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Fat is the new black: How the fashion industry profits from obesity in the United States

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Curvy. Plus-size. Full-figure. Big and Beautiful. Real. These are all fashion-industry euphemisms for women whose bodies might be described in medical circles as overweight or obese. As obesity rates in the United States have climbed in the past few decades, fashion and beauty companies have capitalized on an emerging market segment of women with growing waistlines. Targeted marketing, new product launches and brands designed for women in the plus-size category, meaning anything larger than a size 12, have increased dramatically in the past decade. Fashion bloggers and women's magazines have largely applauded the inclusive nature of advertising featuring "healthy" and "natural" women, celebrating the shift in an industry that was at one time rampant with models afflicted with bulimia and anorexia; but do "big girl" advertising campaigns normalize being oversized? Here, I will use class discussions and case studies to examine the roots of fashion and beauty advertising targeted at overweight women, and whether those campaigns undermine the efforts to reduce obesity in the United States.

Where did curvy fashion campaigns originate? None of the terms listed at the beginning of this paper appear in a 1972 article that includes definitions for "pants-suit," "flare-bottom," "skimpy" and "socialite" among terminology in the fashion world. The only term that comes close is "portly," defined as garments sized to fit stout men. If portliness was considered a male trait, then it should serve as no surprise that, at the height of the Feminist Movement, women's fashion distanced itself from men's fashion; after all, "part of the function of fashion is to produce bodies that are easily distinguishable by sex" (Connell 2012). The first plus-size female supermodel did not emerge in the United States until the 1990s, when she was twice named to People magazine's annual 50 Most Beautiful People list. But, straight-size models (in contrast to curvy-size ones) dominated mainstream fashion images well into the 2000s, when "In the United States, this 'cult of thinness' is increasingly legitimized as not just an aesthetic ideal but also a health mandate as fear of a so-called obesity epidemic have come to predominate national discourses of health and wellness (Connell 2012)."

But, by 2012, the obesity epidemic was anything but "so-called": Across recent decades, clinical signs of obesity, Type 2 diabetes and metabolic syndrome have started to appear in childhood, have become more severe from generation to generation and have come to affect increasing numbers of pregnant women across time. Despite the complex web of factors that contribute to obesity—including nutrition and physical environment—national campaigns to combat rising obesity in the United States often manifest as calls for individual or parental responsibility.

This approach puts the burden of maintaining good health on citizens who are bombarded with advertising to consume high-fat, low-nutrition convenience food in lifestyles that are overwhelmingly sedentary. As if government-sponsored fat-shaming weren't enough, the rise of social media in the past decade has increased users' exposure and vulnerability to a critical global audience, where online bullying is ubiquitous; as discussed in lecture, in the age of social media and digital self-presentation, bodies have become social capital. A culture hostile towards overweight people—women specifically—partly launched grassroots online communities of support groups for women who identified as plus-size. The concepts of body positivity, size inclusivity and body advocacy sprang up in response to bodyshaming. Cue the marketing geniuses who saw the business opportunity in catering to a consumer segment that was growing both figuratively and physically.

Real Women, Real Money

Unlike in many European countries, clothing sizes in the U.S. are not standardized; a size 6 at one store can have the same fit of a size 10 at the next. Prior to the 2000s, sizes 0-12 were generally considered "standard," while size 14 and above was considered plus-size. These fashions were either available in extremely limited quantities or only at select few specialty stores (Gruys 2012). In 2004 and 2005, Dove soap launched their Campaign for Real Beauty, a multi-faceted effort that included television ads featuring fuller women flaunting their natural, un-retouched bodies in their underwear. The brand also released a viral video called "Evolution" in which one average-looking woman is transformed into a stunning billboard model through heavy makeup and Photoshop re-touches: "The movement to expose marketers' use of trickery to convince us that we're failing if we don't have flawless skin and breathtaking bodies was here to stay". A separate video called "Daughters" featured young girls discussing their issues with body-shaming, bulimia and self-loathing—Dove had unequivocally established itself as a brand with a conscience. Some credit the brand with leading the charge among fashion and

beauty companies to promote a more inclusive vision of beauty in sizes small and large. And consumers responded. Brands aren't just embracing body diversity because it's the right thing to do. Retailers like Aerie, whose groundbreaking #AerieReal campaign boosted parent company American Eagle Outfitters' growth by 4 percent last year, and Lane Bryant, whose similarly viral (and very provocative) #ImNoAngel and #PlusIsEqual campaigns were credited with same-store sales increases of 6 percent, are proving that promoting new beauty standards can be lucrative. (Bazilian). Not only were more mainstream clothing brands expanding their merchandise to accommodate plus-size women, but the models and representations themselves were changing. In the past three years: "Forever21 scaled back on retouching; Torrid now relies on good lighting versus Photoshop; and most notably, Target launched an unretouched swim campaign this year that celebrated stretch marks and cellulite in all their glory. The response to the latter was overwhelmingly positive—and it became a viral hit" (Cheng 2017).



#PlusIs Equal; #ImNoAngel; #AerieReal;

The fashion and beauty industries' embrace of plus-size women emerged at an economically convenient moment in history. "The bottom line is that 50 percent of American women are a size 14 or above, so that means magazines [that aren't including plus-size fashion are willfully ignoring 50 percent of their readership,' said Redbook editor in chief Meredith Rollins" (Bazilian 2018). In the 2000s, not only have American consumers more loudly demanded models who more closely reflect who they see or aspire to see in the mirror, but they have embraced new plus-size clothing brands like *Torrid* (2001) and *Fashion to Figure* (2002) and mainstream brands that have added plus-size departments. In the past decade: "This shift has also prompted an onslaught of brands to either launch plus lines or cast curvy "in-between" women to model extended sizes. (Shout-out to Gap, Old Navy, Banana Republic, Good American, Loft, and, amazingly, active-wear lines like *Athleta*, *Outdoor Voices*, and *Nike*.) (Cheng)" Who else is benefitting from this shift, besides the companies selling a product? Plus-size models. "To illustrate this substantial spike since 2017: A single plus model who would normally land one gig a year booked more than eight jobs within the last four months" (Cheng 2017). Diversity may generally refer to inclusion of people of different skin tones, racial backgrounds, ablebodiedness, height, gender identity, sexual orientation. But, as these are generally differences from birth that can't be altered, whether or not weight—which is fluid—should be considered as a diversity category is questionable. Plus, the increase in print and digital images of big women (who may or may not be healthy) leading seemingly beautiful, fashionable lives begs the question: Should fashion and beauty companies bear a larger responsibility for potentially promoting obesity among young girls in the same way tobacco companies were taken to task in the 1990s for promoting smoking as cool to teenagers?

The Belittling Side of Big

Categorically encouraging big-body acceptance is fraught with risk. Not only does it gloss over the increased health risks associated with excess body weight, such as chronic diseases like cancer, stroke and diabetes, but also, it distracts from the opportunity to critically examine potential root causes for obesity, such as rising income inequality. But, the continued stigma around heavier people as weak and impulsive also is problematic and can often exacerbate the problem. Outside of the United States, in countries like South Korea, an environment hostile to women who are not slim pervades: "Also a US size 10, Baek said she had been mocked by her own mother, who once refused to take the same bus with her because of the shame of being called 'mom' in public by a chubby daughter" (Agence France-Presse 2016). Size discrimination exists on more than just an individual level, but systematic shaming can have dire personal consequences. In the UK, out of 422 models in the 460 Spring 2016 campaigns, only six plus-sized women made an appearance, which equates to a minuscule 1.4%. Although models over a size 12 only make up 1.4% of advertising campaigns, size 16 is considered the average dress size in the UK. Plus-size model Bishamber Das, who has an Indian and Malaysian background and has modeled around the world shared that: "I belong to a culture where they sing songs based on female body shapes and how you have to be thin and fair skinned to be deemed beautiful.' The importance of being lean was so far ingrained into her that Bishamber felt she wasn't worthy of love and even harbored suicidal thoughts" (Bakar 2018). Clearly, a balance between encouraging body-acceptance while remaining aware of the risks of carrying too much body fat must be delicately struck as obesity rates rise around the globe.

Fashion as Activism

Despite their complicated roles in influencing what is defined as beautiful, the fashion and beauty industries are capable of being more than just a source of oppression: "it also has the potential to disrupt racist hierarchies of beauty, authority, and knowledge production. In light of such analyses, this paper defines fashion not only as a situated bodily practice, but also as one that produces unique pleasures—and pains—with respect to gender, race, class, and sexual identities" (Connell 2012). If the fashion and beauty industries are capable of embracing and celebrating big bodies, perhaps they can also market models of healthy eating and active lifestyles, lobby for government policies that reduce obesogenic environments and serve as a catalyst of change to curb the obesity epidemic—instead of feed into it.

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