is supported by Ryan and Bernard (2003) who note that the identification of themes depends on the individual frame every researcher applies. However, we believe that the subsequent discussion about such themes further increases validity of our research as we consider different ways to frame the findings and gain a more holistic

and critical view towards the research material which is in line with Ryan's and Bernard's (2003) suggestion to ensure validity. Further, this approach enhanced us to gain a well-rounded understanding of underlying theoretical concepts.

After identifying several topics, we selected those that were on the same abstraction level and created sub-topics if necessary to structure our findings. As a result, we have selected the following themes: brand name, store concept, website concept, models, brand associations, evaluation of brand strategy, brand concept (specialisation, positioning and brand identity and corporate culture), brand target (age, size range, brand orientation) and brand resources (store space, business operations and brand assets).

4.9 Research Ethics

For the conduction of management and business research, different ethical concerns should be taken into consideration (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). The following abstract will outline the ethical considerations of this research and gives special attention to four main principles as proposed by Bryman & Bell (2011): "whether there is harm to participants; whether there is a lack of informed consent; whether there is an invasion of privacy; whether deception is involved" (p.128).

According to the authors, harm can be of physical or psychological nature (such as stress, or development of self-esteem). In regards to this, we are aware that our research topic is highly sensitive, especially for plus-size customers. As our literature review illustrated, the own body shape is a very personal topic and often reason for dissatisfaction or even impair self-esteem particularly for people who do not respond to beauty ideals held by society. Therefore, this research posed special challenges to us in regards to how plus-size customers should be addressed, selected and which topics could be discussed without presenting psychological harm to them. Due to the question of how to address people in public and moreover, explain why they would qualify for our research without eventually harming them, we were aware that the selection of interviewees had to be done very carefully. Thus, we decided that the ethical risks to recruit people in public would be too high and decided to rely on people we know as well as on people who would voluntarily take part in a discussion about this topic as outlined in chapter 4.5. Bryman & Bell (2011) further suggest that the "confidentiality of records and anonymity of accounts" (p. 129) are issues of potential harm. Taking this into consideration, we used pseudonyms to guarantee anonymity of participants and additionally will delete audio tapes after the hand-in of this thesis. Moreover, we only used company names in case the consent was given to do so and relied on a description based on main characteristics otherwise.

As mentioned previously, we based interviews on a voluntary participation. For this purpose we clearly stated the thesis and interview topic to ensure that participants could give an informed consent. The participation in an interview relied on a completely voluntarily basis and participants

could decline attendance. This way we could ensure that only people who felt comfortable during the discussion took part in our research.

Addressing the third area of ethical concerns, the invasion of privacy, we could minimise related risks due to the fact that most interviews were mediated and conducted by telephone. The remaining interviews took place in a public space that offered a comfortable and private atmosphere. We gave the participants the freedom to choose the place that they would feel most comfortable in without having to be concerned that they meet someone they know there who could listen and thus influence their answers. Additionally, we encouraged the participants that there is no right or wrong to an answer and posed the questions in a neutral way so we would not intrude privacy or any personal beliefs. Moreover, privacy could be increased by an extensive information about the aim of this research and hence, the possibility of an informed consent as suggested by Bryman and Bell (2011). Lastly, we see the issue of deception uncritical for this research as we clearly stated the reason and aim of this research and further informed participants that we would record the interview.

For the conduction of online observations, ethical issues have to be considered as well. Due to the fact that this method allows no personal interaction between participants and researcher, issues of an informed consent, privacy and also deception prove to be critical. Whereas some state that archived interaction can be considered publicly available information (Skitka & Sargis, 2006), every researchers must decide for themselves how to deal with ethical concerns in specific cases (Skageby, 2011). In our case, we feel confident that users who engage on public websites intent to share their opinion and are aware of the fact that others can access their statements. Nevertheless, we have anonymised any names in this research. Due to the fact that they shared their thoughts voluntarily we do not see any special problems in respect of potential harm.

4.10 Limitations in Research Design

Even though we have tried to overcome many barriers, there are some limitations in our research design. First of all, we have only interviewed one company representative of each brand. Thus, different perspectives within one company are excluded and the insights per brand are less representative. Additionally, we could not cover all kinds of strategies as for example companies following a house of brands strategy or companies positioned in the luxury segment have not been interviewed.

Secondly, considering that we have approached possible straight-size and plus-size interviewees via Facebook, all those perspectives of people who do not use the social media platform are left out. Furthermore, it has to be considered that the plus-size shoppers we have interviewed are fairly self-confident, especially those who have messaged us actively offering their help for an interview. Therefore, different results might be reached if the opinions of those who are less self-confident with their bodies and with the fact that they have to buy plus-size apparel would have been

included. Additionally, considering the sampling strategy for plus-size customers we also had to be aware of the limitation of potential interview partners due to the selection of people in our immediate surroundings.

Similarly, only individuals who actively raise their opinions in virtual discussions could be considered for the online observations of straight size shoppers. With special regards to the interviews with straight-size shoppers, it has to be acknowledged that even though the participants vary in nationality, gender and focus of studies, they are all students of the same age group and probably share more similar attitudes towards beauty standards and perception of brands entering the plus-size market. Hence, we have to be aware of the fact that we are excluding opinions of customers from other generations that are also part of the customer base. The same limitation is applicable for online observations since Instagram is used by a younger generation as well (Statista, 2019h). Furthermore, for the same interview group, we have to consider that most answers, even in social media, might correspond more to what is socially and politically acceptable to say than to their actual thoughts about the topic.

In addition to that, whereas telephone interviews are a good way of making plus-size interviewees feel more comfortable and overcome distance issues with customers and company representatives, this method also limits the research as valuable other data such as body language has been neglected and since uncontrollable factors might disturb and distract respondents during the telephone interview. Moreover, company representatives could have felt less obligated in comparison to in-person interviews and reschedule the interview spontaneously.

Finally, in alignment with Easterby-Smith et al. (2018), we are aware of the fact that during the analysis process we have already started to frame the content in a certain way as we decided which phrases would be of higher importance and transcribed only those in detail. However, a mutual consensus could be reached when deciding which quotes to transcribe to increase validity. Table 7 summarises the research design.

Table 7: Research Design (adapted from Easterby-Smith et al. 2018)

Research Question: <i>What do fashion retailers have to consider when choosing a brand strategy for the plus-size market?</i>	
Sub Question 1: <i>What are the preferences when it comes to plus-size branding among plus-size and straight-size customers?</i>	
What Data?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Perceptions of fashion brands' plus-size brand strategies
How to Collect?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In-depth interviews ● Supplemented with online observations (for straight-size customers)
From Where?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Current and potential plus-size and straight-size customers
How to Analyse?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Audiotaped interviews and screenshots of comments on Instagram for online observations ● Summarising the interviews and transcribing the main quotes (if necessary translated from German into English) of the interviews and online observations ● Interpretation of findings and discussion ● Creation of themes and sub themes ● Coding the key quotes
Sub Question 2: <i>What are the reasons for choosing specific plus-size brand strategies from a business perspective?</i>	
What Data?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Insights into perceived challenges and opportunities of different plus-size brand strategies
How to Collect?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In-depth interviews
From Where?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Company representatives (working for fashion brands that currently offer plus-sizes and for brands that do not offer plus-sizes yet)
How to Analyse?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Audiotaped interviews ● Summarising the interviews and transcribing the main quotes (if necessary translated from German into English) ● Interpretation of findings and discussion ● Creation of themes and sub themes ● Coding the key quotes

5. Analysis of Results - Customers

In order to answer the question ‘What are the preferences when it comes to plus-size branding among plus-size and straight-size customers?’ we need to analyse the insights gained from both customer groups. However, as plus-size shoppers are the direct customers of plus-size brands, their perspective will represent the main focus of the first part of the analysis.

The branding preferences among plus-size shoppers especially refer to the name of the brand, the store and website concept and the models used in advertising and for the product presentation.

The insights gained from straight-size shoppers refer to the perceptions of fashion brands offering plus-sizes. The results reveal that they would support brands integrating plus-size in their fashion assortment and thus following a branded house strategy so that plus-size shoppers do not feel excluded even though such a strategy would impact straight-size shoppers the most.

5.1 Plus-size Customers

The analysis of the interviews with plus-size customers has shown that fashion brands still have to put a lot of effort in satisfying their needs, especially when it comes to the design and fit of the apparel and availability of sizes on which we do not focus in this thesis. However, from a branding perspective, the preferences of plus-size customers refer to brand name, store concept, website concept and models. Those aspects have emerged during the discussion with plus-size customers and represent our themes for the data analysis as depicted in Figure 20.

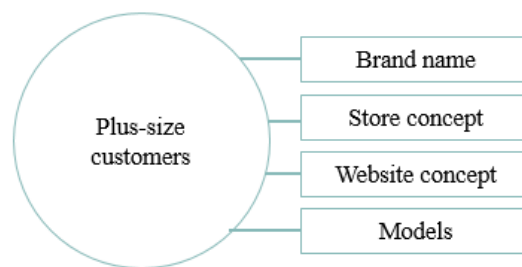


Figure 20: Themes Analysis Plus-size Customers (Own, Figure, 2019)

5.1.1 Brand Name

When presenting the interviewees with the examples of different brand strategies, we have also discussed names of plus-size brands. Hence, ASOS Curve, Violeta by MANGO, Marks and Spencer BIG & TALL, Dressmann XL, ASOS Plus and H&M+. On one hand, some interviewees preferred suggestive brand names such as Dressmann XL since they provide clarity about the product offering. Gerald for example mentioned “It [the name Dressmann XL] is fine. I know what it stands for and what I can expect from that brand.”

On the other hand, other interviewees have emphasised that suggestive brand names are categorising. Linda mentioned that the name Dressmann XL is "... labelling someone as something. You are telling someone which category they belong to." She further stated that she does not want to buy plus-sizes simply because of the name. Moreover, she recommended to

... maybe call it something a little bit nicer than XL ... or call it something completely different. A different word that we don't associate with negative connotations. XL, plus-size, that all has negative meaning in society.

Furthermore, Carlotta highlighted that not every plus-size woman is curvy and that ASOS Curve therefore describes an ideal plus-size body shape. Linda is also concerned about such a descriptive brand name as it tells "people in what way to be plus-sized. If you are a plus-size you have to be curvaceous because that's beautiful." Bernd commented on the descriptive name BIG & TALL as follows "It's weird. It's like peeing around the bush".

Alternatively, neutral names such as Violeta by MANGO have appealed positively to most interviewees as stressed by Carlotta "I like it because I can say I go to Violeta and no one has to know that it's the plus-size version of MANGO."

Thus, these insights illustrate that plus-size is connected to a stigma, even by plus-size customers themselves. Therefore, when choosing a name for the plus-size brand, brand managers should consider that descriptive names might facilitate orientation but can also be perceived as excluding and categorising plus-size customers. Moreover, they need to take into account that customers might prefer the use of neutral brand names that do not refer to the plus-size product offering.

5.1.2 Store Concept

Most interviewees prefer offline over online shopping because, as Gerald explained, "online the sizes don't fit. They vary so much." Thus, the store concept is of significant importance in plus-size retail. As the literature review has demonstrated, currently brands either sell their plus-size products in separated stores, in spatially separated sections within the mother branded store or in the same store without separation depending on the brand strategy they have chosen.

Whereas some interviewees prefer the concept of a separate store for plus-sizes, others would like plus-sizes to be fully integrated in the mother branded stores. For example, Gerald mentioned:

I think the separate store is nice. Because then I know they have my size. I am happy when I go there and the size fits and if I go into other stores and first have to ask for the sizes and then they don't have it I'm frustrated already.

Yasemin agrees "It's great! Because then I have more variety." On the other hand, others disagree. Linda believes that going to a separate store is degrading and that "They should have those size ranges but in the same store. They don't need a separate store." Tanja shares this opinion:

But you don't want to be excluded as a bigger person. You don't want to say 'I have to go there now because I have 5 or 10 kilos too much'. ... I think for the sense of belonging according to the motto 'We are all people. One is a little bigger, one is a little slimmer. We can all exist next to each other and it's nothing bad' then it would be better to unite everything in one store.

Offering plus-sizes in a separate store can also be unfavourable for customers who fluctuate in weight, especially those who wear smaller sizes of the plus-size range, and would therefore need to switch brands and stores regularly. This was demonstrated by Bernd who illustrated:

I had a period when I needed bigger sizes, then I had a long period when I didn't need them and now I need them again. So in the period that I didn't need them I had brands like H&M, Zara ... then I could buy their stuff and it was really nice but now I need bigger sizes again and then I didn't qualify anymore to buy the clothes there.

In contrast, one reason why Gerald favours the concept of a separate store for plus-sizes is that he expects good service and consultation which specialised sales clerks can provide: "... [The sales clerk] has to tell me what fits and what looks good."

However, if plus-sizes are offered in the same store without making any spatial differences, it is important to include clear navigation to customers as proposed by Carlotta:

You are already a bit embarrassed when you go to the plus-size section, at least I am and I kind of just want to be alone then. But I had experiences where I had to ask for it [the plus-size section] and I don't like that. So I would like it to be very present and maybe have them have it put up so that it's really clear that this is the section. So that I could find it easily I guess that is what I mean.

Even though there is no consensus which of the aforementioned concepts is preferable, most interviewees agree that they dislike the separated plus-size section within the same store. In this respect, Carlotta is worried about the little focus that the plus-size department receives and that straight-size customers within the same store judge her as 'fat' for going to this section:

Some brands have the plus-size section at the back of their shop, it feels like going the walk of shame there and it feels like everybody looks at me. It feels weird if straight-size people get lost into the plus-size section and then stare at you or to see the look on their faces that they don't belong in there.

Bernd agrees that going to the plus-size department is weirder than going to a separate store because "then you see it, you see it that people are going to different paths".

To sum up, the interviewed plus-size shoppers either prefer separate stores for the sake of specialised consultation, a bigger variety to choose from and to not be observed by straight-size shoppers or to shop in fully integrated stores that do not make a difference between straight-size

and plus-size customers but provide clear navigation regarding if plus-sizes are offered and where they can be found within the store.

5.1.3 Website Concept

When we consider the different perceptions of plus-size retailers' online shops, we could observe that adjusting the website in terms of navigation can create a sense of belonging and feeling at the right place as Gerald emphasised:

It [the navigation organised by XL sizes] speaks to me. Those are exactly the right sizes. This is exactly what I want and I need. ... I can see which sizes they have and that it is for bigger people. There I belong.

Furthermore, it was highlighted by most interviewees that the creation of a separate segmentation for plus-size customers on the website would enhance the navigation and hence, the ease of use. Carlotta mentioned during the interview that: "I like it [the separate labelling] because then I don't have to go through the other sizes. I guess I know what I'm getting and I know that it's gonna fit."

Moreover, the customers perceived the exclusion online differently than offline. Even though Bernd does not support a separation in stores, he favours the separate labelling online:

I think on the website it's a bit different than in the store. I mean if you click on a different website or ... when you walk into a mall and on the right is that store and on the left is that store and you walk right or you walk left it's a little different.

It appears that an exclusion online is perceived more positively than the exclusion offline due to the fact that plus-size shoppers do not publicly defy the social norms and expectations to be skinny which is highlighted by Carlotta's statement: "I like that because I don't have the public, people don't need to see that I'm shopping plus-size." However, Linda voiced concerns about a separation in the online store. She perceived the separate labelling as a categorisation of herself and does not support that brands are labelling her as outside the norm.

I don't want to have to go into a category to find those sizes. I don't need to be told that I am plus-size. I get it. This is the size. You don't need to tell me.

She further perceived the separation as degrading her: "I am not a woman. I am plus-size. I am not a women. I am a separate being."

Therefore, brand managers should be aware of the fact that the separation online through a second website or a separate category in the navigation menu creates opportunities (such as easier navigation) as well as risks (such as perceived exclusion). However, the opportunities were perceived more strongly by the majority of plus-size shoppers.

5.1.4 Models

The question of what type of models brands use to portray their clothing appears to play a special role for plus-size shoppers. In particular, the illustration of straight-size models within the plus-size segment was not perceived as valuable for the assessment of clothing and instead customers would prefer no model at all. This was expressed by Linda:

It's all small models. ... In that case I would prefer to just see the shirts laid out flat. If you don't show me a range of models then don't bother with the models. This [model] doesn't tell me anything. This [T-Shirt on no model] tells me more than this [T-Shirt on straight-size model] does.

Furthermore, Bernd expressed that picturing regular models within the plus-size section can even decrease the credibility of the brand's plus-size offering: "... the interesting part is that the models are regular sizes ... Because now they say they have the bigger sizes available but maybe I'm not 100% convinced."

On the contrary, the illustration of plus-size models is perceived as positive and encouraging. Additionally, picturing bigger models was even perceived as a buying argument by Linda:

When I see those plus-size models that they are using, it makes me want to buy that. I like that marketing strategy where they use the girls that fit the clothes to market it. Like: 'she looks like me, so she looks good in it, I'll look good in it'.

This further emphasises that, customers seem to especially value it when brands use a model that looks more realistic and they can relate to it. Although, brands should be aware that not all types of plus-size models are perceived as relatable and that the illustration of a certain kind of 'ideal' plus-size model "where all the body fat is in the desired places", as stressed by Linda, is not necessarily perceived positively as already demonstrated in the example of the brand name ASOS Curve.

Even though the customers all voiced their positive feelings about the picturing of bigger models on websites, some interviewees, especially those wearing smaller plus-sizes, mentioned that for them, fashion appears to be more attractive if it is pictured on regular models which embody the popular beauty ideals. Tanja mentioned:

"I think it's [that brands show bigger models] important but I, as a curvier person, would say that I don't really want to see it. I know it's a bit weird but I prefer to see the clothes on a skinny women. But in the end it's a fallacy. ... but if I like the style I wouldn't mind seeing bigger models."

5.2 Straight-size Customers

Overall, the interviewed straight-size shoppers had very positive perceptions of fashion retailers entering the plus-size market. The positive attitude towards brands' advertisements with plus-size models could also be confirmed by online observations where the majority of respondents supported Abercrombie & Fitch's plus-size postings. Based on the topics that have been discussed during the interviews and that could be observed online, we have created themes that refer to the identified associations that straight-size shoppers link to brands entering the plus-size segment and analysed the evaluation of their chosen strategy (Figure 21).

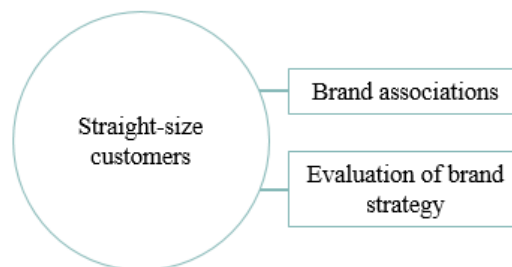


Figure 21: Themes Analysis Straight-size Customers (Own Figure, 2019)

5.2.1 Brand Associations

As shown in the example of H&M, the interviewees perceived the brand as inclusive if it offers plus-size apparel. This is due to the fact that they “broaden the range ... [and] make it very accessible for many parts of the population” as Charlotte described it. One of the online users further commented “Love how Abercrombie is so inclusive with all body types and skin tones”. Others do not support the inclusiveness of a brand as one online user pointed out “from the loud name of Abercrombie & Fitch, one name remains !!! I am very sorry that a brand with such a story in a short time lost its origins and classics!” This comment indicates that being inclusive might even risk losing authenticity for some brands.

Brands offering plus-size apparel were further perceived as empowering because they give confidence, comfort and the opportunity to express oneself through fashionable apparel to plus-size shoppers. Further, they even enhance self-confidence among straight-size shoppers. Marietta mentioned: “I feel better if I see people that represent the normality”. One online user commented “@abercrombie Love that you’re [sic] showing women that look like me and make me feel good about my body”.

Furthermore, we observed that the interviewees perceived brands entering the plus-size market as responsible as it is believed that it is a brand's responsibility to change beauty ideals and to act politically correct by including every part of the society. Rasmus commented on the picture of plus-size model as follows: “I think it's nice that it's actually more realistic than the Victoria's Secret models.” Zane shared this opinion and further emphasised that she perceives brands that

integrate plus-size as “... more up to date ... [and as] 21st century brands that are aware of the world around them”

In contrast, a few online comments perceived the opposite and stated that it is irresponsible of brands to normalise plus-size as this means promoting unhealthy diet.

5.2.2 Evaluation of Brand Strategy

When confronting straight-size interviewees with H&M+'s online product offering, all interviewees raised concerns about the separation of the plus-size apparel. Even though the interviewees had a positive image of inclusive brands, the image would be even better if the plus-size section was not separated. It was stressed by some of the interviewees, for example by Marietta, that “Integrating bigger sizes is the first step, and the next step is putting them all together.” since separation makes it “awkward and insensitive” as described by Zane. Thus, we can conclude that the interviewed straight-size shoppers do not fully encourage H&M's sub brand strategy but would support a branded house strategy even though this strategy would have the highest impact on them as it might change their shopping experience. Marietta even stated:

I don't mind [if brands offer plus-sizes as well as straight-sizes]. I really like it [the bathing suit illustrated on a plus-size model in picture 3] and I know that I'm not plus-size but I would try on this bathing suit because it looks good on the girl.

6. Analysis of Results - Company Representatives

The following abstracts give answers to the question ‘What are the reasons for choosing specific plus-size brand strategies from a business perspective?’ The decision depends on three different factors that have emerged during the interviews: firstly, the brand’s concept, which includes consideration of the positioning, brand identity and specialisation of the product offering, secondly, the brand’s target, which can vary among certain characteristics such as age, size range and brand orientation and finally, the brand’s resources regarding store space, business operations and brand assets. These considerations portray the themes and sub themes used for the data analysis (Figure 22).

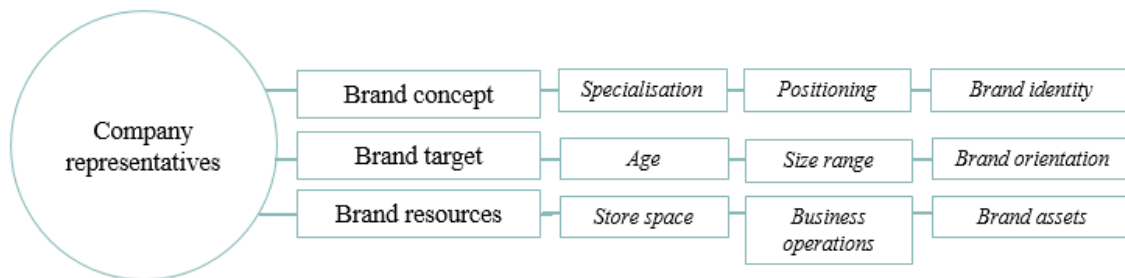


Figure 22: Themes Analysis Company Representatives (Own Figure, 2019)

6.1 Brand Concept

The choice of a brand strategy for the plus-size segment “... depends on the brand and the concept and what you choose to deliver in retail” as the interviewee representing Dressmann XL stated. Hence, the following abstracts divide the considerations of certain aspects that we could investigate regarding the brand concept.

6.1.1 Specialisation

Based on our analysis, it becomes evident that the decision to enter the plus-size segment as well as the choice of brand strategy strongly depends on the specialisation of the mother brand. The Managing Director of Marc Cain suggested that integrating bigger sizes, which is possible when pursuing a branded house strategy, is easier the more focused a brand’s product offering is. He compared Marc Cain which offers different garment items to another fashion brand which solely offers trousers and stated “We have everything [blouses, dresses, trousers etc.]. This is the reason why it is harder for us to please everybody [with the same brand].” If they considered offering more plus-sizes than German size 44 and 46, Marc Cain would choose an endorsed brand strategy in order to not mix the two segments because, as the representative highlighted: “You cannot dance at every wedding because then you will neglect your main product since you occupy yourself with different things regarding commitment and investment.”

This emphasises that for some brands a specialisation is needed to maintain their brand core and hence, an integration of plus-size clothing within the same brand is not always possible. The endorsed brand strategy has also been chosen by Dressmann XL since mixing the sizes in the Dressmann store was not enough specialisation on the plus-size segment for them. The company representative explained:

We didn't feel that the department in the store got the right focus and we decided to have own shops with just these sizes ... To have the right focus to provide for our customer so they feel confident and motivated. ... Big sizes are a different thing and we have to take it seriously. To provide the best service we can.

In that respect, the same interviewee believes that the saturated retail market will require brands to become specialists in niches in the future and that generalist brands following a branded house strategy trying to satisfy every segment with the same brand might face the challenge of staying in focus as expressed in the following statement:

I hope they [UNIQLO] have the expertise to handle all these sizes because they have men and women and small and bigger sizes so it's a lot to handle.

As our insights illustrate, the decision to offer plus-sizes and hence which strategy to take on depends on the type of fashion that brands offer. One interviewee working for a German fashion retailer speculated that "... And maybe then there are also some labels that want to have this sexy, tight, waisted fashion and it won't be beneficial for them if they offer bigger sizes." Moreover, the representative of Hugo Boss emphasised that offering plus-size might not fit to brands focusing on high fashion as expressed in the following statement: "For the extreme high-fashion lines we didn't offer bigger sizes because in some pieces an extremely big size looks weird." As he further indicated, exclusion of the plus-size offering from the mother brand, for example by following a sub brand or endorsed brand strategy, only fits to mainstream brands that are not fashionable. The same interviewee further stressed that brands which do not specialise in plus-size fashion should not put too much focus on the segment and thus, believes that a silent inclusion following a branded house strategy is the best option for Hugo Boss.

6.1.2 Positioning

The specialisation of the brand is strongly linked to the brand's positioning which is also a crucial factor to take into account when choosing certain strategies, especially for premium brands that put emphasis on their positioning. For example, the brand's positioning would be a reason for Marc Cain to follow an endorsed brand strategy:

A brand needs a certain direction. Because we also stand for something. Quality, cuts, etc. And you have to defend that every day. As soon as you start mixing things [you put your brand in jeopardy] ... for example we have never done a collection for men ... those are

two different segments [men and women apparel] and really big sizes are a real different segment.

Hugo Boss' representative also highlighted that the positioning is important to regard, especially for premium brands which want to appeal desirable:

A brand is a brand and a brand has to represent something ... because a brand has to express something and a brand that is desirable is not a brand where someone has a big belly.

Marc Cain's Managing Director shares the same opinion because he thinks that the stigma connected to plus-size would make premium brands less desirable:

In the premium segment, they [brands that followed a branded house or sub brand strategy] all have failed. Because something is connected to plus-size. There is a certain stigma ... and nobody wants to wear Marc Cain Big. This is something that has to be considered for a brand.

He also perceived another challenge for premium brands:

The other problem [for premium brands] is: At the golf course, does a sporty woman who wears size 38 want to see the same model or print on another woman in size 50? This is a topic to take into consideration for Marketing. Because it's not only about the target group regarding age or certain trends but also in which league you want to play.

Therefore, the brand would not tolerate to offer plus-sizes under the brand Marc Cain. Consequently, he would consider an endorsed brand strategy to target the plus-size segment.

6.1.3 Brand Identity and Corporate Culture

The final element of the brand concept that determines the decision of the brand strategy is brand identity and corporate culture as Dressmann XL's interviewee illustrated when we asked him why he thinks UNIQLO has chosen a branded house strategy for its plus-size offering:

It's their brand identity I think. ... They do their shops with the same agenda and give confidence to men and women shopping in the same store and why don't include the plus-sizes?

Furthermore, the reason for Dressmann to offer plus-sizes and follow a strong endorsed brand strategy linking the name Dressmann XL to the mother brand also lies in their corporate culture:

To not exclude. To include everyone. ... We are really into seeing people and their needs ... We are doing so much more than just selling clothes. We are selling confidence, happiness and joy. We think for us it's a big thing in our culture to help people. To look good and be confident.

Given their culture to respond to everybody's needs, Dressmann XL felt that their brand could better incorporate plus-sizes with an endorsed brand strategy which enables them to focus more on plus-size customers' needs and wishes: "You should feel like you are being taken seriously. Be a part of our happy culture. Feeling great when you are entering the store and feel like home."

6.2 Brand Target

To analyse the reasons why brands choose certain strategies for the plus-size market, the consideration of the brand's target plays an important role as emphasised by the brand representative of Hugo Boss: "... companies have to keep in mind who they advertise to". In general, we could observe that the characteristics such as age, size range and brand orientation are determinants for choosing an appropriate strategy in regards to the target group.

6.2.1 Age

During our conversation with a German fashion retailer that follows an endorsed strategy the company representative highlighted that the preferences for different brand strategies can vary between different age groups among customers. While older women value good service and look for a style that is appropriate for their age and body which can be offered to them following a house of brands or endorsed brand strategy, younger women prefer to follow present fashion trends of straight-size fashion and hence, a branded house or sub brand strategy appeals more to them. As she explained:

I think a younger customer would also wear a short or Bermuda which is also shorter whereas the older women are not wearing that anymore ... From designer perspective it makes more sense to integrate it [plus-sizes] when you target younger people and to separate it if you target older people.

6.2.2 Size Range

Another factor that has to be taken into account is the size range of the brands' target group. The plus-size segment includes a big variety of sizes and moreover, every shopper perceives their own body differently. Consequently, some plus-size shoppers might identify themselves more with regular size ranges whereas others perceive themselves more as plus-size. This is especially the case when customers have a size that belongs to the smaller plus-sizes. The company representative of a German fashion retailer elaborated:

If we talk about a size 48 or 50 which already is a big size then she would maybe rather go into a regular store because she doesn't see herself as a big person.

This emphasises that people who perceive themselves as straight-size shoppers might prefer an integration of bigger sizes and therefore, a branded house or sub brand strategy since they would

not like to be excluded from the regular offering as they do not identify with the plus-size target group.

Moreover, the Managing Director of Marc Cain pointed out that people who are part of the top end of plus-sizes and perceive themselves as big might prefer to be in private and among other plus-size shoppers. This is due to the fact that they might not feel comfortable to shop next to straight-size customers which make them aware of the fact that they do not comply with the norm of present beauty ideals:

And if we are talking about really big sizes, this is a completely different sector. There, the girls are under themselves and they want to stay under themselves ... For example, at Breuninger [a German department store], there are four dressing rooms next to each other. If there is a woman trying on a dress in size 50 and next to her a sporty girl tries the same dress in size 36, she will not feel good. This does not promote sales within the store.

This statement further indicates that especially for plus-size shoppers who are not comfortable with their own appearance, a direct comparison to slimmer shoppers might be perceived negatively and hence, a separate store would be the preferred strategy.

6.2.3 Brand Orientation

The third factor that brand representatives perceive as decisive is the buying behaviour of their target group, in particular how brand oriented the customer is. This characteristic is insofar important, as brand oriented shoppers desire exclusiveness and would not like to be associated with plus-size shoppers since overweight people are still stigmatised in society. One of our interviewees explained:

It is comparable to cars. Some people buy certain cars so that certain people do not drive the same cars. And it is the same thing with fashion ... We have a system of classes and this also takes place in size classes.

This illustrates that, especially for premium brands, the integration of plus-sizes can degrade the brand and diminish its exclusiveness.

6.3 Brand Resources

During the interviews it was emphasised that especially premium brands have to focus their resources on the main target group which restricts them from applying certain brand strategies. This is especially important since the plus-size segment only represents a small target group for some brands when following a branded house or sub brand strategy. Additionally, there are different requirements from both customer groups which the company might not be able to respond to simultaneously.

6.3.1 Store Space

Due to special requirements of plus-size customers it is not possible to attend to all those needs with the existing resources, especially in terms of store space.

On the one hand, the integration of plus-size lines requires more space that existing stores cannot offer which as a consequence means that the brand would have to limit its offering for straight-size customers. Therefore, the integration of plus-sizes is easier to realise for the online than for the offline offering. This was highlighted by the representative of Marc Cain:

And the other thing is the space... in general there is simply no space to show the whole selection of sizes. However, sizes 46 we sell a lot online since it does not take any space from the physical stores.

Additionally, in terms of store design, plus-size shoppers have special needs that might require a restructuring of the existing store when following a branded house or sub brand strategy. For brands to react to such needs this implies that following a house of brands or endorsed brand strategy with separate retail stores might be preferable. One of our interviewees mentioned the following:

They [plus-size customers] just need more space for everything. For example also the fitting rooms were bigger. And ... that they have space between the hanging rails. We just focused on offering the customers more space. And then also ... to offer things like a lounge area where you can also sit down.

6.3.2 Business Operations

Overall, the interviewees linked the integration of plus-sizes to the requirement of additional resources regarding business operations. For example, it requires the creation of new fashion designs to reflect plus-size customers' needs as some company representatives have stressed that German size 46/48 represents a turning point that demands a different handling regarding fashion design. This was illustrated by Marc Cain's interviewee as follows:

... because if you have the design for size 38 you have to edit the cut completely for size 48. This is a lot of work for only this size ... it's a new process, also for sewing. You also need a forerunner, a production sample, you need a size 48 sampling model

However, Marc Cain's main target group, which is German size 40 customers, might not find the designs required for bigger plus-sizes appealing and thus, a full integration (enabled by a branded house strategy) is difficult from a design perspective.

This new design process as well as other business operations entail special expertise of employees which might call for the endorsed brand strategy using separate stores for the plus-size offering as mentioned by Dressmann XL's company representative: "[To] have the personnel, that have the

expertise in the qualities and the shapes ... so we can have a good service ... [and] see what the customer needs.”

Nevertheless, if brands apply an endorsed strategy they can benefit from the fact that they share the same culture which enables them to leverage existing resources in terms of business operations and human resources. Dressmann XL’s company representative commented on this as follows:

We can have the same operations. Often ... we can have personnel from each stores working both in Dressmann and Dressmann XL. ... We have one country manager, one region manager and the XL stores and the Dressmann stores are included in the same region so they get a lot of friendship and learn from each other.

6.3.3 Brand Assets

A strong endorsed brand strategy offers specific advantages as the new brand can make use of the mother brand’s awareness to gain recognisability. The company representative of a German fashion retailer mentioned the following:

It’s an advantage if you create a new brand that you link it to the existing brand that is already successful... I think it’s easier to start a brand like that. ... You can sell way more with a well-known brand. I think it’s easier for the beginning.

Moreover, one interviewee stated that linking the plus-size brand to the mother brand can provide guidance and trust for customers: “... so people know that this type of clothes and this type of prices are the right model for me”. This was further supported by another company representative who stated that “so you still knew that it was from Brand A and they have a good fit and quality”.

7. Discussion

To answer the main research question ‘What do fashion retailers have to consider when choosing a brand strategy for the plus-size market?’ we need to take into account the results from a customer perspective as well as the results from a business perspective. The following chapter connects these insights and further discusses them with literature.

7.1 House of Brands and Endorsed Brand Strategy

As customers and company representatives agree, the creation of a new brand provides the opportunity to tailor the offering to plus-size customers’ needs which corresponds to the advantages that have been highlighted for the house of brands and endorsed brand strategy by Aaker (2004). This is especially favourable in terms of store design and range of offerings since plus-size customers wish for more variety and size availability. Even though literature has already pointed out that strategies on the left side of the Brand Relationship Spectrum, especially the house of brands strategy, enable different positionings of two brands (Aaker, 2004; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000), this study has shown that in plus-size branding this is of even greater importance due to the stigma that is connected to plus-size as agreed by company representatives and some customers. Thus, as emphasised in the example of Marc Cain, this strategy could especially be applicable for premium brands which do not mainly target plus-size brands minimising the risk of a negative image transfer from the plus-size brand to the premium mother brand.

However, some plus-size customers perceived a psychological barrier connected to the two strategies due to the fact that some customers felt excluded from the offering of brands that are popular among straight-size customers because they eventually have to shop at different stores. In contrast, even though exclusion from the mother brand has been discussed in theory, literature did not regard that the exclusion could be perceived negatively by customers. This finding further emphasises the sensitivity of plus-size branding and how it dissociates itself from regular fashion branding.

Nevertheless, our results concur with other studies that show that it is crucial to consider characteristics of target customers when choosing a brand strategy (e.g. Kapferer, 2012). Thus, this study demonstrates that a house of brands and endorsed brand strategy appeal more to an older target group of plus-size customers in their 50s as well as price sensitive customers that are not focused on brands and latest fashion trends and hence, do not perceive the psychological barrier. This is due to the fact that this target prefers apparel that is more appropriate for their age and body type instead of following the latest fashion trends and hence, also does not feel excluded from the offering. Furthermore, if a separate store is created, plus-size customers gain more privacy which can have a positive effect on their buying behaviour. These customer insights have also been

supported by Marc Cain and Dressmann XL. Therefore, non-premium brands could choose this approach.

As demonstrated in the example of Marc Cain and a German retailer, an endorsed brand or house of brands strategy are recommended for those brands that aim to offer a wide range of plus-sizes. In contrast, if brand managers only consider the integration of one or two additional sizes from the lower end of the plus-size range, for example by adding German size 44 and 46, strategies on the left side of the spectrum might not be appropriate. This is due to the high investment that is required for these strategies which would be unprofitable considering the narrow range of additional plus-sizes. This is further because customers wearing these sizes might fluctuate in weight or might need straight-sizes as well as plus-sizes depending on the garment item and thus would have to buy from two different brands. Furthermore, they might not perceive themselves as being plus-size and being required to shop at other stores than their counterpart, straight-size shoppers.

Finally, the results are consistent with Aaker (2004) regarding the high investments linked to the two strategies and in particular, the house of brands strategy, as the new brand cannot leverage the mother brand's familiarity. Thus, the interviewed company representatives would prefer an endorsement strategy over a house of brands strategy. This is also due to the positive image transfer from the established endorser brand to the new plus-size brand which is further in accordance with literature. However, other studies have not sufficiently highlighted that for premium brands, a strong endorsement strategy might bear the risk that brand oriented plus-size shoppers feel excluded from the mother brand's offering and further, that the mother brand is linked to the plus-size stigma. This finding further puts emphasis on the significance of the plus-size stigma in brand management. Consequently, if premium brands follow a token endorser strategy, they can avoid this negative connection.

7.2 Branded House and Sub Brand Strategy

As customers and company representatives agree, in contrast to strategies positioned on the left side of the Brand Relationship Spectrum, branded house and sub brand strategies are especially favoured by plus-size customers who can be characterised as fashionable and brand oriented, young and/or shoppers wearing smaller sizes of the plus-size range or fluctuate in weight. The reasons for that are that they do not want to be treated differently than straight-size customers and their needs could not be served by brands that solely cater plus-sizes due to their low size in the plus-size range.

Even though Aaker (2004) suggests that in comparison to a sub brand strategy, it is more difficult to satisfy specific needs when following a branded house strategy, our findings show that in plus-size branding this does not hold true. Straight-size and plus-size customers as well as company representatives share the opinion that a sub brand strategy is the least favourable approach since the extra labelling negatively categorises customers under one brand and thus, the sub brand

strategy receives the highest perceived level of exclusion from the mother brand. Consequently, a branded house strategy satisfies customers' needs in a better way.

Alternatively, our findings correspond to literature which has highlighted the risk of a strong link between the mother brand and the sub brand as well as of hyper segmentation and brand dilution (Aaker, 2004; Petromilli, Morrison & Million, 2002) as stressed by Marc Cain, Hugo Boss, Dressmann XL and some straight-size shoppers. Again, this aspect has been proven to be even more significant in plus-size branding. Especially premium brands and premium customers want to avoid the shared associations between the plus-size segment and the mother brand and thus, a sub brand strategy is risky. At the same time, it bears the risk for brands to lose their focus and diminish their positioning without being able to specifically tailor the brand to the needs of the new segment. As illustrated in the example of Marc Cain and Hugo Boss, premium brands which cater to smaller sized plus-size customers prefer a branded house strategy due to the fact that they do not want their brand to be connected to the plus-size stigma, which has been emphasised in the literature review. However, due to this stigma, descriptors receive a higher relevance in plus-size branding even though Aaker (2004) proposes that they only have a minimal driver role. Consequently, a branded house strategy should only be considered if plus-sizes are fully integrated and brands refrain from the use of descriptors.

Moreover, straight-size shoppers and company representatives agree that branded house strategies especially fit to brands which are inclusive due to their culture, price strategy and product offering, such as UNIQLO or H&M. Additionally, a complete integration of plus-sizes following a branded house strategy is suitable for fashion brands that are highly specialised in one type of apparel segment. On the contrary, if brands are extremely exclusive or associated with a certain type of fashion such as waisted and sexy apparel or high fashion designs, strategies on the left side of the spectrum might not be advisable at all because the designs would not respond to plus-size customers' demands.

Even though the literature suggests that a branded house strategy is favourable in terms of resources (e.g. Dooley & Bowie, 2005), our study revealed that the integration of plus-sizes under one brand represents a conflict of resources since more store space and different models, designs and cuts starting at German size 46/48 are required. Thus, using and restructuring existing resources might be even more costly and complicated than the establishment of new resources.

8. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to gain a better understanding of the currently chosen brand strategies, potential other brand strategies, and the opinions of direct and indirect customers as well as company representatives about different brand approaches within the plus-size fashion industry. Based on that, this thesis aims to guide fashion retailers in their decision to choose the most appropriate brand strategy when entering the plus-size market. Thus, we have investigated what fashion retailers have to consider when they decide on a brand strategy for the plus-size market, taking into account plus-size and straight-size customers' preferences towards branding approaches as well as company representatives' reasons for choosing specific plus-size brand strategies. This enables us to understand benefits and drawbacks that are linked to certain strategies and can sequentially guide brand managers in making an informed decision.

By investigating this topic, we came to the conclusion that even though the branded house strategy is the most commonly chosen strategy among world leading fashion brands, there is no 'One Size Fits All' plus-size brand strategy. However, there are certain aspects that brand managers have to consider when deciding on a brand strategy for their plus-size offering.

Firstly, they have to take into account the brand's concept. This includes considerations regarding the specialisation and positioning of the brand as well as its identity and corporate culture. Our results suggest that the more a brand is positioned in the premium segment, targeting less price sensitive and more brand oriented customers, or the more specialised one brand is in one segment, the more recommendable are strategies on the left side of the spectrum. In contrast, strategies on the right side of the spectrum are more advisable for non-premium or generalist brands as depicted in Figure 23.



Figure 23: The Brand Relationship Spectrum in the Plus-size Context: Brand Concept (adapted from Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000)

Secondly, brand managers have to consider the brand's target customer regarding age group, size range and brand orientation. As Figure 24 shows, our findings explain that house of brands and endorsed brand strategies are more suitable when the brand's target consists of older customers who are in their 50s. Furthermore, the two strategies are preferred by customers wearing bigger plus-sizes. Alternatively, sub brand and branded house strategies are favoured by young customers

(plus-size as well as straight-size) in the beginning of their 20s or by customers who need sizes from the lower end of the plus-size range.



Figure 24: *The Brand Relationship Spectrum in the Plus-size Context: Brand Target (adapted from Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000)*

Finally, a crucial consideration regards the brand’s resources in terms of store space, business operations and brand assets. Our results have emphasised that strategies on the right side of the spectrum require brands to make additional space in the existing stores available. Nevertheless, a sub brand strategy or branded house strategy can leverage existing resources such as business operations or brand awareness from the mother brand. In contrast, strategies on the left side of the spectrum do not enable the sharing of business operations and hence, require high initial investments. The more the chosen strategy leans towards the right side of the spectrum, the more image transfer from the mother brand to the plus-size offering is possible. However, brand managers always have to consider the stigma that is connected to plus-size and can negatively influence the image transfer which is illustrated in Figure 25.



Figure 25: *The Brand Relationship Spectrum in the Plus-size Context: Brand Resources (adapted from Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000)*

Further, our research revealed that there are aspects to consider regarding preferences of straight-size and plus-size customers which refer to the brand name, the store and website concept and the models used for advertising and product presentation. Our findings illustrate that the interviewees prefer neutral brand names that do not point out the connection of the brand to the plus-size segment. Furthermore, whereas some interviewees favour full inclusion in one store, others prefer to shop in a separate store. However, all agree that a spatially separated plus-size area within the same store is not favourable. On the contrary, separation on the website is perceived more positively. Furthermore, the majority of interviewees fancy models that reflect their own body type and thus, straight-size models or plus-size models which mirror a certain desired plus-size body shape (for example curvy) are not preferred. As previously mentioned, there is no ‘One Size

Fits All' solution but rather that every strategy offers advantages and disadvantages that refer to the preferences among customers and reasons why certain brand strategies have been chosen. Brand managers thus have to consider the benefits and drawbacks summarised in Table 8.

Table 8: Summary of Advantages and Disadvantages of Brand Strategies (Own Table, 2019)

	Advantages	Disadvantages
House of Brands Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More freedom to tailor offering to the different needs of two different segments (bigger variety, tailored store design, specialised service, availability and range of sizes, use of plus-size models) • No link to the mother brand (especially important for premium brands) • Offers plus-size customers more privacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exclusion of plus-size customers to buy from the same brands as straight-size customers • Psychological barrier among plus-size customers to shop at different stores and from different brands • High investments to create brands awareness
Endorsed Brand Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More freedom to tailor offering to the different needs of two different segments (bigger variety, tailored store design, specialised service, availability and range of sizes, use of plus-size models) • Greater distance of mother brand from plus-size stigma (token endorsement) • Offers plus-size customers more privacy (if two separate stores are created) • Enables sharing of resources (fashion designs, staff, other business operations, mother brand awareness) and company culture • The image of the mother brand does not diminish, product offering can remain specialised 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk of perceived exclusiveness from mother brand and categorisation of plus-size customers • Difficult to serve plus-size customers who shop smaller plus-sizes or fluctuate in weight • Strong endorsement still links premium brands to plus-size stigma • Requires a lot of resources (new designs and cuts, new models for production sample and advertisements, new stores, specialised sales clerks etc.)
Branded House Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible to serve customers wearing smaller plus-sizes and straight-sizes (and/or fluctuate in weight) with one brand • Offers plus-size shoppers a feeling of integration and 'normal' shopping experience • Gives plus-size shoppers the opportunity to buy from popular brands • No perceived exclusiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For extremely fashionable brands only applicable for some sizes (extreme designs not possible in really big sizes) • Brand is linked to stigmatised plus-size segment • Premium shoppers demand that brands stay exclusive • Risk that brands lose focus on core product and diminish their brand image • Hinders a specific targeting (not possible)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increases the positive image also among straight-size customers • Leverages mother brands awareness 	to attend to plus- and straight-size shoppers needs)
Sub Brand Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitates navigation • Less resources and investment required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative association transfer for plus-size stigma to mother brand, especially for premium brands • Risk of brand dilution (losing focus of the core product which are straight-sizes) • Diminishes the positioning of premium brands • Categorises people and points out differences between straight-size and plus-size customers under one brand • Fails to target plus-size customers' needs in terms of variety and availability

8.1 Theoretical Contributions

This is the first study, to our knowledge, that has applied the topic of brand management in the context of plus-size fashion. Thus, our results describe for the first time how the challenges that a stigmatised topic or product poses, can be overcome by brand management and what has to be considered to do so. Moreover, our study takes on a holistic approach considering the customer as well as business perspective and therefore, contributes to consumer behaviour as well as strategic brand management literature. Furthermore, this study critically reflects on brand strategy theory and proves that some inputs are not true for certain segments as the stigmatisation of plus-sizes can transform benefits of certain strategies, for example the positive image transfer between endorser and endorsed brand, into drawbacks. Our study further contributes to the understanding of brand strategies within stigmatised markets and how consumer behaviour has to be considered within this field. In addition to that, this thesis firstly describes how brands have approached the plus-size market.

Although this study was conducted in one setting, namely the plus-size fashion industry, the results should be generalised to other areas. For example, plus-size might not only be of interest in fashion, but also for other industries which are affected by the development of increasing obesity rates such as home and living (for instance beds for bigger people) or the automotive sector (for instance cars for bigger people). Moreover, other stigmatised topics, for example mental illness, might lead to similar findings.

8.2 Managerial Implications

As the literature review highlighted, plus-size branding represents a topic of growing relevance for brands and hence it is of particular interest for brand managers within the fashion industry. As our study presented, plus-size is still connected to a big stigma within society and therefore, the integration of plus-sizes poses specific challenges for brand managers. Therefore, it is significant to strongly consider the advantages and disadvantages presented in Table 8 when brand managers decide on a brand strategy. In particular, as it was emphasised by company representatives, the link between the mother brand and the stigmatised plus-size segment can present a big risk, especially for premium brands. Therefore, we recommend brand managers do not underestimate the hazards that a strong link to the plus-size segment (as for example in a sub brand strategy) could create. Further, it is vital for managers to consider their target group and positioning within the fashion industry as our study revealed that brand strategies are perceived differently among various target groups. Due to continuously changing beauty standards and hence altering needs among customers, managers should carefully research and track preferences of their target group in order to tailor their offering and strategy accordingly. For example, in case beauty ideals will continue to favour rather curvy women, a branded house strategy might become an even more natural choice for brands, as one day plus-sizes might represent the main segment instead of straight-sizes. Therefore, brand managers should consider that as beauty ideals evolve over time, our findings have to be adapted to present changes and acceptances within society.

Lastly, our research revealed that there are several elements that influence the perception of brand strategies among straight and particularly plus-size customers. Hereby, managers should be aware of the fact that the use of models, the choice of brand name, the store concept and further, the navigation on the online web shop receive special attention by plus-size customers when they assess different brand strategies. Due to the big stigma connected to plus-sizes and the resulting psychological consequences that plus-size customers suffer, these factors represent areas where brands should be especially careful when deciding upon a strategy, taking into account the high sensitivity of the topic of plus-size branding.

8.3 Limitations and Further Research

In chapter 4.10 we have elaborated on the limitations in research design which mainly refer to the sampling of the interviewees, the method of telephone interviews and the data analysis approach. Among others, we have described that the interviewed company representatives do not represent all four brand strategies. This is due to the fact that our study focused on examples of endorsed brand and branded house strategies within the plus-size customer interviews as well as from a company perspective, and hence, we neglected the points of view of a house of brands and sub brand perspective. During the analysis it became even more evident that this is a major limitation

in this study and thus, we would like to emphasise it one more time. Consequently, further research should include the perspectives of companies following a house of brands and sub brand strategy.

Furthermore, our study disregards some consumer groups as for example we did not include premium shoppers that wear a big apparel size and hence, cannot evaluate if companies targeting this segment might face different challenges. Lastly, our research focuses on plus-size customers in their 20s as well as 50s. However, during the interviews with plus-size as well as straight-size customers it was emphasised many times that plus-size branding represents a particularly sensitive topic for teenagers. This is due to the fact that they are often insecure about their own appearance and might be influenced more strongly by branding strategies. Further, due to their lower self-confidence they might have different concerns as well as preferences regarding brand strategies. Therefore, we suggest that further research in this field should regard a more diverse sample including the points of view of plus-size teenagers as well as of premium shoppers wearing bigger plus-sizes.

Further studies are required to investigate other societally stigmatised topics applied to brand management. Moreover, the topic of plus-size branding should be explored in other sectors that also require product adaptations due to increasing obesity rates, for example in the automotive industry.

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Appendix A

The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of the YOURS website. It includes the logo 'YOURS' with a heart icon, the name 'BADRHINO', and a Swedish flag icon with the text 'Sign Up / Sign In | Saved Items | My bag: (0) - Skr0.00'. Below the navigation bar is a search bar and a navigation menu with categories: NEW IN, WHAT'S HOT, CLOTHING, LINGERIE, NIGHTWEAR, FOOTWEAR, ACCESSORIES, BRANDS, and SALE. A secondary navigation bar contains buttons for 'SEASONAL OFFERS', 'LATEST ARRIVALS', 'SALE CONTINUES' (highlighted in red), 'FULLY TRACKED DELIVERY', and 'SIGN UP TO OUR EMAILS'. The main banner is a large teal rectangle with a yellow border. It features the text '48 HOURS ONLY!' in pink, '20% off absolutely everything!' in yellow and pink, and a 'shop now' button. Below the banner are five category buttons: 'shop new in', 'shop tops', 'shop dresses', 'shop bottoms', and 'shop footwear'. A small note at the bottom of the banner reads '*FULL PRICE ITEMS ONLY'.



Screenshot 1: YOURS (Yours Clothing, 2019, n.p.)



FREE
BEACH BAG
WITH YOUR ORDER
USE CODE PR

A circular inset image shows a woman from the side, wearing a black top and holding a blue beach bag with a pattern of white and red lifebuoys.

Offer only valid on the Curvissa website, exc
brought to you by our sister sites. Offer expir

  WATCH OUR LATEST TV AD AND SHOP THE LOOKS

Screenshot 2: Curvissa (Curvissa Plus Size Clothing, 2019)



Screenshot 3: HIGH AND MIGHTY (High and Mighty, 2019, n.p.)

online exclusive... **48 HOURS ONLY!**

20% off
absolutely
everything!*

SHOP NEW IN

SHOP T-SHIRTS

SHOP POLOS

SHOP SHORTS

SHOP SHIRTS

SHOP TROUSERS

*FULL PRICE ITEMS ONLY



Klarna.

SHOP NOW, PAY LATER

[find out more](#)

Screenshot 4: BAD RHINO (Yours Clothing, 2019, n.p.)

WOMEN'S PLUS SIZE CLOTHING

Our plus-size clothing collection, Curve, is thoughtfully designed in sizes 18 to 32 and is brimming with trend-led pieces. Curve offers modern wardrobe staples that are carefully tailored as opposed to simply made bigger. Think tops with longer hemlines, gorgeous fabrics that don't cling and discreet elasticated panelling in jackets and trousers for added ease. You'll love the style and quality of this plus-size women's clothing range

25 items

Add filters +

NEW ARRIVALS

Page 1 of 1



M&S COLLECTION
CURVE Faux Leather Biker Jacket
£59.00
★★★★★



M&S COLLECTION
CURVE Straight Leg Joggers
£12.50
3 colours available
★★★★★



New
M&S COLLECTION
CURVE High Waist Super Skinny Jeans
£19.50
2 colours available



New
M&S COLLECTION
CURVE Wide Leg High Waist Trousers
£29.50
2 colours available

Screenshot 5: Marks and Spencer Curve (Marks and Spencer, 2019a, n.p.)

BIG & TALL GUIDE

OFFERS

Buy 2 Luxury Shirts for £60
or 3 for £90

BIG AND TALL CLOTHING

- Suits
- Blazers & Smart Jackets
- Casual Shirts
- Trousers, Chinos and Jeans
- Coats & Casual Jackets
- Formal Shirts
- Jumpers & Cardigans
- Made to Measure Shirts
- Nightwear
- Underwear
- Tops, T-Shirts & Polos

SHOES & ACCESSORIES

- Shoes
- All Accessories
- Cufflinks
- Ties & Formal Accessories
- Watches



BIG & TALL

Setting new standards, our Big & Tall range is cut for gents in sizing up to
XXXXL and extra-long lengths

Shop Big & Tall

Screenshot 6: Marks and Spencer BIG & TALL (Marks and Spencer, 2019b, n.p.)



XLNT Underwear

Underwear that makes you feel good and comfortable all day.

SHOP NOW



Vacation shop

Straw hats, straw bags and sunglasses - we have everything to complement your look.

SHOP NOW



XLNT swimwear

Love your body, all the way to the beach. Here you will find swimsuits and bikinis for all shapes and flavors.

SHOP NOW

Screenshot 7: KappAhl XLNT (KappAhl, n.d., n.p.)

ASOS WOMEN MEN Search for items, brands and inspiration

Home > Clothing > Skirts > Accessories > Activewear > Face & Body > Living & Gifts > Brands > **Outlet** > Marketplace > Inspiration

Home > Women > Curve & Plus Size

Women's Curve & Plus Size

Embrace a style that's truly your own with our edit of women's curve and plus size clothing for any and all occasions. Whether you need to update your going out wardrobe with glam dresses and versatile jumpsuits, or you're simply after a top that'll serve you well for both work and play, scroll down for items that are just as unique as you. From everyday essentials to stand out pieces for a special occasion, ASOS Curve have got you covered. Check out new season styles and plus size transitional heroes that'll take you effortlessly from the office to the bar. Need to revive your lingerie line-up? Mix and match comfortable basics with lace-trimmed bra sets that have all-day-long confidence-boosting potential. Prepare for your next beach holiday with swim options from the look Curve is classic cuts and bold prints that let you be playful with your style - even when you're relaxing by the pool. Those looking to update their workwear arsenal should turn to River Island Plus for chic dresses in numerous lengths, cuts and prints.

[SHIRTS & SHORTS](#)
[PARTY DRESSES](#)
[JEANS](#)
[JUMPSUITS & PLAYSUITS](#)
[ACTIVWEAR](#)
[OCCASIONWEAR](#)
[JUMPERS & CARDBOARDS](#)
[COATS & JACKETS](#)
[TOPS](#)
[TROUSERS & LEGGINGS](#)

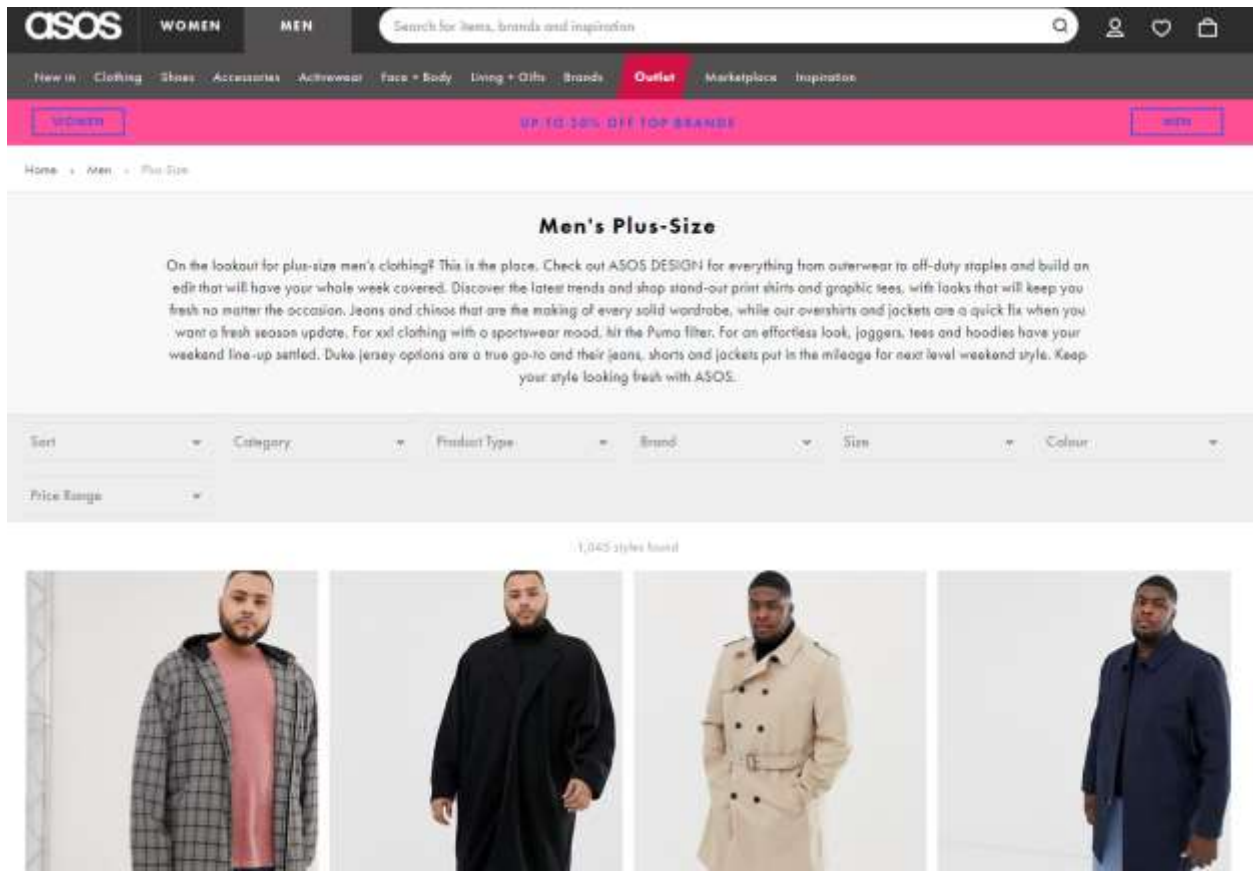
Sort -> Category -> Product type -> Brand -> Size -> Colour ->

Price Range ->

£134 meter based



Screenshot 8: ASOS DESIGN Curve (ASOS, 2019a, n.p.)



Screenshot 9: ASOS DESIGN Plus (ASOS, 2019b, n.p.)

WOMEN'S APPAREL (1,022 Products)

REFINE

GENDER
Women

CATEGORY
Apparel (1,022) **CHANGE**

PRODUCT TYPE


- T-Shirts (214)
- Hoodies & Sweatshirts (142)
- Tights (174)
- Jackets (770)

[View More](#)

SIZE


36A	36B
36C	36D
36SA	36SB
XS	S
M	L
XL	2XL
3XL	M TALL

Women > Apparel > Track
SORT BY ▼




Women's 3-Stripes
3-STRIPES TRACK JACKET
\$75

4 colors




Women's 3-Stripes
3-STRIPES TRACK PANTS
\$68

4 colors




Women's Jersey
HEMLOCK HOME JERSEY
\$50

14 colors




Women's Training
TIRO 18 TRAINING PANTS
\$50

14 colors




Women's 3-Stripes
TRACK JACKET
\$66

4 colors




Women's 3-Stripes
3-STRIPES TRACK PANTS
\$68

4 colors



Women's Training
ALL-WE-D-STRIPES BRA
\$35

4 colors



Women's 3-Stripes
TIRO 18 TIGHTS
\$40

3 colors

Screenshot 10: adidas (adidas, 2019, n.p.)

98

[←](#)
JUST LAUNCHED: MICKEY ART UT T-SHIRT COLLECTION
[SHOP NOW](#)
[→](#)

HOME / WOMEN / FASHION NEEDS

WOMEN

[NEW ARRIVALS >](#)

[LIMITED-TIME OFFERS >](#)

FEATURED COLLECTIONS

- [NEW Mother's Day Shop](#)
- [NEW UV Cut](#)
- [Spring Style](#)
- [Linen Collection](#)
- [Vacation Shop](#)
- [The 365 Shop](#)
- [Uniqlo Essentials](#)
- [Online Exclusives](#)
- [Maturity](#)
- [Wine To Work](#)

SHOP BY CATEGORY

- [T-Shirts And Tops](#)
- [UT Graphic Tees](#)
- [Shirts And Blouses](#)
- [Sweaters And Cardigans](#)
- [Outerwear And Blazers](#)
- [The 1 1/2 Day Dress Collection](#)

EXTENDED SIZES

Discover our impressive variety of on-trend styles, comfortable essentials, and high-performance items available in sizes XXS – XXL.



UT: UNIQLO GRAPHIC T-SHIRT COLLECTION

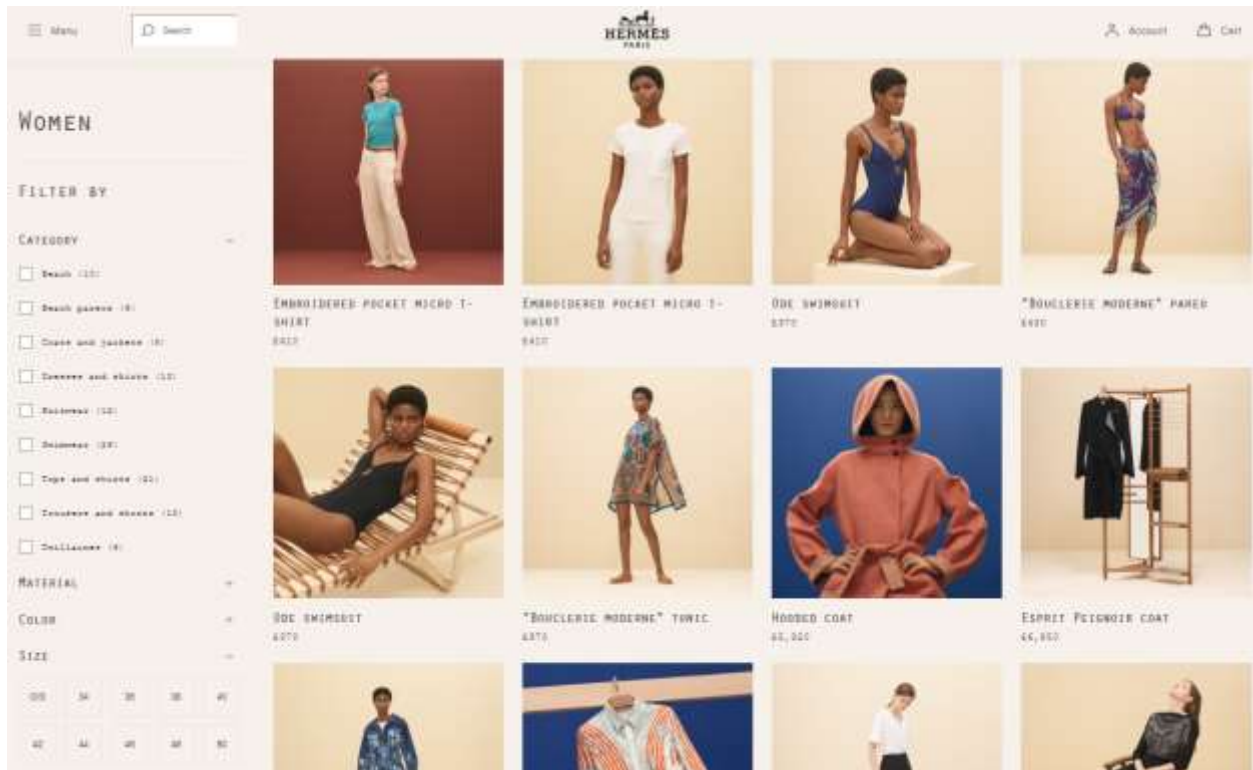
Available in extended sizes! Shop the latest from our best selling UT graphic t-shirts collections. New styles arrive every Monday!

*Adults based on men's sizing XXS-3XL
*Women's sizing XXS-XXL

[SHOP WOMEN](#)

[SHOP MEN](#)

Screenshot 11: UNIQLO (UNIQLO, 2019, n.p.)



Shreen Shot 12: Hermès (Hermès, 2019, n.p.)

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Need Help?

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Women's Size Guide

	2XS	XS	S	M	L	XL	2XL
USA	0/2	2/4	6/8	8/10	10/12	14/16	18/20
UK/IRL	4/6	6/8	10/12	12/14	14/16	18/20	22/24
EUR	32/34	34/36	38/40	40/42	42/44	46/48	50/52
IT	36/38	38/40	42/44	44/46	46/48	50/52	54/56

Screenshot 13: Primark Women's Size Guide (Primark, 2017, n.p.)

ACCESSOARER

WARDROBE ESSENTIALS

UTVALT


- NYHETER
- KOMMER SNART
- BÄSTSÄLJARE
- STORLEKSGUIDE
- SUSTAINABLE CHOICE
- THE BASICS
- YTTERKLÄDER
- ADDED SIZES**
- TOPPAR & BLUSAR
- TRÖJOR & CARDIGANS
- KLÄNNINGAR
- JACKOR & KAVAJER
- BYXOR & JEANS
- KJOLAR

- FESTKLÄNNINGAR
- PREMIUM QUALITY
- MIX 2
- PERSONAL SHOPPER
- KLÄDVÅRD
- OUTLET


INSPIRATION

- FESTKLÄDER
- YOUR SMART WARDROBE
- ONLINE EXCLUSIVE SET
- LOOKBOOK
- HISTORISKA MODER


TOPPAR & BLUSAR



Mönstrad viskosblus
299:-




Spetstopp med puffärm
199:-



Added sizes

Up to size 54



Vitt bomullstopp m...
149:-

Screenshot 14: Lindex (Lindex, n.d., n.p.)



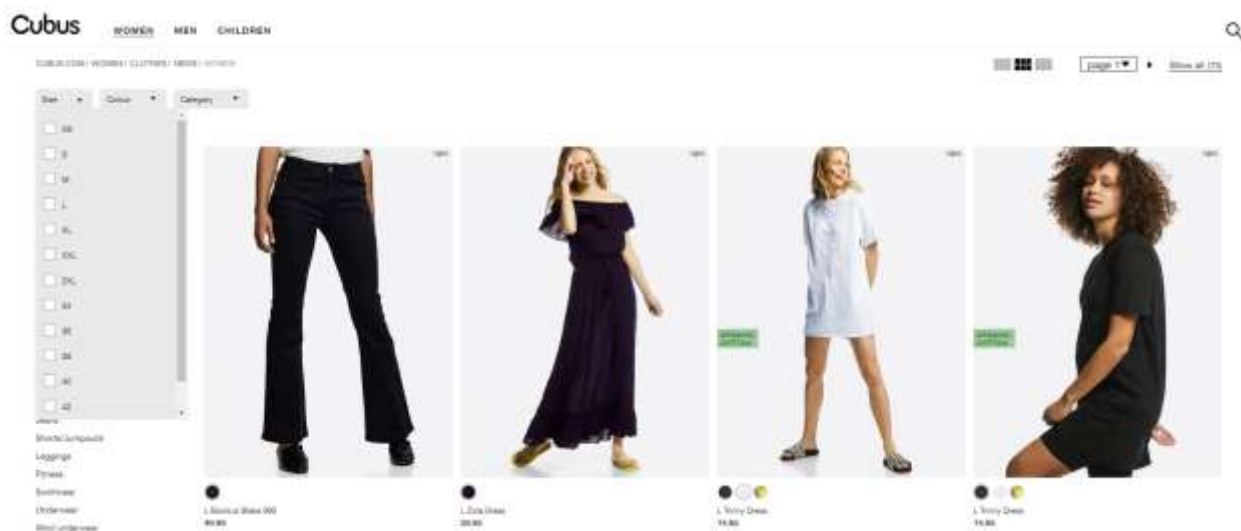
1 Bust: measure around the fullest part of your bust, preferably wearing a smooth, unpadded bra. Make sure you measure straight across your back.

2 Waist: measure around the smallest part of your torso.

3 Hips: measure around the widest part of your hips (about 20 cm below your waist).

	XXS	XS	S	M	L	XL	XXL
1 Bust	74-76	80-82	86-88	92-94	98-100	104-106	110-112
2 Waist	56-58	62-64	68-70	74-76	80-82	86-88	92-94
3 Hips	81-83	87-89	93-95	99-101	105-107	111-113	117-119

Screenshot 15: Gina Tricot Size Guide (Gina Tricot, n.d., n.p.)



Screenshot 16: Cubus (Cubus, n.d., n.p.)

Appendix B

Interview Guidelines Company Interviews

Introduction:

First of all, thank you for taking the time to answer our questions. We are Julia and Jella and are currently writing our Master thesis about plus-size branding at Lund University. We are very grateful to be able to use your company as it is a very interesting example of an established fashion brand targeting the plus-size market. The interview will be audiotaped and transcribed to enable a detailed analysis of the results and will last approximately 20 minutes. However, we will destroy the tapes after the thesis is handed in. Do you have any further questions? Before starting the interview, we would need your full name and position in the company.

Icebreaker

In the last few years, it could be observed that obesity rates have been increasing and that past beauty ideals have been questioned since consumers demand the fashion industry to portray more realistic people. Many fashion brands have reacted to this development by offering plus-size collections or even establish their own plus-size brands.

- Tell us a little about why your company decided to target plus-size customers and what you are doing in order to target them.

Follow-up questions regarding plus-size segment

- How did you integrate your plus-size offering in the brand portfolio? For example, did you create a new brand or did you integrate the collection into your existing brand?
 - Why have you decided to use the chosen strategy of XY?
 - Have you considered any alternative strategies?

(Give some examples of alternative strategies if necessary e.g. creating a new brand/integrating the collection into your product offering/creating a sub brand)

- What do you think are the challenges and opportunities involved with your chosen strategy?

(Give examples if necessary e.g. people feeling excluded, easy navigation, clear positioning, high financial commitment etc.)

- Would you consider changing your strategy? Why?

(Give examples of options to changing e.g. creating a separate brand, creating a sub brand, integrating the product offering without separation)

‘Nice to have’: Questions to ask if the time allows

- Show picture/link to a website of a company that follows another strategy. In case of a telephone interview, describe the example.
 - What do you think about this approach?
 - What would you say are the greatest advantages or disadvantages?
 - Why do you believe this brand has chosen this strategy?
 - Do you think this strategy would work for your brand? Why? Why not?

Comparing the example of this strategy with your own.

- What would you say are the biggest differences?
- Do you think one strategy is generally superior to the other one? Why?
- What do you think are the reasons for companies to decide against the integration of plus-size?
- When did you start offering plus-sizes?
- What is your size range (smallest and largest plus-size)? How did you decide upon the range of sizes?
(e.g. Why did you decide to stop your collection at 2XL?)
- Who are your target customers and what kind of shopping experience do you think you offer your customers with this strategy?

(Give examples if necessary e.g. feeling inclusive, easy to navigate, premium/basic experience etc.)

Thank you for the interesting conversation and for your interest in participating in our study. The thesis will be handed in end of May and will get published probably around one month later. If you are interested, we are happy to share the results with you (if they are → ask for eMail address). Do you agree to show your brand’s name in the thesis or would you like it to be anonymised e.g. a well-known company selling men’s apparel in Scandinavia?

Interview Guidelines Company Interviews: Companies that are currently not offering plus-sizes

Introduction:

First of all, thank you for taking the time to answer our questions. We are Julia and Jella and are currently writing our Master thesis about plus-size branding at Lund University. We are very grateful to consider the perspective of such an established fashion brand. The interview will be audiotaped and transcribed to enable a detailed analysis of the results and will last approximately 20 minutes. However, we will destroy the tapes after the thesis is handed in. Do you have any further questions? Before starting the interview, we would need your full name and position in the company.

Icebreaker

- Tell us a little bit about what your company is doing?
 - Where do you sell?
 - Which strategy are you following?
e.g. premium price strategy, how the company is positioned
 - Who are your target customers?

→ keep those questions very short; it is just intended as an icebreaker and to make sense of their responses; maybe ask more at the end of the interview if the time allows.

In the last few years, it could be observed that obesity rates have been increasing and that past beauty ideals have been questioned since consumers demand the fashion industry to portray more realistic people. Many fashion brands have reacted to this development by offering plus-size collections or even establish their own plus-size brands.

Questions regarding plus-size segment

- Have you considered offering sizes XL and up?
 - Why? Why not?
 - Do you believe offering plus-sizes would fit your brand?
- If you were to consider entering the plus-size segment, which strategy would you choose? (Give some examples of strategies e.g. creating a new brand, creating a sub brand, including the plus-sizes into the brand's product offering)
 - Why?

- What would you say are the challenges and opportunities involved with some of those strategies?
- Dressmann is a value retailer offering male apparel mainly in Scandinavia. They have created the brand Dressmann XL, for which they have opened separate stores where they sell sizes from 2XL - 9XL. They advertise with plus-size models and also have a separate section for Dressmann XL on their website.

(In case of a Skype or personal interview, additionally send link to website and photos of stores and models)

- What do you think about this approach?
- What would you say are the greatest advantages or disadvantages?
- Why do you believe this brand has chosen this strategy?
- Do you think this strategy would work for your brand? Why? Why not?

‘Nice to have’: Questions to ask if the time allows

- UNIQLO is another example of a fashion retailer offering plus-sizes. However, they have chosen to extend their brand using the brand name UNIQLO also for the plus-size offering. They only categorize the size range separately in their webshop.

(In case of a Skype or personal interview, additionally send link to website and photos of stores and models)

- What do you think about this approach?
- What would you say are the greatest advantages or disadvantages?
- Why do you believe this brand has chosen this strategy?
- Do you think this strategy would work for your brand? Why? Why not?
- If you now compare the two examples:
 - Do you think one of these strategies is generally superior to the other one? Why?
 - What would you say would work better for your own brand? Why?

Thank you for the interesting conversation and for your interest in participating in our study. The thesis will be handed in end of May and will get published probably around one month later. If you are interested, we are happy to share the results with you. Do you agree to show your brand’s name in the thesis or would you like it to be anonymised e.g. a well-known company selling men’s apparel in Scandinavia?

Interview Guidelines Plus-size Customers

Introduction

First of all, thank you for taking the time for this interview. Let us first introduce ourselves. We are Julia and Jella and are currently writing our Master thesis about plus-size branding at Lund University. Before starting, we would like to clarify some details. The interview will be audiotaped and transcribed. Nevertheless, everything will be treated confidentially and we will delete the recording after we transcribed it. Please make sure that you feel comfortable, do not get disturbed and answer our questions honestly since there is no wrong or right. We are just interested in your personal opinion and experiences. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. Do you have any questions before starting the interview?

- Age:
- Gender:
- Nationality:
- Occupation:

Icebreaker Questions

- When you think about going shopping, what comes to your mind?
- How do you usually shop?
(e.g. favorite brands, online/offline, how often, price range etc.)
 - What do you struggle most with when you go shopping?
 - Are there any brands from which you would like to shop but can't?
- What would your ideal shopping experience be like?
 - What is important for you when you shop for clothes?
 - How would you like to be treated as a plus-size customer?
 - Is there any brand that offers this experience?

Questions regarding plus-size

After the fashion industry was criticised for supporting developments like size zero, society began to demand the promotion of more realistic beauty ideals. Also developments like Body Positivity (eventually explain what it is: people are supporting that everyone feels comfortable in their own body no matter what shape they are and that they feel positive about themselves regardless of their looks) began to arise. Now more and more fashion brands realise that 'normal people' do not wear the sizes which they have been offering for decades. Fashion brands are thus responding to these changes and are picturing plus-size models and extend their lines to plus-sizes.

- What do you think about brands which are doing that?
- What does this mean to you personally?
- Do you sometimes feel discriminated in society?
- Show picture of Dressmann XL store:

Dressmann is a Norwegian fashion retailer specialising on men's apparel. They have two separate brands where one offers the regular sizes and the second one sizes 2XL and up. Moreover, they have a separate store for Dressmann XL.

- What do you think about this concept?
- Would you like to shop in a separate store that only offers plus-sizes? Why? Why not?
- FOR MEN: Show a picture of Dressmann XL website.

Please take a few minutes to look at this picture and tell us what comes to your mind. Is there anything specific that catches your attention?

Follow up:

- Ask about product offering, models, navigation
- Do you like that it is displayed as a separate category on the website?
- Would you say that this makes it easier for you to find what you are looking for?
- Would you feel the same way when shopping offline e.g. that the plus-size section is in a separate area than the other sizes?

'Nice to Have': Questions to ask if the time allows

- *What do you think about the name Dressmann XL?*
- *What do you think about the name ASOS PLUS or BIG & TALL when you compare it to the previous example of Dressmann XL?*
- *Show a picture of Uniqlo Website.*

Please take a few minutes to look at this picture and tell us what comes to your mind. Is there anything specific that catches your attention?

- *What differences do you perceive when you compare the two different brands in their plus-size offering?*
- *If you compare how the plus-sizes are presented in the two different examples which example do you like better and why? (regardless of the style of clothes)*

- FOR WOMEN: MANGO also has their own brand called Violeta by MANGO offering female apparel up to size 2XL. It can be bought on their webshop and it also has its own area within the MANGO store.

Show an example of the Violeta by Mango webshop. Please take a few minutes to look at this picture and tell us what comes to your mind. Is there anything specific that catches your attention?

Follow up:

- Ask about product offering, models, navigation
- Do you like that it is categorised separately? Would you say that this makes it easier for you to find what you are looking for?
- Would you feel the same way when shopping offline?

Nice to Have:

- *What do you think about the brand name Dressmann XL?*
- *What do you think about the brand name ASOS Curve when you compare it to the previous example of Dressmann?*
- *Show a picture of Uniqlo Website.*

Please take a few minutes to look at this picture and tell us what comes to your mind. Is there anything specific that catches your attention?

- *What differences do you perceive when you compare the two different brands in their plus-size offering?*
- *If you compare how the plus-sizes are presented in the two different examples which example do you like better and why? (regardless of the style of clothes)*
- Now that you have seen some examples of what brands are doing in the plus-size segment.
 - What would you say is good and bad about it?
 - What would you say could be improved?
 - How would you like brands to treat you as a plus-size customer?
 - How would you like the general society to treat you as a plus-size shopper?

The thesis will be handed in end of May and published approximately one month later. If you are interested in the results, we are happy to share them with you. We will only use your insights referring to your first name.

Interview guidelines Straight-size Customers

Introduction: Tell interviewees that there is no wrong or right, ask them to be honest, assure anonymity, ask them if they are interested in the results

Icebreaker Questions:

1. As what kind of (fashion) shopper would you describe yourself?
(e.g. where do you like to go shopping, what is important for you? preferences/dislikes?)
2. What does fashion mean to you?

Questions regarding plus-size in general (Picture 1, 2 and 3):

Show Picture 1 & 2 at the same time as a comparison, add picture 3 later to the conversation

3. Can you please describe what you see in these pictures?
What perception/associations do you have when you see this picture?
Focus on feelings/emotions → follow up questions based on answers

Picture



Picture 2:



Picture 3:



4. What do you think of fashion retailers offering clothes for plus-size people?
5. Do you think there are any opportunities or challenges linked to offering plus-size fashion?

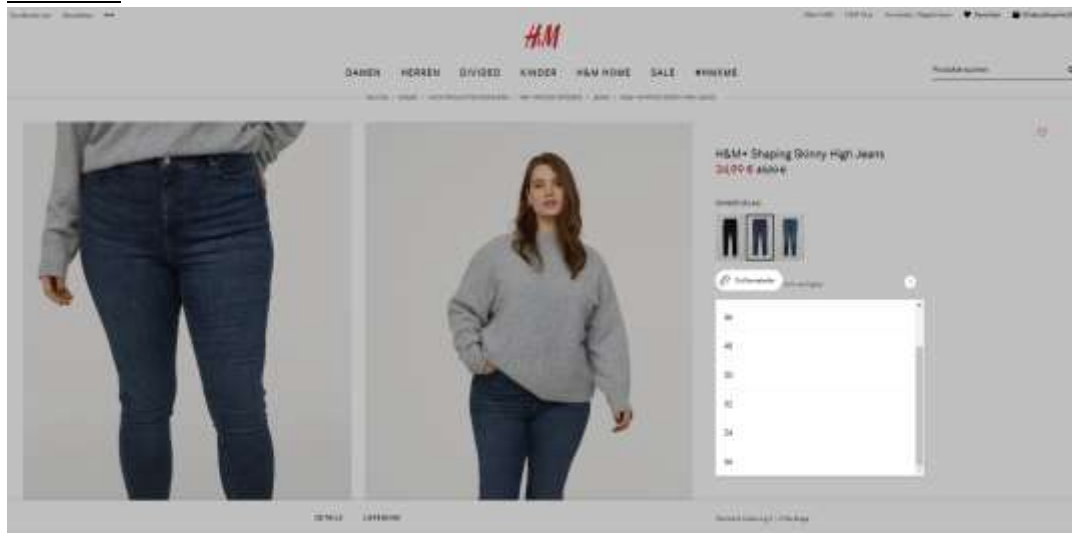
Questions regarding H&M's plus-size offering (Picture 4 & 5):

6. How do you perceive H&M?

Show both pictures at the same time

7. Can you please describe what you see in those pictures?
 - What do you think about the presentation on the H&M Website? (Thoughts, feelings)
 - Are there any specific things you like/dislike about this presentation?
 - Is anything specific catching your attention (e.g. differences to other presentation)?
8. What do you think of H&M offering plus-size apparel?
9. Why do you think H&M offers plus-size fashion?
10. How would you describe the fit between H&M and H&M+?

Picture 4:



Picture 5:

