

THE
STRATEGIC BRAND MANAGEMENT:
MASTER PAPERS

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STRATEGIC BRAND MANAGEMENT

MASTER PAPERS

Eighth Edition

Student Papers

2022
September - October

How does body image relate to brand image?

An analysis of brands incorporating the body positivity movement

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Abstract

Purpose: The importance of body positivity is visible in its remarkable media presence. The movement entails challenges such as opportunities for brands. The purpose of this paper is to examine why companies adapt to the body positivity movement, what they are exactly doing regarding body positivity and how this is related to the brand's reputation.

Methodology: Literature and media review, Case studies, Survey

Findings: The reasons why companies chose to incorporate the body positivity movement differ. According to the motivation, suitable implementation strategies are put in place which lead to different perceptions. The paper finds that it is crucial for a brand to have consistent and authentic incorporation of body positivity to earn a strong reputation.

Original/value: The paper contributes to the understanding of what a brand should consider when incorporating a trendy movement.

Keywords: body positivity, brand management, *Dove, Aerie, Victoria's Secret*

Paper type: Research paper

Introduction

According to Cohen (2019), body positivity is resistance against traditional marketing representations to promote the inherent value in all bodies (Sastre, 2016). More generally, body positivity is the phenomenon of physical acceptance regardless of differentiating features such as gender, ethnicity, shape, and size (Leboeuf, 2019).

The beginning of the body positivity movement dates back to the 1960s when the Fat Rights Movement starts and evolves in the 70s/80s (BBC, 2022). At the end of the 1990s, third-wave feminism advocating an intersectional approach combining gender, body, and ethnicity further paves the way for the body positivity movement. (Snyder, 2008)

From the 2000s onwards, the internet and later social media became a place where body shame but also body love took place and different communities could connect more easily (BBC, 2022). Regarding the misdeeds of companies, this meant that a

bottom-up logic could be put in place with consumers being vocal through boycott practices (Mc Griff, 2012). This was especially the case with the rise of body positivity influencers gathering "consumer tribes" around the demand for inclusivity (Cova, Shankar, & Kozinets, 2007).

This development led to the fact that body positivity is now a strategic brand management issue. It can be a necessity to satisfy this new consumer demand for inclusiveness but also an opportunity for companies. Campaigns conveying new attributes of inclusiveness, similarity, and ethics affect the brand image positively. Furthermore, this leads to stronger customer loyalty and is beneficial to the company's reputation. (Caputova, 2020)

The purpose of this paper is to look at the marketing strategies put in place by brands to integrate the demands of the body positivity movement. Nonetheless, the focus is not on the critical evaluation of the body positivity movement, but on the

evaluation of brand strategies that capture these new body-ethical demands of consumers.

Thus, three research questions emerged:

- *Why do companies adapt to the body positivity movement?*
- *What are companies doing regarding the body positivity movement?*
- *How do consumers react to these initiatives?*

The analysis starts with a literature review, continues with case studies, and the survey, and ends with a discussion of the findings.

Literature Review

The literature review is structured by the three layers of the *key concept of brand management* (Urde, 2022).



Figure 1: The Key concept of brand management (M. Urde, Strategic Brand Management lecture, Lund University, August 29, 2022).

We associate several concepts with each layer of the matrix and apply them to the phenomenon of body positivity.

Reputation

According to Urde (2022, p. 5) reputation is linked to what people associate with the corporate brand.

Brand Associations

The associations made by the consumer to a brand are partial and subjective, either positive or negative. Not only is the perceived image of the brand linked to the product but also to the values it conveys for

itself and compared to its competitors. (Aaker & Keller, 1992)

Therefore, the strategic challenge in body-positive campaigns is to make consumers associate an inclusive brand personality with the company. (Bowman, 2020)

Brand reputation

Brand reputation differs from the brand image as it brings together all the perceptions of a brand over time (Fombrun & Van Riel, 1997). Therefore, the concept is part of the brand-building process. The goal for brands is to reduce the gap between brand reputation and brand identity, by delivering the “desired identity” and a “coherent set of values” (Chernatony, 1999).

Regarding this previous theory, companies can sustain a body-positive reputation as long as it is in line with the brands’ identity.

Communication & Positioning

According to Urde (2022, p. 5), a brand needs to express its identity and stand out in the marketplace. Therefore, it is crucial to achieve high brand awareness and a strong customer-brand relationship.

Brand awareness

The concept can be defined as the ability of the consumer to recognize and recall the brand and its attributes. Brand awareness should always be concerning the purchase process as a preference is made by the consumer based on the familiarity and reliability attributed to the brand. Initially perceived as an individual feeling, awareness is nevertheless fundamentally collective. (Kapferer, 2012)

It is, even more, a collective phenomenon when applied to body positivity marketing campaigns where awareness emerges from a source of attractiveness as the consumer sees likeability and familiarity in the representation they are exposed to. (Mc Guire, 2000)

Consumer-brand relationship

The concept cannot be only defined as the process by which a brand initiates, develops, and maintains a purchase engagement of its consumer, but also covers the scope of community experiences. Social media has reshaped the consumer-brand relationship from a top-down approach closed to the brand public to a two-way relationship in which consumer communities can initiate a tri-dimensional interaction system of cognition, affect, and behavior. (Baldus & Voorhees, 2015)

From this theory, we deduce that a two-way relationship is therefore needed between brands and consumers to fully integrate the body positivity movement.

Identity

According to Urde (2022, p. 5), the identity layer answers the nine questions of the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (Querverweis Methodology Chapter). If the nine elements are consistent, the brand is authentic which leads to more loyalty.

Brand Authenticity

The concept revolves around the perception of a brand by consumers to be “faithful and true toward itself and its consumers” (Morhart, 2015). Moreover, brand authenticity is deeply linked to brand identity as it relates to the mission & brand core (Greyser & Urde, 2019). Therefore, it requires “clarity of purpose” and “values of integrity, (Beverland, Dickinson, Napoli, & Farely, 2014).

From a strategic perspective and relevant to our case studies analysis, four factors of “continuity, originality, reliability, naturalness” can be outlined to measure brand authenticity. (Brunh, Schoenmüller, Schäfer, & Heinrich, 2012)

Brand Loyalty

Loyalty is defined as the consumer’s commitment to a brand to engage in a purchase process in time. Repurchase loyalty is correlated to a strong consumer-brand relationship based on identification,

value, trust, and satisfaction (Harris, He, & Li, 2012).

Because of the ethical dimension of body positivity to which the consumer both identifies and grants value, loyalty is supposedly increased with this mindful customer’s behavior which results in a preference for inclusive brands. (Bethel, 2020)

Methodology

To research how brands deal with the body positivity movement, we chose a mixed method approach, combining a literature and media review, a qualitative case analysis, and a quantitative survey.

Firstly, the literature review introduces the *key concept of brand management* (Figure 1). The theories presented above allow us to establish a link between the perceived exteriority of a brand (reputation), and its interiority (identity), which are interconnected by effective communication and positioning (marketing strategy).

Secondly, three case studies, namely *Aerie*, *Victoria’s Secret*, and *Dove* are analyzed. While *Aerie* and *Dove* are known for their inclusive campaigns, *Victoria’s Secret* was sharply criticized (see case studies below). Based on our literature review we extract the following three factors for the case analysis: authenticity, marketing strategy, and change in brand reputation. First, we examine the brand’s authenticity by having a closer look at the brand’s core and its surrounding elements according to the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (see Figure 2) (Greyser & Urde, 2019, p. 6). Second, we analyze the marketing strategy of the chosen campaign. Third, we explore the change in brand reputation that took place because of the body positivity campaign. Our case research is drawn upon qualitative literature and media analysis (see Altheide & Schneider, 2012).

EXTERNAL	VALUE PROPOSITION What are our key offerings, and how do we want them to appeal to customers and other stakeholders?	RELATIONSHIPS What should be the nature of our relationships with key customers and other stakeholders?	POSITION What is our intended position in the market and in the hearts and minds of key customers and other stakeholders?
EXTERNAL/ INTERNAL	EXPRESSION What is distinctive about the way we communicate and express ourselves and makes it possible to recognize us at a distance?	BRAND CORE What do we promise, and what are the core values that sum up what our brand stands for?	PERSONALITY What combination of human characteristics or qualities forms our corporate character?
INTERNAL	MISSION AND VISION What engages us (mission)? What is our direction and inspiration (vision)?	CULTURE What are our attitudes, and how do we work and behave?	COMPETENCES What are we particularly good at, and what makes us better than the competition?

Figure 2: The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (Greyser & Urde, 2019, p. 6).

Lastly, a survey about body positivity in advertisements has been conducted to collect recent data. A sample of 61 persons gave us insights into their perceptions and experiences within the field of body positivity and brands.

Case studies

The following section depicts how *Aerie*, *Victoria's Secret*, and *Dove* incorporated the body positivity movement and what effects it entailed.

Aerie

Aerie is a sub-brand of American Eagle and was launched in 2006 (AEO Inc., 2007). The brand is targeted at young women between the age of 15 and 25 years (Moin, 2006) and sells bras, underwear, leggings, and more (*Aerie*, 2022-a). The brand became famous through the #*Aerie*REAL campaign in 2014, which introduced advertising of women without retouching the images and promoting the realness of the models with all their imperfections (Kim, 2020).

Authenticity

The key offerings of *Aerie* are its design and quality, an extensive network of retail outlets, and high-quality customer service. (CLEVERISM, n.d.)

Regarding the positioning of *Aerie*, the brand is “for real women and girls” (Mahoney, 2020). Therefore, the brand builds personal relationships and a

community with its customers to create a strong sense of belonging and to promote the individual real self (*Aerie*, 2022-b). In its communication, the brand appears in a warm, welcoming, inviting, and positive self-loving way (*Aerie*, 2022-a). The core values include people, integrity, passion, innovation, and teamwork (*American Eagle*, 2022).

Thus, the mission of *Aerie* is to “build confidence in women, foster an inclusive community and protect our planet to make the world a better place for all” (AEO Inc., 2022). The vision is “we want to make our girls feel good about who they are, inside and out. It’s time to think real. It’s time to get real. No retouching. No supermodels. Because the real you is sexy” (*American Eagle*, 2022). To further shape the brand identity, the company has built a culture around its core values. (*American Eagle*, 2022).

The brand’s competencies are its above-average job knowledge, quality of customer service, quality control, pricing strategy, and organization (UKEssays, 2015).

Value Proposition Design, quality, product range, customer service, network	Relationships Personal relationships, community for a strong sense of belonging	Position Only true brand for “REAL women and girls”
Expression Warm, welcoming, inviting, positive self-loving appearance	Brand Core Inclusiveness, body positivity, empowerment, acceptance	Personality People, integrity, passion, innovation, and teamwork
Mission and Vision confidence in women, foster inclusive community	Culture Inclusive, accepted, empowered, supportive	Competences Above-average job knowledge, quality of service, quality control, organization

Table 1: The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix of *Aerie* (Greyser & Urde, 2019, p. 6).

Marketing strategy

In spring 2014, *Aerie* launched the famous #*Aerie*REAL campaign (Krupnick, 2017).

The campaign was one of the first in its market that started promoting a more body-

positive image through the abandonment of supermodel standards (Krupnick, 2017). The campaign was launched to “help empower young women to be confident in themselves and their bodies”, according to Jennifer Foyle, *Aerie*’s Chief Merchandising Officer (PRNewswire, 2014). Moreover, the campaign sets an emphasis on the non-perfection of everyone and aims to correct the false idea of the perfectly portrayed bodies in most advertisements (Cornelis & Peter, 2017, p. 102). Especially the sense of body confidence of young women is heavily influenced by the portrayed beauty of women in media (Krupnick, 2017). Therefore, the campaign features women of all sizes, which are shown in non-retouched images and supporting the slogan of the campaign “the real you is sexy” (Goddard, n.d.).

The campaign was rolled out in both one-way and two-way communication. While social media content, print, and video advertisements marked the classical one-way communication, the campaign included a new online bra guide, a hashtag with more than 374’000 contributions from its start until October 2022, as well as a 24/7 hotline with experts called “Real GirlTalk” (Monget, 2014).

Rodgers et al. (2019) found out, that the *Aerie* Real campaign was perceived very positively, in that the campaign appeared “more realistic, natural, and representing greater diversity of body shapes, sizes, and ethnic/racial groups compared to the typical images seen in the media.”



Figure 3: An advertisement of the #AerieREAL Campaign (Krupnick, 2017).

Change in brand reputation

A study by Convertino, Rodgers, Franko & Jodoin (2016) evaluated the effects on body satisfaction of young women through the exposure of the images of the *Aerie* Real campaign as well as images of previous *Aerie* campaigns. The results showed that the *Aerie* Real campaign was way better perceived and had a smaller negative impact on body satisfaction than previous campaigns.

These findings are supported by a study on the authenticity of advertising disclaimers by Cornelis & Peter (2017). The authors found that the disclamation of non-retouched images had positive effects on appearance satisfaction. Apart from that, the purchase intention increased.

Further, Selensky & Carels (2020) found out, that women had significantly improved self-esteem and positive affect after being exposed to the *Aerie* campaign. Apart from these positive effects, the women found the messages in the campaigns to be positive, uplifting and empowering.

Lastly, a study with 35 women aged 18-23 analyzed the perceptions and reactions to the images of the *Aerie* Real campaign, as well as the impact of the campaign on brand perceptions and consumer intentions. Most of the interviewed women reacted positively to the images of the campaign and “perceived them as representing body diversity across several dimensions” (Rodgers, Kruger, Lowy, Long, & Richard, 2019, p. 127). The study found that the outcome of the women’s comparisons with the bodies portrayed in the campaign were overall neutral, both in upward and downward comparisons. The good perception of the campaign thus led to very positive attitudes toward the *Aerie* brand and increased intentions to support the brand by buying its clothes. (Rodgers, Kruger, Lowy, Long, & Richard, 2019, p. 132)

Through the research on the implications of the *Aerie* Real campaign, previous research that suggested a positive female reaction to

advertisements ceasing the promotion of the thin ideal could be confirmed. (Convertino, Rodgers, Franko, & Jodoin, 2016, p. 735)

Apart from research focusing on the campaign itself, financials suggest an improvement in the brand reputation. After the launch of the *Aerie* Real campaign in 2014, sales grew by 20% in the fiscal year 2015 (Krupnick, 2017). This substantial growth in 2015 marked the first year of a period of six years with a sales growth of mostly more than 20% every year (Debter, 2021). This success is also reflected in the market share, which grew from 2% in 2015 to 6.7% in 2020 (Debter, 2021).

Victoria's Secret

Victoria's Secret was founded in 1977 and is the world's largest intimate specialty retailer (Victoria's Secret & Co., 2022-a). With its famous fashion show and so-called beautiful "angels", which aired in 1995 for the first time, the brand became known around the world (Willett-Wei, Heller, Pantazi, & Fernandez, 2021). The brand's focus lies in the creation of high-quality products as well as exciting customer experiences. (Mission Statement, 2022)

Authenticity

The value proposition of *Victoria's Secret* includes a wide assortment of modern and fashion-inspired clothing lines, such as bras, panties, and lingerie (Victoria's Secret & Co., 2022-a). In recent years, the brand has been aiming to position itself as the single lingerie brand in the minds of its customers, which lets one feel fierce and confident (Patricia Lee, n.d.). Therefore, the brand is trying to create a community through various partnerships and new inclusiveness and body-positivity projects such as VS Now, the VS Collective or the VS Global Fund (Victoria's Secret & Co., 2022-b).

The new inclusive approach to the market is also reflected in the expression of *Victoria's Secret*. To support the rebranding initiatives, the brand clearly communicates, that beauty is undefinable (Victoria's Secret, 2022-b). The new personality can be

described as empowering and focusing on women's real personality (Kerin & Hartley Marketing, 2021).

To "create opportunities for women everywhere to define themselves on their own terms" (Victoria's Secret, 2022-b) is the mission of the brand. Therefore, its core values include passion, customer rules, inclusion, and diversity (Business Strategy Hub, n.d.), which complies with its vision of becoming the world's leading advocate for women (Victoria's Secret, 2022-a). Furthermore, a culture of authentic selves, healthiness, and inclusiveness is promoted. (Victoria's Secret & Co., 2022-c).

Lastly, the brand profits from its high brand recognition and high customer loyalty, which makes itself still stand out from the masses (Gustafson, 2016).

Value Proposition Fashion-inspired clothing lines	Relationships Community, partnerships, inclusive & body-positive projects	Position Single lingerie brand that lets oneself feel fierce & confident
Expression Undefinable beauty and individual	Brand Core Passion, customer rules, inclusion, and diversity	Personality Empowering, focusing on women's real personality
Mission and Vision opportunities for everyone and to become world's leading advocate for women	Culture Everyone encouraged to be authentic selves, to be happy, healthy, and inclusive	Competences High brand recognition, high customer loyalty

Table 2: The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix of *Victoria's Secret* (Greyser & Urde, 2019, p. 6).

Marketing strategy

As a direct consequence of the #MeToo movement in 2017, *Victoria's Secret* saw its strategy of promoting their perception of sexiness to be questioned (Feng, 2019, p. 179).

In a study from 2013 (Chrisler, Fung, Lopez, & Gorman), tweets right before and during the *Victoria's Secret* fashion show in 2011 were analyzed, whether upward and downward social comparison (social comparison theory) could be identified. It turned out that the tweets contain evidence

of both upward and downward social comparisons. Due to the changed perception in people's minds, the fake ideals that the *Victoria's Secret* fashion show was promoting to the world were now judged. What once worked and made the brand a worldwide success with a market share of 32% in the U.S. intimates apparel market in 2015, did not work anymore and let the company to lose market share to 16% in 2020 (Ell, 2021).

To change its strategy, *Victoria's Secret* hence started moving away from that strategy "in favor of supporting customers throughout every phase of their life" (La Jeunesse, 2021). Therefore, the company started changing its brand through different campaigns. First, the well-known fashion shows were put down. Les Wexner, the CEO of L Brands, said that network television would not be the right fit for promoting fashion in the digital age (Hanbury, 2020). Shortly after, the first transgender model Valentina Sampaio, as well as the plus-size model Ali Tate Cutler, were hired (La Jeunesse, 2021). Additionally, the VS Collective, a team of several body-positive role models was created in 2021, including the plus-size model Paloma Elsesser and other famous names such as the Tennis star Naomi Osaka (Nesvig, 2021). Second, the product portfolio changed and includes maternity bras since April 2021 (Emmer, 2021) as well as mastectomy bras since October 2021 (La Jeunesse, 2021). Apart from these changes, an inclusiveness-promoting website called VS Now was introduced, partnerships with female-focused non-profit organizations were established, a podcast called VS Voices and a global fund for women's cancer programs were launched (La Jeunesse, 2021).

These efforts are however not yet perceived as authentic. The fashion writer Gianluca Russo thus mentioned, that doubt within the plus-size community persists, whether the new *Victoria's Secret* really supports the new ideals from the body positivity movement or simply tries to save the

worsening brand reputation (in La Jeunesse, 2021). Another critique mentions, that "the brand still perpetuates misogynistic and harmful standards", in that the models themselves still are extremely flawless and attractive (Chabot, 2021).



Figure 4: An advertisement of *Victoria's Secret* for body-positivity (The San Francisco Times, 2021).

Change in brand reputation

Regarding a change in the brand reputation, only little research has been conducted. Therefore, the analysis is mostly based on social media impressions, interviews with lingerie experts, and opinions by bloggers.

Victoria's Secret has experienced a lot of negative publicity in recent years. The main occurrences were sexual assault allegations, an open petition signed by 100 models (Ciment, 2020), a connection to the convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein (Specter, 2022), and controversial statements, for example from Chief Marketing Officer Razek, in that plus-size models or transsexuals would not be represented in the then still active *Victoria's Secret* fashion shows (Rasool, 2018).

The rebranding through several campaigns in the last couple of years is hence aimed at transforming the brand's image into a more inclusive one and moving the brand away from a "male desire and sex appeal" shaped brand to a more female-centered brand (Bhattarai, 2020). This perception change is, however, not yet achieved in 2022. The lingerie expert Cora Harrington explains that the whole campaign is not aligned with the goals of the rebranding, since the scandals in the last years are not solved by new slogans (Kibbe, 2021).

First, a timing issue is mentioned. Whereas other big brands such as *Aerie* or *Dove* started their campaigns already many years

ago, *Victoria's Secret* is only now trying to improve its image. Second, internal “secrets” such as sexual harassment are not addressed in the campaign, which makes the campaign seem unimaginative and simply copying from other successful campaigns (Garnett, 2022; Kibbe, 2021). Third, even though the VS Collective models are diverse, this diversity marks the standard nowadays and does not make the brand stand out from the masses. Additionally, the brand is criticized for putting in the lowest effort regarding inclusiveness but advertising it as the greatest step forward (Martinez, 2021). Fourth, the VS Collective praises rather the achievements of its models, instead of focusing on their bodies (Magleave, 2021).

In addition to these inputs, financials support the weakening of the *Victoria's Secret* brand. After the emergence of the #MeToo movement with changing ideals (Bhattarai, 2020), sales revenues started decreasing for the first time since 2010 (Feng, 2019, p. 177). Up to 2021, the 2016 revenue levels could not be reached again (Statista, 2022-a). Information from the annual report 2021 regarding the number of stores worldwide supports this trend, in that the amount has constantly decreased from 1'222 in 2019 down to 899 in 2022, which marks a decline of 26% (Statista, 2022-b).

Dove

Dove was founded in 1957 in the United States, belongs to *Unilever*, and is in the market of personal care products. The brand focuses on women, female-identifying, and non-binary people, nevertheless, also has men and baby products. (Dove, 2022-a; Unilever, 2022) For over seventeen years *Dove* has been committed to changing beauty ideals and raising self-esteem (Unilever, 2022). The brand states: “Beauty is not defined by shape, size or color – it’s feeling like the best version of yourself. Authentic. Unique. Real.” (Dove, 2022-a).

Authenticity

The key offerings of *Dove* are personal care products that contain a moisturizing cream.

Dove's value proposition is unique as it builds upon the promise of real and natural beauty. (Dove, 2022-a)

When it comes to the market position in the US, France, and Germany, *Dove* ranks among the first six brands (VuMA (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Verbrauchs- und Medienanalyse), 2020; YouGov, 2022; Kantar Media, 2021). But what makes *Dove* especially strong is its positioning in the hearts and minds of its stakeholders as the brand is building a community. For example, it has a #RealVoices site where *Dove* partners can share their stories (Dove, 2022-b). With initiatives such as the *Dove* Self-Esteem Project *Dove* contributes to better self-esteem education (Dove, 2022-c).

This is also reflected in the way *Dove* expresses itself. Since 2004 real beauty is shown by portraying normal women, instead of models, to boost confidence and self-esteem. (Dove, 2022-e) Therefore, the culture of *Dove* is transparent and consistent. Furthermore, it is inclusive, open, and progressive, showing different ages, sizes, gender, and ethnicities. (Dove, 2022-h).

Dove's mission is to “make a positive experience of beauty accessible to all women” (Unilever, 2022). Therefore, the brand stands for self-esteem, empowerment, and natural and real beauty. The brand promises to raise self-esteem, especially for future generations by redefining beauty standards. (Dove, 2022-f)

All in all, *Dove* is better at impactfully and authentically transmitting the message of self-love than its competitors which leads to powerful campaigns. (Rogers, 2021)

Value Proposition Personal care products, broader beauty understanding	Relationships Dialogue with community, partnerships, and projects	Position Natural personal care products
Expression Real women, natural beauty, ideological	Brand Core self-esteem, empowerment, and natural/real beauty	Personality Modest, trustworthy, daring

Mission and Vision to raise self-esteem of girls, change beauty standards	Culture Transparent, consistent, inclusive	Competences Authentic and emotional campaigns
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Table 3: The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix of Dove (Greyser & Urde, 2019, p. 6).

Marketing strategy

At the beginning of the 2000s *Dove* was looking for a rebranding strategy to differentiate itself (Bahadur, 2017). Therefore, market research has been conducted and the large-scale study “The Real Truth about Beauty” revealed that only two percent of the interviewed women considered themselves beautiful (Etcoff, Orbach, Scott, & D’Agostino, 2004, p. 10). Thus, *Dove* launched the “Campaign for Real Beauty” in 2004. The campaign showed real women instead of models, embracing the variety of beauty by showing different body sizes, shapes, and ages (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, pp. 951-952). It was not the first campaign showing real women but the first large-scale campaign and its media attention was remarkable (Millard, 2009, p. 148). Interactive billboards where people could vote if the portrayed woman was for example “grey or gorgeous” contributed to a new dialogue about beauty standards (Bahadur, 2017). Additionally, advertisements were spread through various channels, for example, television, print, and mass media (Murray, 2013, p. 85). Moreover, short videos like “Evolution”, showing the process of photoshopping, or “Onslaught”, displaying how a young girl is influenced by all the glammers and fake advertisements, were used to depict how important it is to change the beauty standards (Bahadur, 2017; Millard, 2009, p. 146).

As Murray (2013, p. 84) discusses, *Dove* was aware that within brand-building it is important to touch emotions and build an ideological alliance with its customers. To reach and engage the target group the *Dove* Self-Esteem Fund, offering workshops and partnering for example with the American Girl Scouts, was founded (Murray, 2013, p. 85). Thus, the campaign was fully dedicated

to changing the narrow ideals of beauty and boosting the self-esteem of women rather than directly marketing a product.

 Real women. Real beauty



Figure 5: An advertisement for Dove’s Real Beauty Campaign (Rogers, 2021).

Change in brand reputation

The success of *Dove*’s Real Beauty Campaign is undisputed. The media attention was tremendous and for its online videos, *Dove* even awards. (Celebre & Waggoner Denton, 2014)

Compared to 2003 a sharp increase in loyalty can be determined in 2006 as the sales generated by customers buying more than one product have doubled by then (Neff, 2006 in Celebre & Waggoner Denton, 2014). According to Celebre & Waggoner Denton (2014), this could be due to the perceived similarity with the women portrayed. The comparison theory assumes in this context that women can identify more with the real women in the *Dove* ads which makes them feel more confident.

It is the first digital campaign that creates a supportive online community and reaches over 200 million people worldwide (Springer, 2009, p. 232). Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan (2012, p. 135) point out that this online involvement of customers builds trust and may lead to the feeling that the company cares about them. For example, *Dove* fosters community feeling by asking their followers on social media to share their photographs under the use of a certain hashtag (Global Brands, n.d.).

Millard (2009, p. 157) found a change in the perception of *Dove* after the Real Beauty Campaign. The campaign is a relief for women, taking the pressure to fit into the narrow beauty ideals. Additionally, it changed people’s minds and allowed them

to be different. Thus, the strong message of self-love *Dove* is transmitting leads to more positive brand associations.

The campaign was also a huge success in financial terms. The market share rose from one to six percent and a “700% increase in the number of creams” that were sold (Brook, 2004). In 2010 the revenues still increased by 10 percent in comparison to the year before (Global Brands, n.d.). The 200 million dollars company in the 1990s grew to a 4-billion-dollar firm today (Aaker D., n.d.). However, in 2011 and 2017 *Dove* was accused of racism because of two advertisements. It affected *Dove* more than it might have affected another brand as it was against *Dove*’s brand essence (Dua, 2017). Although *Dove* had two major public-relations crises, the brand value is still increasing (Brand Finance, 2021).

Survey

In the following the results of the survey are presented. More details can be found in the Appendix.

While 79% of the respondents feel comfortable or even very comfortable in their bodies, only 28% feel that their body type is represented in advertisements. This leads to the fact that the majority feels sometimes under pressure with their body because of advertisements.

Quality is perceived as the most important factor in a brand, followed by price and authenticity. Most of the respondents agree they are neutral about the status of a brand. While many are neutral about inclusiveness, the majority still think that it is important.

While the majority does not know *Aerie*, which, the majority (69%) does not at all associate *Victoria’s Secret* with body positivity. Conversely, most of the respondents have an opinion about H&M but they only associate it a little bit or sufficiently with body positivity. *Dove* is

most associated “completely” with body positivity.

While some respondents think that it is hard to assess when a brand is really into body positivity and are rather sceptic about the movement, a third agrees that they are convinced when the brand has a large size range and broad body representation in advertisements.

Two factors that are often mentioned to contribute to the credibility is consistency and authenticity:

“When it’s constantly present throughout the brand, and not just a campaign here and there”
(Anonymous, 2022)

“Being authentic and showing different body types without making a thing out of it.” (Anonymous, 2022)

Further, a political or educational engagement can help to build trust and manifest that the brand does not only use body positivity for promotional purposes.

Discussion

The present study sought to explore the effectiveness of body positivity marketing campaigns around three axes: their authenticity, their marketing strategy, and their perception by consumers.

To provide a theoretical and empirical analysis of body positivity marketing strategies, we were able to link each factor of effectiveness to a research question. The first question “Why do companies adapt to the body positivity movement?” is linked to the demand of brand authenticity. To answer the second question “What are companies doing regarding the body positivity movement?” we studied the marketing strategies of the case studies. Finally, the third question “How do consumers react to these initiatives?” challenges the reputation of brands.

Why do companies adapt to the body positivity movement?

The body positivity movement is not simply a trend that brands can seize on as a commercial opportunity, but a demand for authenticity on the part of consumers against traditional representations with which they no longer identify. Indeed, in the survey we conducted, most respondents feel under pressure with their body because of advertisements and authenticity comes as the third important factor for a brand. Our case studies led us to discuss this dimension through the authenticity, which is measured by the strong connection between the nine elements of the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix.

The challenge is to understand whether these brands have succeeded to integrate an authentic vision of a real self into their core values, culture and mission or whether they have simply created a new ideal self based on the body positivity stereotypes. On this issue, both *Aerie* and *Dove* have relied on a unique value proposition explicitly promoting in their campaigns “the individual real self” (*Aerie*, 2022-a) or “real and natural beauty” (*Dove*, 2022-b). They did not stop with a nice sounding slogan but integrated the idea of the real self into their culture by creating a strong sense of community. On the contrary, it seems that *Victoria’s Secret* has tried to integrate a new ideal self-born from the brand’s aesthetic interpretation of the body positivity movement into its existing brand building and not from consumers’ demand for real authenticity. Indeed, as mentioned by Chabot (2021). Indeed, most of *Victoria’s Secret’s* new plus-size models are still flawless and attractive, thus explaining all the criticisms the brand received. The findings of the survey exemplify that idea with 69% of respondents who do not associate at all *Victoria’s Secret* with body positivity.

We can therefore hypothesize that the “why” of the adaptation of brands to the body positivity movement is mainly identical, since for *Aerie* and *Dove* it was a

question of encouraging a whole new brand building process whereas for *Victoria’s Secret* it was a defensive commercial strategy to preserve a brand image that was fragilized at the time.

What are companies doing regarding the body positivity movement?

An effective marketing strategy tries to increase brand awareness and build a strong customer-brand relationship. Further, for body positivity campaigns it is crucial to create a source of attractiveness through likeability and familiarity to which the consumer identifies (Mc Guire, 2000).

In a way the three brands studied, *Aerie*, *Dove*, and *Victoria’s Secret* tried to create familiarity through multimedia networks in their campaigns. For example, in addition to the hashtags and tweets used by the three brands, *Aerie* and *Victoria’s Secret* launched the *Aerie* “Real Girl Talk” and VC voices respectively.

However, while *Aerie* and *Dove* adopted a two-way communication strategy aimed at mutual interaction between the brand and consumers, *Victoria’s Secret* distinguished itself with a campaign that can be described as top-down based on role models established by the brand. Indeed, *Aerie* and *Dove* adopted rather a dual communication strategy with their consumers through the 24/7 “Real Girl Talk” hotline or interactive billboards. Their main common argument was to counter the former idealized and unrealistic marketing by using unretouched images for *Aerie* and debunking photoshopping methods on videos for *Dove*. On the contrary, *Victoria’s Secret* has taken up the traditional codes of role models by choosing larger models (like Paloma Elsesser or Ali Tate Cutler) or sportswomen (like tennis player Naomi Osaka). Criticism of this strategy stems from the brand’s choice of beauty ideals (models) or health ideals (sportswomen) which do not correspond to the demand for realism and similarity from consumers who are sensitive to the body positivity movement.

In a nutshell, we deduced that the most effective body-positive marketing strategies were those based on a realistic vision and interactive communication, rather than on new ideals and more traditional communication.

How do consumers react to these initiatives?

The perception and reaction of consumers to these marketing campaigns affects the brand's reputation. With *Aerie* and *Dove* on the one hand, whose rebranding was generally positively perceived, and *Victoria's Secret* on the other hand, whose strategy was not convincing to most people, we discuss the success factors for an effective implementation of the body positivity movement.

The first criterion that emerged from our case studies was the timing of the initiation of body positivity campaigns. Indeed, a brand's reputation is a long-term process of brand building. Therefore, the positive engagement of consumers for the pioneers *Dove* and *Aerie*, has been consolidated over the last ten to fifteen years. In contrast, the late launch of *Victoria's Secret's* campaign after falling sales was perceived more as a marketing rescue attempt by consumers rather than as a genuine rebranding. The survey supported that "consistency" and "long-term" commitment of brands are the main criteria to sustain an authentic reputation.

On the other hand, if a good brand reputation is associated with convincing cause related-marketing, then brands must create "a recognition of similarity" (Grigaliūnaitė & Šontaitė-Petkevičienė, 2020) for consumers. It, therefore, seems that the real effort of *Aerie* and *Dove* is positively correlated to the perception. It may be precisely where the misperception of the *Victoria's Secret* campaign comes from as the company did not link its marketing campaign to the cause asked for by its consumers but only integrated it into its own codes of traditional brands.

Lastly, a final criterion for analyzing consumer reactions to these campaigns could be their degree of inclusiveness. Indeed, we can hypothesize that *Dove* and *Aerie* have put effort in including all of their consumers in a new positive community regardless of size, ethnicity, or gender. In a way, *Victoria's Secret* has bet more on a diversity strategy by creating another category of body-positive role models who nevertheless remain separated from idealized models, with the excluding term "plus-size".

To sum up, the positive reaction of consumers seems to depend on the ability of brands to create a new long-term inclusive reputation, which engages consumer loyalty through a feeling of similarity. A bad perception would therefore lie in the misinterpretation of the body positivity movement as a new isolated category, rather than as a trend asking for a complete reshaping of the consumer base and brand image.

Conclusion

The current research aimed to identify relevant success factors of body positivity-aligned marketing campaigns.

The central questions for this research were as follows:

1. *Why do companies adapt to the body positivity movement?*
2. *What are companies doing regarding the body positivity movement?*
3. *How do consumers react to these initiatives?*

To answer these questions, a mixed-method approach was applied. First, through the literature review of the key concepts of brand management the three factors authenticity, marketing strategy, and reputation were extracted. Second, three case studies were analyzed based on the chosen factors. Third, the findings were then compared to the quantitative survey that was conducted in October 2022.

The results showed that different factors play a role, in whether a body positivity campaign is perceived as authentic. Regarding the first research question, the results show different reasonings for the analyzed companies. Whereas *Aerie* and *Dove* encouraged a whole new brand-building process, *Victoria's Secret* reacted to the body positivity movement with a defensive commercial strategy. The analysis in favor of the second research question thus showed different approaches. While the focus of the *Aerie* and *Dove* campaign lied in a realistic vision and interactive communication, *Victoria's Secret* emphasized new ideals and continued with traditional communication channels. Both the reasoning for reacting to the body positivity movement as well as the chosen marketing strategy thus reflected the success of the actions taken. As to the third research question, through the analysis of consumers' reactions to the campaigns, specific factors of success could be identified. First, the timing of the campaigns may play an important role. It could be observed that the earlier campaigns succeeded, which were introduced well before the #MeToo movement in 2017. Therefore, not trying to catch up with movements, but pushing the ideals before they get mainstream, could be a key factor of authenticity. Second, it seems essential to link the cause of the movement with the campaign. In this case, *Victoria's Secret* tried to associate the cause of the movement to the codes of its traditional brands, which was worse perceived than *Aerie's* and *Dove's* ways of aligning the ideals of the movement with the campaign. Third, in light of the body positivity movement, the degree of inclusiveness may play a crucial role in the perception of the campaign. While *Aerie* and *Dove* succeeded in meeting the expectations of the movement, namely the inclusion of all, *Victoria's Secret* failed to do so and targeted only a fraction of the ideals of body positivity.

The results of this research paper thus bring up five managerial implications. First, to

make use of a well-known phenomenon, the ideals and values of the movement should be reflected in the brand identity. Therefore, companies are advised to only identify movements that align with the company's ideals and values. Second, a careful assessment of the communication channels should be performed since the ideals of the movement often favor certain options and disfavor others. Third, the time of the movement should be considered. While future movements are only foreseen with ambiguity, already mainstream movements need to be carefully addressed to not be perceived as a trend-adapting company, but rather as value promoter. Fourth, the ideals of the movement need to be aligned with the campaign. The attempt of fitting these ideals on the codes of the existing brands could lead to an unauthentic campaign. And fifth, the movement needs to be thoroughly understood, since targeting only fractions of the movement do not meet the expectations of the targeted audience.

This research has shown the differences of three marketing approaches to a worldwide phenomenon, which yielded in the finding of answers to the research questions and five managerial implications. However, the current study faces several limitations, in that the analysis only included a limited number of cases. Also, no internal company documents or insights through interviews were considered in the evaluation of the case studies. Apart from that, further surveys could be considered, since the present survey is not representative with its sample size of 61 respondents.

Based on our findings, future studies could analyze further case studies in the body positivity movement to confirm and extend the findings on a broader field of examples. To draw more general conclusions, the present findings could be reviewed with other movements.

Word count: 6'945

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Appendix I: Survey Questions

Body positivity in advertisements

Hejhej!

We are a team of three students in the Strategic Brand Management course at Lund University. For our final paper we do research about body positivity in advertisements. Therefore, we would like to know your opinions and experiences in this field.

Many thanks for filling out our short survey!

1. How old are you?

Mark only one oval.

- Younger than 18
- 18-30 years old
- 31-45 years old
- 46-59 years old
- Older than 60

2. What gender do you identify with?

Mark only one oval.

- Female
- Male
- Other

3. How comfortable do you feel in your body?

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5
not comfortable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	very comfortable

4. Do you think that your body type is represented in ads?

Mark only one oval.

- Mostly
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

5. Do you sometimes feel under pressure about your body because of ads?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

6. What is important for you in a brand?

Mark only one oval per row.

	not important	neutral	important	very important
Price	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Authenticity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Stauts	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Quality	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inclusiveness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. How much do you associate these brands with body positivity?

Mark only one oval per row.

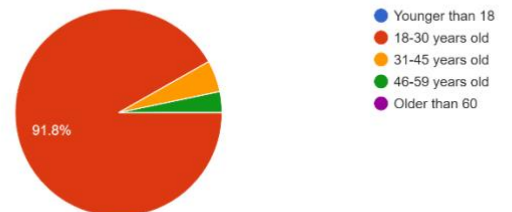
	not at all	a little bit	sufficient	completely	I don't know
Dove	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Aerie	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Victoria's Secret	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
H&M	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Asos	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Benetton	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Uniqlo	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adidas	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. Optional: When do you believe that a brand is really into body positivity?

Appendix II: Survey Results

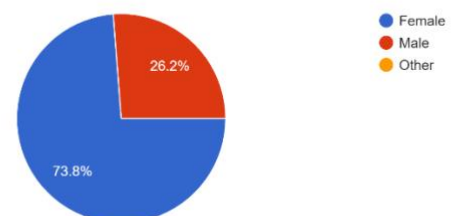
How old are you?

61 responses

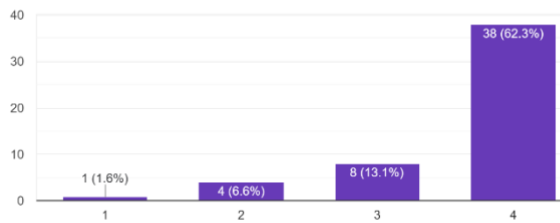


What gender do you identify with?

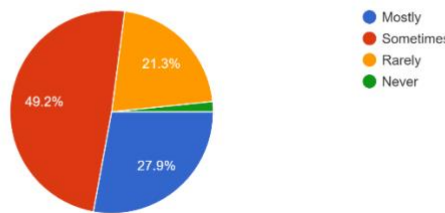
61 responses



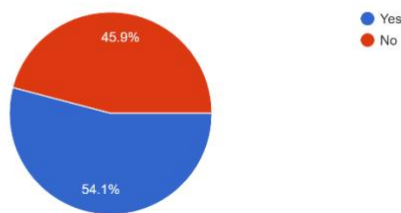
How comfortable do you feel in your body?
61 responses



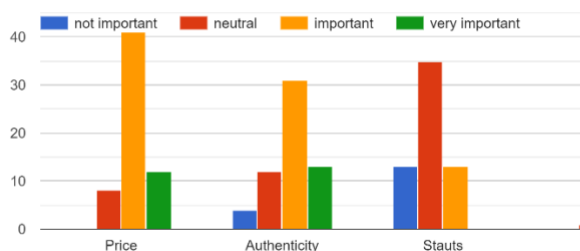
Do you think that your body type is represented in ads?
61 responses



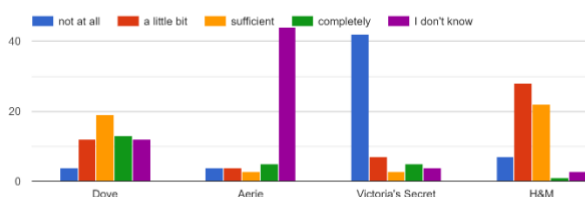
Do you sometimes feel under pressure about your body because of ads?
61 responses



What is important for you in a brand?



How much do you associate these brands with body positivity?



Question 8:

- When they communicate authentically and the body-positive strategy matches the brand's identity. When it is not only one campaign but the brand's real conviction and therefore implemented in every aspect of the brand.
- It's hard to say as it seems sometimes it can look like body positivity washing (idk how to say but like greenwashing)
- I don't know. But body positivity is pretty useless and might be deleterious for people. Brands should not put forward this social movement.
- When it's constantly present throughout the brand, and not just a campaign here and there
- By promoting body acceptance or body neutrality instead of body positivity
- I don't believe that all brands has to be body positive including all type of bodies. Its important for brands to show healthy bodies, not underweight or overweight and promoting a healthy lifestyle. With that said, its still crucial that the market is inclusive and that there are brands providing products for ALL body types.
- First, when they have a full range of size. Then when they show curvy or plus size model to portrait the cloth. And when they mix model from different size in their adv
- When they have communicated the same message over a longer time, then it feels authentic. If a company recently started to use plus size models and such, I can be quite suspicious if it's just a "trend" for the company or not.
- When not only one body type (usually normative) is shown
- When they have a big range of sizes

- When having sizes and models for ALL body types
- Offering a huge range of different sizes (when it covers to clothing brands) and showing people of different shapes and skincolours in their ads
- If they actually have a big range of sizes available all the time
- A large size range and models of all shapes in all commercials and website and social media
- when a brand presents different body types in advertisements, tv spots, on posters
- Different body types are shown in advertising
- Representation in communication and using role models to enhance the credibility
- I perceive this to be really difficult to answer. I feel like many brands act as if they are body positive, but that it is more like 'green washing' (but than for body positivity). Maybe brands that have lots of sizes, employees in all different sizes, body inclusive campaigns etc
- When they offer products/services that are actually suitable and fitting for diverse body types
- When it is able to show different types of bodies in their ads and have various sizes of clothes.
- When they offer all sizes and when all sizes are also represented in their ads
- When they offer clothing in all sizes, when their models are of all body types (representation/diversity)
- Carhartt
- If diverse body types are not only represented in a brand's ads but the brand actively engages with diversity issues (in politics, education etc.).
- When they use different kind of bodytypes when it comes to models.

Also they have products in all sizes from super small to super big.

- When they dont show a „perfect“ body, but usual or even people who might not be considered „pretty“ so that there is no pressure on anyone to look somehow.
- Being authentic and showing different body types without making a thing out of it. It should be obvious to show all types of people.
- When it does not portrait an ideal image of beauty
- When they sell clothes that suits different body types! With ads they should chose something memorable but not necessarily related to the narrow beauty standards that suck?!
- When they use different models
- When they make products for a wide range of body types and represent a range of bodies in their adverts, consistently and without making it super performative and staged