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### The Authenticity of Body Positivity in the Media: A Comparative Analysis of Four American-Owned Companies

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The Authenticity of Body Positivity in the Media: A Comparative  
Analysis of Four American-Owned Companies

By

Emma L. Mink

An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
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4/15/2022

Emma L. Mink

Date



4/13/2022

Dr. Kelly G. Atkins, Thesis Mentor

Date



4/11/2022

Dr. Dana L. Harrison, Thesis Advisor

Date

*Reza Maihami*

4/12/2022

Dr. Reza Maihami, Reader

Date

## **Abstract**

Marketing strategies are changing how businesses sell their products. The body positivity movement is causing consumers to examine companies to determine if their intentions are authentic. Some of the ways consumers evaluate company authenticity include examining corporate social responsibility reports, types of advertising, or the brand-cause fit between the company and the body positivity movement. The author of this study followed two companies (Dove and Aerie) that are known for body positive advertising messages and two companies (Mattel/Barbie and Victoria Secret) that are known for promoting unrealistic body expectations. The author examined each companies' mission statement, annual report, and types of media being used to determine whether the companies were doing what they say they are doing. The researchers found that Dove and Aerie demonstrated company values consistent with their body positivity campaigns; however, both had opportunities to increase their emphasis on inclusion and diversity in their advertising campaigns and media presence. Mattel and Victoria's Secret had inclusive and diverse campaigns and media presence but focused on empowerment of women rather than body positivity. In the final analysis, Aerie had the most consistency between its brand and its body positivity campaigns. Further, the author found that Aerie's campaigns promoted true body positivity with models of various ethnicities, sizes, disabilities, and illnesses. Aerie has raised the bar for companies joining the body positivity movement by encouraging women to accept the "imperfect" bodies they were born with. This study has academic and industry contributions due to the comparative analyses of the body positivity marketing campaigns of American-owned brands. The results could inform companies of their strengths and areas of opportunity in consumer perceptions of brand authenticity and could provide direction for future studies focused on body positivity marketing.

## **Introduction**

Businesses are transforming the way they market their products to consumers. Recently, these strategies include the body positivity movement (Caldwell, 2021). Body positivity is changing the way companies advertise their products and the kind of campaigns they create to represent their brand. In turn, the body positivity movement is making consumers look more closely at companies to determine if their intentions are authentic. Consumers may be evaluating a company's authenticity by examining their corporate social responsibility reports, the types of advertising they are using or the fit between the promoted social movement and the company. Examining these factors helped the researchers evaluate the authenticity of the company's marketing efforts (Caldwell, 2021).

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used in this study consisted of an examination of the body positivity movement and the way four companies utilize this social movement in their marketing strategies. The author investigated body image, media, and corporate social responsibility. Within body image, the concept of body positivity was explored. In the examination of media, social media and types of advertising were examined. Finally, within corporate social responsibility, brand-cause fit were investigated.

### **Body Image**

An important aspect of body positivity is body image. Body image is defined as how someone views themselves in a mirror or in their own mind (NEDA, 2021). Winfield and Richardson (2016) expressed how women have unrealistic expectations due to impractical standards imposed on them through the media. Winfield and Richardson (2016) further assessed the impact the media had on women, how women viewed themselves, and how satisfied they

were with their bodies. Results indicated that women were apt to compare themselves to women in the media, resulting in body dissatisfaction and a negative body image (Winfield & Richardson, 2016). Researchers also demonstrated the negative influence of social media on women's body image satisfaction based on what they saw as the "ideal body" in other's social media posts (Yu, 2020).

D'Alessandro and Chitty (2011) discussed how Western culture impacts other countries' beauty standards and how prevalent eating disorders impact other countries based on the unattainable and unhealthy "ideal" body size of Western models. In addition, D'Alessandro and Chitty (2011) reported that in order for women to obtain the Western cultural beauty standard, they have to be small, appear feminine, and be objectively attractive according to the "ideal." In this study, the researchers discovered that beauty standards such as blonde, mid-sized, white women with tanned skin were seen on the majority of advertisements relating to body positivity (D'Alessandro & Chitty, 2011). The lack of diversity in size or ethnicity can be discouraging for women that do not fit this Western standard of beauty (Gelsinger, 2021).

In another important study, Rudd and Lennon (2000) explored the view of college women on body image and how societal pressures made them feel as if they need to modify or alter their appearance in some way. Rudd and Lennon (2000) further discussed how women felt as though they have to control themselves, while men were known for controlling others, making women chase outward appearance perfection in order to be accepted by society. The researcher also posits the "social comparison theory" that makes people compare themselves to others in order to determine where they stand (Rudd & Lennon, 2000). Each of these studies demonstrate how women are taught through social behaviors in the media and advertisements to constantly worry about their appearance and compare themselves to others.

Body positivity is related to how consumers view themselves, how they believe others view them, and how these factors impact their lives as a whole (Stumer et al., 2003). The body positivity movement encourages members of society to break ideal beauty standards and create an environment where women will be able to accept themselves no matter their size, ethnicity, or imperfections. This movement is also aimed at helping women achieve self-care by encouraging them to pay attention to how they feel rather than what they see in the mirror (Cohen et al., 2019). In one study, women's feelings were explored related to their actions towards themselves and how well they took care of themselves based on how they felt about their body (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015) concluded that women who were more in tune with their health and well-being had a higher level of body appreciation, meaning they were more accepting of their bodies despite the "ideal" body stereotype.

In recent years, body positivity in social media has been discussed frequently by businesses, influencers and consumers. Strumer et al. (2003) investigated why consumers participate in certain movements, where consumer's goals and values lie, consumer perceptions from others close to them, and incentives of consumers' personal motives. Consumers' insecurities of not having the "ideal" body depicted why they follow the body positivity movement; because it can show a false sense of positive change (Stumer et al, 2003). The body positivity movement attempts to bridge the gap between consumer's personal perspective and society's overall view of the ideal body to create positive body image for all sizes and ethnicities so women can be happier and healthier (Stamp, 2019). Stamp (2019) proposed health as the main focus of women's motives to explore how they feel about their body rather than what society tells women they should look like. This emphasis of body health over body appearance allows

women to obtain a more positive mindset about their body by focusing on the functionality of it rather than on the appearance (Stamp, 2019).

Caldwell (2021) investigated how some companies take advantage of the body positivity movement and use it to sell their products instead of trying to create actual social change. According to her study, when businesses and companies mix advertising and the body positivity movement together, it made consumers question the company's intentions (Caldwell, 2021). This raised the question of whether the body positivity movement used in company marketing strategies is authentic or if it is just a way to make a profit and follow social trends (Caldwell, 2021). According to the study some companies adopted the body positivity movement to create a positive company image and to sell more products rather than to influence social change (Caldwell, 2021). Caldwell (2021) recommended that a company's image and advertisements should support or reflect the movements they support. With body positivity being a major social trend, plus-sized women still have trouble finding stores that carry clothes that fit them (Baker, 2019). If companies use advertisements about loving the body you were born in, then consumers expect the company's product assortment to reflect that same message.

Stamp (2019) proposed that the body positivity movement and positive body image were two separate things. Body positivity is a social movement and body image is the feelings and views one has of their own body (Stamp, 2019). The body positivity movement is meant to challenge the ideal body image and help consumers accept their bodies no matter the size, shape, ethnicity, or disability (Cohen et al., 2019). Baker (2019) proposed that women are typically more satisfied with their bodies if they see women that look like them in the media (i.e., size or diversity). Studies suggest that more diverse representation in the media could increase women's appreciation of their own bodies, allowing them to have increased loving, accepting feelings

toward their body even while looking at idealized bodies (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). In a 2019 study, Stamp explored the meaning of the body positivity movement and the kinds of change it is supposed to bring. The author concluded that when bigger bodies are normalized in the media, society will be more accepting of larger bodies (Stamp, 2019).

Winfield and Richardson (2016) reported that when companies and social media campaigns focused on being diverse and having representations of all shapes, sizes, ethnicities, ages, and disabilities, women were able to find someone they identified with. Further, women had more confidence in themselves and had a more positive body image when represented through strong, powerful women in the media (Winfield & Richardson, 2016). Through marketing strategies that promote a more mentally and physically healthy lifestyle, an increased positive atmosphere is created to help represent a more attainable body. Yu's (2020) study demonstrated the importance of balancing advertisements effective at selling products with advertisements that preserve women's positive self-image.

Yu (2020) explored internalization, and objectification. Internalization is when a person inherits a certain mindset based on others behavior. Objectification is when a person equates someone having the value of an object; this can be shown through social media and how the social environment plays a huge role in how women view themselves. The social pressure of conforming to ideal beauty standards can have a negative impact on women, such as companies themselves with others causing a lot of anxiety.

## **Media**

The influence of media is an important part of the framework of the present study. The three primary types of media that companies use to promote their brand are: paid, owned, and earned media. Bonchek (2014) described owned media as anything that comes directly under the



jurisdiction of the company, (i.e. the company's website or blog). All content presented on a company's website or blog originates from the company. Garmin (n.d.) described paid media as media that helps drive traffic towards owned media platforms (e.g. google ads on Instagram ads). Paid media is also used as a means to build earned media. Garmin (n.d.) depicted earned media as a form of media that is driven through word of mouth and comes from third party sources. Examples of earned media include: Hamilton Twitter watch party or roller-skating companies booming with business due to TikTokers making content go viral about roller skating. Earned media can also be seen when clothing companies have Instagram ads on your feed based on things you've searched that lead you directly to their owned media on their website. Earned media can stem from owned media when people talk about certain products on their social media platforms, which then leads consumers to visit their websites.

Stamp (2019) investigated whether the body positivity movement and the culture surrounding it promoted health or fat-acceptance. Stamp (2019) went further to propose that people with disabilities, various ethnicities, and imperfections are not represented equally in the media. The lack of diversity of women in the media when society says all women are accepted, can send mixed signals (Baker, 2019). When only the idealized beauty standard is represented in the media, being a part of the body positivity movement can be hard for some women. This difficulty comes when there is confusion on who is included and represented in this movement, making it difficult for women to support body positivity. With the importance of individual body image and the influence media has on consumer's self-perception, it is very important to look at what types of media companies are using to market their products.

In contrast to advertising of the 1990s and early 2000s that exclusively used supermodels, companies such as Aerie and Target have women in their ads that have

imperfections and curves (Yu, 2020). Even well-known companies that promote the idealized body such as Victoria Secret, tried to go away from their internalized and objectified beauty standards by focusing on how women feel about their bodies by conveying the message of a strong woman (Yu, 2020). Marketers can use the empowerment of women and body positivity in their campaigns to be inclusive of all consumers instead of just those with the idealized body type (Yu, 2020). D'Alessandro and Chitty (2011) discovered that consumer perception of the brand and overall feeling of body image is impacted by the body types used in advertising. D'Alessandro and Chitty (2011) also found that when consumers identified with a model's size or ethnicity, they were more likely to deem that model credible. Improving credibility is yet another reason why marketing strategies should show more representation of models with different body types, sizes and ethnicities.

Yu (2020) surveyed female college students regarding how they felt about themselves after looking at pictures of thin or average sized models. The researcher concluded that appearance self-schema and impact of media images on advertising effectiveness are the two major factors on how women viewed themselves (Yu, 2020). These findings depict how easily influenced we are by the images in the media. D'Alessandro and Chitty (2011) described how young girls see a small, unattainable body in the media as the body size they need to strive for, even if they have to achieve that in unhealthy ways (e.g. extreme dieting resulting in eating disorders). The different forms of media that businesses use to display these perfect model bodies in their ads has an impact on consumers' self-perceptions.

Advertising campaigns can be focused on the utilitarian or hedonic characteristics of a product. Companies promote and sell both utilitarian and hedonic products to satisfy consumer needs. Hedonic products are viewed through the interaction between the product and the

consumer and what kind of emotion it evokes. (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Utilitarian products are targeted towards consumers who are looking for functional and performance-based products. (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Harrison (2020) focused on organizations, such as nonprofits, that use hedonic methods of marketing to promote their messages to the public. Harrison (2020) discussed further how companies used hedonic marketing tactics to orchestrate consumer emotions so that they will be more on board with their brand, creating an emotional response. These created emotions can be studied through the form of advertising and through the reaction people have emotionally to the content presented (Harrison, 2020). Harrison (2020) expressed how most companies, do not use certain hedonic emotions such as sadness, due to the lack of positive response it can bring. This is important to note because marketers of companies are thinking about how people will feel based on their advertising, making which type of advertising they choose crucial. In the body positivity movement, advertisements will be targeted to consumers with hedonic tactics that can make them feel pleasure or happiness. In addition to the types of ads companies choose, they can also choose what their advertisements represent.

Social cause is an advertising tactic, with the purpose of improving society instead of only making a profit (Chang, 2012). Marketing social cause as an advertising tactic on social media produces content on a platform a lot of consumers use daily, allowing companies to reach consumers in different ways. One way companies can use a social cause tactic is through cause-related marketing instead of product-related marketing, allowing consumers to think with their hearts (Chang, 2012).

With a third of the world online, social media has grown into a common technology consumer use every day (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). The use of social media has increased

exponentially in 15 years and its impact on society should not be underestimated. The percentage of adults in the United States who used social media was 79% in 2019- up from only 5% in 2005 (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). With the widespread use of social media, it is inevitable that consumers will be affected by what they see or hear on these platforms.

Gelsinger (2021) explored the influence Instagram had on women and the way they reflected on their bodies. Gelsinger (2021) discussed women treating themselves as an object resulting in negative body image because of influencers and celebrities on Instagram with idealized body types. D'Alessandro and Chitty (2011) encouraged women to focus on overall health and well-being rather than on physical goals that may not be attainable. This changed mindset can create more confidence in women who focus on health instead of just becoming the "ideal" looking woman.

Gelsinger (2021) discussed that body positivity hashtags and posts are used to gain popularity with followers and make the company seem inclusive without actually including women of different sizes and ethnicities. As a result, companies could be accused of using body positivity and inclusivity to gain favor with consumers to make a profit rather than trying to influence real positive social change. In a 2020 study, Lazuka et al. discussed how Instagram contained a lot of posts tying body positivity to products that promote weight loss or fitness. The tactic can make women more dissatisfied with their bodies rather than promoting self-love and positive body image. The researchers also discussed how posts about women's bodies and their functionality can lead to body dissatisfaction in women with disabilities (Lazuka et al., 2020). This study revealed that through the point of the body positivity movement is to promote bodies of all sizes and ethnicities, companies are still using idealized body types to promote products (Lazuka et al., 2020).

Instagram has become a platform for advertising and marketing and uses algorithms in order to reach consumers (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). One study examined companies using algorithms and the popular body positivity movement to further their agenda of selling the maximum amount of products with the most effective method (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). This nefarious agenda contradicts the initial reason for the body positivity movement of women accepting and embracing their bodies and feeds off women's insecurities to sell products (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). With the rise of social media, companies are incorporating socially responsible core values. As a result, companies are creating marketing campaigns, posts, and brand deals in order to promote social causes.

As the author explained, social media and advertising impact today's consumer through the use of paid, earned and owned media. Many companies publish annual corporate social responsibility reports that are discussed widely in the marketplace via social media outlets and news reports thus impacting consumer perceptions of the brand.

### **Corporate Social Responsibility**

Craddock et al. (2019) described corporate social responsibility (CSR) as when companies, at their discretion, give back to society past what they are legally obligated to do in order to please stakeholders. Craddock et al. (2019) reported that a company's intentions surrounding the use of CSR may be questioned (e.g., do they really want to improve society or to help maintain the upstanding company reputation?). Craddock et al. (2019) investigated CSR motivations related to body positivity (i.e. such as going along with the feminist movement). Fashion companies are using CSR and the body positivity movement to improve their brand image and help women view themselves in a better light. When companies create social change, it will be financially beneficial looking at the long-term profitability of the company and it

typically creates consumer loyalty (Craddock et al., 2019). Craddock et al. (2019) explained, however, that if CSR is used as a short-term plan, companies will come off as inauthentic and customers will view the companies as less genuine. This is important to note when examining the fashion industry and their new CSR of promoting the body positivity movement.

By using CSR, companies are striving to meet the economic, ecological, and societal demands of consumers buying the company's products. When combining brand equity and CSR, consumers have a more positive response to the company, allowing a strategic investment in a social cause (Hsu, 2012). Cause-related marketing can be a CSR tactic by tying the company to a specific cause (e.g. such as the body positivity movement). (Champlin et al., 2019). When using cause related marketing, it is important that the cause and the company or brand align.

Brand-cause fit is the connection between a brand and a social issue and how well they together (Champlin et al., 2019). Champlin et al. (2019) discussed how brands align with social movements to seem more socially and ethically responsible. Companies can align with the social cause they are supporting through matches in functionality of the products, images advertised, and through the target audience the company is trying to reach (Champlin et al., 2019). For example, if a company already has products targeted towards women, then marketing campaigns relating to empowering women creates a better fit between the brand and the cause (Champlin et al., 2019).

Shumate et al. (2016) explains how vital business relationships with nonprofits are. Businesses benefit by gaining economic, social, and brand value, while nonprofits are given the platform to help advance progress on their social issues they are supporting (Shumate et al., 2016). This social advancement is important in CSR and plays a big factor on how the company is perceived in the media and can impact what consumers choose to support that company.

Shumate et al. (2016) also addresses how with business to nonprofit relationships and the enhancement of 21st century technology allows social issues to be solved more efficiently.

The theoretical framework discussed here by the researcher includes marketing campaigns based on the body positivity movement for authenticity and effectiveness. The methods used to investigate body positivity, body image, social media, corporate social responsibility, types of advertising, and brand-cause fit, to evaluate the authenticity of body positivity in the media are described next.

### **Research Methodology**

The goal of this study was to examine the body positivity campaigns of selected national brands to determine whether their motives and intentions were truly related to a positive body image or if they were merely for profit. The author evaluated four companies on their body positivity campaign strategies. Two companies (Dove, a personal Hygiene brand and Aerie, a clothing and underwear brand) have a positive brand image in contrast to the two other companies (Mattel, the Barbie doll brand and Victoria Secret, an underwear and lingerie brand) that are known for promoting unrealistic body images but have tried to improve consumer perceptions with body positivity campaigns.

The comparative analysis of four companies consisted of an examination of internal and external sources of information about each brand's body positivity campaigns and how well each company followed through with the campaign after the initial launch.

### **Research Questions**

These research questions about four companies and their body positivity movements helped the researcher determine whether these body positivity movement campaigns were part of genuine corporate social responsibility efforts or merely for profit. Research question one and

research question three were related to the alignment of company intentions and values. Research question two examined the kinds of media being used and whether companies were using emotional or functional marketing strategies.

- RQ1. Do the body positivity campaigns fit the company's mission statement?
- RQ2. What types of media are companies using in order to relay effective body positive messages?
- RQ3. Are the companies doing what they say they're doing?

Research question one was used to examine the fit between body positivity campaigns and the company's mission statement through an evaluation of annual reports, campaign strategies and social media campaigns. Research question two evaluated the type of media companies were using in their body positivity campaigns. Research question three was used to determine whether companies were really focused on body positivity through an evaluation of annual reports and news articles.

### **Sample and Criteria for Selection of Companies**

The four companies examined were Dove, Aerie, Mattel, and Victoria's Secret. Two companies (Dove & Aerie) were selected that have body positivity campaigns with positive connotations. Two other companies (Mattel & Victoria's Secret) were selected that have negative connotations with body positivity but are trying to turn their businesses around. These companies were chosen based on the following criteria:

- each had body positive campaigns during (2016-2022);
- each is known as a big player in the body positivity movement;
- each is well-known to consumers and primarily focused on selling their products to women; and



- each promotes body positivity to consumers in similar demographic categories (e.g. women of all sizes, ethnicities, and disabilities).

### **Introduction to companies**

The author's assessment of four companies depicts the campaigns, strategies, and common consumer perceptions of each company. The researcher investigated campaign strategies, social media strategies, and forms of advertising used by each company. By assessing the background of the companies, the author identified what each company stands for and where each company is going. This helped determine whether companies felt socially obligated through corporate social responsibility in their campaigns or if they genuinely want to create positive social change through the body positive movement. The author also assesses the types of advertising being used, whether that be hedonic or utilitarian.

#### ***Dove***

Dove was founded in 1957 and launched their Dove Beauty Bar that was made specifically for women to care for their skin (Unilever, n.d.) Since launching the original Dove Beauty Bar, Dove has created multiple lines of products including deodorant, shampoo, conditioner, and a list of hygiene care products (Unilever, n.d.). In 2010 they launched a men's line of hygiene care products to also boost men's self-esteem to make them feel stronger (Unilever, n.d.). Dove is a brand that is all about body positivity and promoting "real women." since 2004 launching their 'Campaign for Real Beauty' (Celebre, n.d.). Some marketing tactics have been very impactful, such as the Dove Self-Esteem Project, while others have not done so well, such as their new bottle line (Bogost, 2017). Helping women have a higher self-esteem, be more confident, and be more educated on how to love their body impacts the consumers that interact with their products and the profit of Dove and their parent company, Unilever. All of

these campaigns aim to build up women of all ages, sizes, and ethnicities and to give them the confidence to take on everyday life.

### ***Aerie***

Aerie was founded in 1998 to create a new branch of the already existing company American Eagle and eventually opened its first store in Greenville, South Carolina in 2006 (AEO Inc., 2021). At the start of the launch they had three different types of bras for sale, but after listening to consumers and their wants and needs they quickly expanded their line to clothes for any occasion whether it's for sleeping, working out or just hanging out (AEO Inc., 2021). In 2009 they released the wireless bra and later came out with boy brief underwear that set differentiated them in the market (AEO Inc., 2021). This brand prides itself on building the foundation of their company on body positivity and as this social trend continues to grow, Aerie's projected sales are also expected to increase.

On Aerie's website, consumers can browse through and add to a collection of photos of real customers in Aerie merchandise. Aerie's target market is 15–25-year-old women with hedonic marketing and body positivity (Kohan, 2020). Rasool (2018) reported that Aerie even redesigned its stores to advocate body positivity.

### ***Mattel***

Mattel was founded in 1945 and in 1947 came out with the Uke-A-Doodle, their first big toy on the market (Mattel, 2020b). In 1959, the "Barbie" doll was released being the first doll released in the United States of America with adult characteristics (Holland, 2019). Barbie then released many more dolls after their initial launch including Barbie's boyfriend Ken doll in 1961, Barbie's best friend Midge doll in 1963, an African American and Latina Barbie doll in 1980, along with many other releases (Holland, 2019). Barbie then released the Barbie Fashionistas

line in 2016 to fight the negative commentary of Barbie's not accurately depicting the female body (Holland, 2019).

Mattel's new focus is on three areas: empowerment, environmental impact, and representation (Mattel, n.d.). The company leaders have done this through their newer line of more diverse and inclusive doll lines. Mattel is also creating events, content, and products that work harder on empowering young girls (Mattel, n.d.) Though Mattel was known for beauty ideals in the past, the company is now creating more body positive dolls and dolls that represent strong women such as dolls that have different sizes, heights, and ethnicities displaying more representation (Cramer, 2020).

### ***Victoria Secret***

Victoria's Secret was founded in 1977 where the main purpose of the store was to make a lingerie store that men felt comfortable shopping at (Hanbury, 2021). By 1982, the company was nearing bankruptcy, but after a change in higher management they turned into one of the most successful lingerie brands by the early 1990s (Hanbury, 2021). In 1995 they started the infamous Victoria's Secret fashion show and aired online for the first time in 1999. (Hanbury, 2021). Since the initial launch of Victoria's Secret, the company has taken a different approach on how they promote their brand.

Victoria's Secret has new brand representatives that illustrate what women can do, not only focused on how women look. Maheshwari and Friedman (2021) discussed how the infamous Victoria's Secret fashion show ended in Dec 2018 and the company is now focused on a new campaign called, "What women want." Instead of having supermodels represent all women in the Victoria's Secret annual fashion show, they now have seven strong, powerful women represent the brand as spokeswomen. By making these strong women the spokespeople,

Victoria's Secret is striving to turn their brand image around from previously representing ideal, perfect bodies. The company has hired people including athletes, activists, actresses, and other women in social change roles to become more body positive and their profits have increased (Victoria Secret, 2020). Even with this rebranding however, consumers are still not convinced that Victoria's Secret has become body positive and still has concerns with Victoria's Secret claiming that buying their products will fix their life or will allow them to be perceived as the models in their ads (Chabot, 2021).

## **Results**

With research question one (Do the body positivity campaigns fit the company's mission statement?) the author sought to determine if company advertising campaigns were consistent with the company mission statement and brand image. Overall, this question was used to identify company authenticity versus skillful marketing tactics.

### **Mission Statements**

The mission statement identifies the company's current purpose and then looks further to what it wants to achieve as a business (Grewal, 2008). The present study investigated the alignment of body positivity campaigns and the company's key values, as stated in the mission statement.

Dove's Mission Statement, "To encourage all women and girls to develop a positive relationship with beauty, helping to raise their self-esteem, and thereby enabling them to realize their full potential" (Dove, n.d), depicts wanting people to learn how to love the way they look. This can be supported by the ads and the resources provided on the company website. Dove's target market is not exclusively female; however, a lot of their ads and self-love campaigns are targeted at women.

Aerie's mission statement, "Aerie is bras, undies and more for every girl. 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, n.d.), focuses on not only empowering their customers but being inclusive and celebrating individuality. Aerie is a company specifically for women; therefore, all their ads, campaigns, and products are targeted towards females and their ads and campaigns reflect what they state in their mission statement.

Barbie's mission statement is: "To Inspire the Limitless Potential In Every Girl" (Mattel, n.d.). This mission statement focuses on social change through the next generation of children. In the past, Barbie dolls were accused of causing young girls to develop insecurities and a negative personal body image. With only one shape and ethnicity, Barbie dolls made it hard for girls to feel accurately represented and had a negative impact on the self-image of young girls. Today, Mattel has shifted its mission statement and product selection towards a more inclusive line of toys; however, these efforts have not entirely erased former consumer perceptions.

The mission statement of Victoria's Secret is: "...to be the world's leading advocate for women. Which means the activity and community we foster across all our social media properties must put that advocacy into action, by maintaining a safe, inviting, supportive, and inclusive space for all" (Victoria's Secret & Co, n.d). Having a long history of portraying the ideal female body type, it is more difficult for Victoria's Secret to transition into a brand promoting female empowerment and body positivity.

## **Brand Image**

Every brand has a certain image and consumers typically shop with brands that align with their personal values. As a result, it is important for companies to effectively align their brands and brand image with the company's mission statement.

Dove is a brand known for celebrating women and their differences in beauty. Axe is known to depict women as thin, ideal females who are drawn to the men wearing Axe products (Unilever, n.d.). The differences between Dove and Axe's depiction of women can confuse the customer regarding the type of values of the overall company.

Aerie is one of many well-known companies that promote body positivity in their products and campaigns. Aerie has celebrated and marketed "real women" in their advertising campaigns since 2014 that contained no airbrushing and showed imperfections of the women's bodies in the ads (Ell, 2021). This is an example of Aerie's marketing by using real women with normal bodies instead of using models with ideal body types.

In the past, Mattel was guilty of negative campaigns such as handing out diet books created from the inspiration of a prostitute gag gift that said, "don't eat," (Dockterman, 2016). In another negative campaign, Barbie had dolls with catch phrases such as "Math class is tough!" that were demeaning to women (Dockterman, 2016). One report showed that young girls viewed Barbie as just a body rather than a person resulting in insecurities regarding body image (Dockterman, 2016). Because of declining sales from 2012-2014 and increasingly negative perceptions of the Barbie doll, Mattel had to do something to turn around the Barbie brand (Dockterman, 2016). In 2016, Mattel introduced a new line of Barbie dolls that had different sizes, ethnicities, and representations of disability (Dockterman, 2016). This new line of dolls included an infinite number of combinations of four body types, seven skin tones, 14 face

sculpts, 22 eye colors, 30 hair colors, and 24 hair styles (Colon, 2016). This is one example of Mattel's new emphasis on inclusivity through diversity in its dolls.

Historically, Victoria's Secret represented female bodies through the male gaze and created a practice of sexualizing women (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021). It will take a concerted effort to get consumers to fully believe that Victoria's Secret's efforts of promoting different types of bodies are pure and not just following social trends.

With research question two (What types of media are companies using in order to relay effective body positive messages?) the author used this research question to investigate the types of media companies are using to reach consumers. Media can be evaluated as paid, owned, or earned media. This research question also considered social trends, what consumers respond to, and whether the company effectively promotes what they are selling or if they influence consumers to believe they are body positive through the media they produce.

### **Media Types**

It was important for the researchers to see what types of media each company used to reach its target audience. The way companies use their owned media and implement paid media determines the type of earned media each company receives.

Dove's owned media included advertising campaigns such as their bottle campaign and social media platforms like Dove's Instagram. The author observed that Dove focused on posting women of all ages, sizes, ethnicities, and disabilities with Dove products (Dove, 2022). Dove's earned media included consumers using hashtags such as #InMyOwnSkin and #LoveMyCurls. This use of social media hashtags provides earned media by allowing consumers to participate in Dove's media (by using specific hashtags) while also helping with Dove's advertising campaign. In 2021 Dove also made videos of how much people retouch their photos on social media and

how it can impact consumers' view of themselves (Dove, 2021). This is an attempt to show women that everyone has imperfections despite what consumers see posted on social media outlets.

Aerie's owned media included their Best Fit Finder videos available on the Aerie website that helps women find bras that actually fit them, so they do not have to go through traditional measuring methods that often lead to shame and body dissatisfaction to find their size (AEO Inc., 2021). Another way Aerie uses owned media is with posts on Instagram of non-photoshopped models in Aerie clothing depicting women of all sizes, ages, ethnicities, disabilities, and illnesses (Rasool, 2018). Aerie's earned media included consumer hashtags such as #AerieREAL and having real customers post and send in photos of themselves in their Aerie merchandise to the company website.

The author observed that though Mattel does not post much on the parent company's platform social media about Barbie, Barbie's Instagram regularly contains Barbie dolls of different ethnicities, Barbie dolls doing various jobs and careers, and some events celebrating historical female figures such as Ida B Wells (Barbie, 2022). On Barbie's Instagram, they also made a special post about International Women's Day by creating 12 Barbies modeled after successful women in various careers. Barbie's Instagram was not promoting body positivity but illustrated powerful women and diversity in ethnicities and careers. The Barbie website contains descriptions of initiatives the company has undertaken to promote inclusivity and the launch of the Barbie Dream Gap campaign in 2018 to help young girls believe they can do anything a boy can do (Mattel, 2022). Barbie has also posted a study on their website about how playing with dolls is beneficial for building social skills and emotions such as empathy (Mattel, 2022).



As of 2021, Victoria's Secret had six new women as spokespeople to help with rebranding. These spokespeople include athletes such as Megan Rapino (women's soccer team/gender equity campaigner) and Eileen Gu (Olympic skier) (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021). Victoria's Secret also has models such as Paloma Elsesser (biracial model/inclusivity advocate), Valentina Sampaio (Brazilian trans model), and Adut Akech (model/south Sudanese refugee) that represent inclusivity (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021). Other diverse brand representatives include Priyanka Chopra Jonas (Indian Actor/Tech Investor) and Amanda de Cadenet (Photographer/Founder of #Girlgaze) (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021). These new spokespeople represent women of different sizes, ethnicities, athletic ability, careers, and gender identities advocating for women empowerment and are shown on Victoria's Secret's Instagram posts. Victoria's Secret's Instagram posts do feature female models of different sizes and ethnicities; however, the social media platform still contained many photos of their thinner models (Victoria's Secret, 2022). As mentioned on the website, Victoria's Secret has partnered with Amplypher Ventures; a business devoted to closing the gender funding gap by helping women with business opportunities (Wilson, 2022). Though Victoria's Secret is trying to move toward women's empowerment and diversity, they still have further to go in the body positivity movement.

### **Media and Self-Image**

The author found that Dove's overall brand image of promoting body positivity aligned with their campaigns, however there were still some flaws with their campaigns. Bogost (2017) concluded that Dove's ad campaign of different shaped bottles of body wash represented different shapes of women but still emphasized an ideal body shape due to the functionality of the bottles. One of the bottles stood out as the easiest to use reinforcing the "ideal body type"

with an hourglass figure. The bottle campaign made women more aware of their body shape by still having an ideal body shape to be compared to. This example of one of their campaigns displays how they have good intentions of displaying diversity and inclusion of different bodies but there is still improvements that could be made.

Rasool (2018) complimented Aerie for a diversity of ethnicities, disabilities, and illnesses, which are some of the general complaints about body positivity campaigns. The author discovered that Aerie has kept up the brand image of inclusion since the beginning. When there is diverse representation of women in the media, women will be able to identify and connect with the images they are seeing in a more positive light. Aerie's early efforts to represent real women, imperfections and all, has had a positive impact on their target audience because of their efforts of inclusion including women feeling more confident in the clothes they buy regardless of size.

The author found that Barbie does not have any body positivity hashtags or social media posts. They do feature new dolls with different sizes and ethnicities, but there is no content created specifically for the body positive movement. They created a line of inclusive Barbie dolls, yet they do not focus on highlighting that aspect of their line, but rather focus on promoting women empowerment. The focus being on women empowerment rather than the body positivity movement can be perceived as inauthentic due to Mattel's efforts to shift their brand toward body positivity only after almost declaring bankruptcy. Since Barbie dolls are a toy for young children, it is important that the doll and its advertisements contain diversity and body positivity messages to help children develop a more positive body image.

Previously, Victoria's Secret had fashion shows depicting models as "Victoria's Secret Angels" who illustrated the "ideal body type." The annual fashion show gained much criticism

for the unrealistic female body type Victoria's Secret was supporting with the VS Angels (Time, 2019). Along with shifting to a more body positive company, Victoria's Secret also has rising competition in the lingerie industry. To compete with inclusive lingerie brands such as Aerie and Savage X Fenty, Victoria's Secret discontinued the annual fashion show in 2018. Kohan (2020) proposed that Aerie is slowly edging Victoria's Secret out of the market because of their inclusivity and emphasis on the body positivity movement. This competition induced Victoria's Secret to add more diverse models, but the company has not become as inclusive as their competitors such as Aerie and Savage X Fenty.

With research question three (Are the companies doing what they say they're doing?) the author used this research question to investigate companies' advertising campaigns and public statements. The author attempted to gauge the genuineness of the body positivity campaigns by comparing two companies that are known for body positivity with two companies that are not. These investigations were made through observation of corporate social responsibility reports and partnerships with each company. With research question three, the author also investigated how the company annual reports lined up with the advertising campaigns.

### **Annual Reports**

The author analyzed each company's annual reports to identify the company's reflection upon the previous year and goals they hoped to achieve in the coming year. This was used to identify what companies said they would achieve and what each company actually achieved.

Unilever's 2021 annual report discussed helping women feel more confident through educational programs put out by the company. These educational websites and partnerships are meant to educate women on the importance of body confidence, how to raise body confidence, and how to accept their imperfections (Unilever, 2019). This allows women to turn to factual

information on how they can become more confident, making the Unilever educational programs a reliable source.

American Eagle Outfitter's 2020 annual report, the parent company of Aerie, discussed their mission to promote body positivity and to help women feel more empowered to be their authentic selves by consumers embracing the body they have rather than striving for a body they view in advertising. The author felt this statement supports Aerie's values and mission of promoting body positivity and including it in their social media campaigns, products, and advertisements.

Before the inclusive line of Barbie dolls came out, Mattel's 2016 annual report expressed the risk of bankruptcy due to inaccurately anticipating trends and changes in the media, and their failure to market their products effectively (Mattel, 2016). The Mattel 2020 annual report did not contain the mention of body positivity but did include a discussion of equality, diversity, and inclusion (Mattel, 2020a). Mattel's profits have skyrocketed in the past four years since the launch of their more inclusive line of Barbie dolls after trying to correct the risks expressed in the 2016 annual report (Mattel, 2020a). Because Mattel focuses more on inclusion, their new body positive dolls focus more on diversity rather than body positivity. This made the author question whether Mattel is more focused on being more body positive or if they are trying to be more inclusive overall.

The 2020 annual report of Victoria's Secret discussed how their main social and environmental responsibilities were increased sustainability, improving communities through non-profits, and improving strategies to strengthen their representation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (L brands, 2021). This demonstrates Victoria's Secret's top priorities of sustainability and inclusion but does not specifically mention body positivity. Victoria's Secret's most recent

annual report does not discuss body positivity, but does emphasize empowering women (L brands, 2021).

The two companies known for being more body positive, Aerie and Dove, presented body positivity in their annual reports. Both companies discussed wanting women to feel more confident and wanting to provide resources in order for women to feel empowered. The annual reports of the two companies that are historically well-known for promoting an ideal body image, Mattel and Victoria's Secret, did not mention body positivity but rather discussed being inclusive and focused more on hiring people that represent women empowerment. The annual reports for Victoria's Secret and Mattel revealed that their financial profits have increased since implementing these new campaigns expressing inclusivity and empowerment of women.

### **Corporate Social Responsibility and Partnerships**

When companies partner with other organizations in cause-related marketing, it helps promote the brand more effectively by demonstrating positive actions related to social change. Dove partners with The Centre for Appearance Research (CAR) which provides free downloads for tools and handouts on evidence-based research from experts on body image. This can be helpful for women focused on being healthy rather than trying to obtain a certain body type. With CAR, Dove promotes getting women educated on being healthy rather than trying to promote something like body positivity that is not supported by scientific research. This means that they want to help women as efficiently as possible, and by giving them educated resources, they can achieve body positivity in a healthy way. Dove also works with partners such as the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) and The Women's Dermatologic Society (WDS) (Dove, 2021). By partnering with these programs, Dove emphasizes the importance of building young girls' self-confidence and organizations focus on boosting positive

self-esteem from an early age. Dove also provides free downloads for tools and handouts for women to be able to look at their bodies in a healthy way (Dove, 2021).

Aerie spreads awareness of eating disorders through a partnership with the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA). Aerie and NEDA have an effective brand-cause fit to help with the prevention and cure of eating disorders. Aerie's website sells t-shirts where the proceeds go to the NEDA program, while also bringing awareness to eating disorders. The Aerie and NEDA program's website even provides links on getting help if someone is struggling with an eating disorder (Aerie, 2021).

Both companies are also already known for the core value of encouraging women to love the bodies they were born with. Although their mission is to "empower all women to love their real selves, Aerie's 2019 corporate social responsibility report was primarily focused on sustainability. This contradiction depicts that Aerie is trying to create positive change yet has not aligned all their statements.

Mattel launched the Barbie Dream Gap project in 2018 to make young girls feel equal in the presence of boys; however, this project has not commented on body positivity. Mattel has partnered with UCLA to develop the Barbie Dream Gap Curriculum for children ages 5-7. Mattel also donated more than \$80 million to UCLA in order to build a nice children's hospital (Dennis, 2017). This mindset is positive, yet the importance of being more body positive after almost suffering from great financial loss, led them to this project and partnership.

Victoria's Secret hired spokeswomen to help represent them in their rebranding process. They still have a lot of the original runway models from before their rebranding efforts, but are slowly adding activists, athletes, and larger-sized models into their campaigns to embody women

empowerment. Even though Victoria's Secret is trying to become more inclusive, they do not necessarily support the body positivity movement.

### **Conclusion**

The author examined four companies and their body positivity efforts by assessing annual reports, mission statements, company campaigns, partnerships, and media types. The author analyzed the quality and effectiveness of each company's marketing campaigns related to the company's values and body positivity.

The author found that Mattel and Victoria's Secret promote women empowerment rather than body positivity. Dove and Aerie did a good job of aligning their values with their promotion of body positivity; however, diversity and inclusion in their advertisements had room for improvement. Every company had problems with diversity and inclusion with lots of room to grow as far as representation of different ages, sizes, ethnicities, and disabilities.

Overall, Aerie was the only company that historically promoted body positivity and has continued to use models of all sizes, ethnicities, injuries, and disabilities. Aerie's mission statement, media content, and partnerships all align to consistently represent the values and goals of Aerie as a company.

Limitations of the present study include the limited number of companies evaluated in this study. Another limitation to the study was observing the last six years, instead of exploring body positivity efforts further into the past. Another limitation is the qualitative nature of the study that lacks quantitative data for comparison between different companies and forms of media.

Future studies could examine body image in the media over the past few decades and assess how it has changed. A quantitative analysis could be conducted on body positivity by

looking at the data gathered from different types of media. Further studies could also explore what rival companies of Dove, Aerie, Barbie and Victoria's Secret are doing to promote the body positivity movement.



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