

Model Diversity in Fashion Advertising:  
The Influence of Self-Model Congruity on Body Appreciation

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## **Dedication**

To every woman who just wants to feel beautiful,  
Always remember that you don't need society's validation to be fabulous!  
Be FIERCE, Be FUN, & Be YOU!  
Demand to be treated like the Queen you are,  
& Never, ever let your crown fall!  
Cheers to redefining beautiful!

## **Abstract**

A majority of the women in the U.S. do not match the conventional standard of beauty. Consequently, they feel underrepresented in fashion advertisements and mass media imagery (“#Plus is Equal”, 2015). Using an advocacy/transformational philosophical assumption, the purpose of this exploratory qualitative study is to understand the impact of the lack of model diversity in fashion advertisements and media images on viewers’ self-perceptions. Ultimately, this study should aid in the process of revolutionizing society’s current definition of beauty by highlighting the importance and positive outcomes of featuring diverse models in advertisements and mass media imagery.

This research introduces a new approach by examining the applicability of minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) to understand the influence of media images on female consumers. The snowball, convenience sample included fifteen women from Chicago, IL, San Antonio, TX, and Minneapolis - Saint Paul, MN; with five women from each geographical location. This sample of Black, Latina, and White women represent ages from 18 - 71. This study was designed using the stimulus-organism-response framework (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974) and supported by self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985) and minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003). The negative effects of the lack of model diversity and the areas in which the interviewees would like to see increased diversity emerged during data analysis.

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## **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

The population that embodies our society is changing daily, consequently societal norms are shifting. Thanks to body positivity activists, inclusive beauty bloggers, and the freedom of expression afforded on social networking sites (SNS), it is easier to understand the type of communication that is most relevant to female consumers of all ages. Models who are frequently featured in advertisements become society's standard of beauty. Several companies are using their influence to create a more inclusive definition of beauty. Companies like Target, Dove, and Lane Bryant are leading the fashion and beauty industry toward accepting these popularly demanded changes in model representation.

The Dove 'Campaign for Real Beauty' was launched in 2004 and featured television, print, and billboard advertisements (figure 2) that the company claimed would 'inspire women and society to think differently about what is defined as beautiful' (Campaign for Real Beauty, 2006). This campaign featured women of various sizes, ethnicities, and ages.

Lane Bryant produced two campaigns in 2015 promoting plus size women appreciation and body positivity. Their first campaign "I'm No Angel" featured six diverse plus-size models in Lane Bryant lingerie in print advertisements, commercials, and on billboards in Time Square (Figure 3). This campaign targeted Victoria's Secret's 'Angels' for their lack of model diversity in body size and body shape. This campaign was instantly trending in the media.

Lane Bryant's second campaign was "Plus is Equal" (figure 4) during which they revealed that 67% of women in the U.S. wear sizes 14 - 34. Unfortunately, a majority of these women feel ignored by the retail industry. Furthermore, over 90% of plus size women feel that they are underrepresented in the media.

On March 8, 2017, an ABC original series, *Blackish*, starring Anthony Anderson, Tracee Ellis Ross, and Yara Shahidi, aired an episode exposing the lack of diversity in dolls and the consequences of such. In this episode, a Black little girl was given a White doll for her birthday from her White neighbor. The mother went to exchange the doll, and was appalled to find that the only Black dolls that were sold in the store were an escaped slave or a mother of 11 who lived in the projects. There seems to be a long and slow learning curve for how to appeal to women of color.

The average size of American women is size fourteen. Furthermore, in the real world plus sizes begin at a size sixteen. However, in the fashion industry, plus-size models start at a size eight (Beck, 2014). This disconnect is abundantly obvious because a size eight can shop in the same place that a size two can, while a size fourteen cannot. Therefore, a size eight is not a true plus size.

According to the Association of Model Agents (AMA), which holds a significant position in the modeling industry, the minimum requirement for the ideal model's measurements should be 34"-24"-34", with a height between 5'8" and 5'11", and weighing 115-130 lbs. ("Do I have", n.d). According to standard sizing charts, these measurements align with a size two or x-small (Price, n.d). The average American woman wears a size fourteen, and yet the dominant sizes in the industry are zero through

four (Beck, 2014). Therefore, the majority of advertisements cycled through mass media showcase models who wear size four or smaller. These models are incongruent to the majority of viewers who are expected to purchase the clothes and comply with beauty trends. If “models are supposed to embody ideal beauty”, this discrepancy could act as a stressor (Schwiegershausen, 2014, p.1). There is a plethora of research articles that highlight the vast array of negative effects of the media’s portrayal of beauty as idealized thinness, including eating disorders, low self-esteem, and extreme body modifications (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Heinberg & Thompson, 1992; Jacobi & Cash, 1994). However, there is limited research addressing outcomes related to the use of diverse models in fashion advertising. This research study is designed to explore the impact of the lack of model diversity in fashion advertisements on consumers’ self-perceptions.

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study is to understand the impact of the lack of model diversity in fashion advertisements and media images on consumer self-perceptions and to advocate for diverse models in fashion advertisements and media imagery. Diverse models included an array of body sizes, body shapes, ethnicities, ages, hair textures, hair colors, height, skin tones, and eye colors, along with models with learning and physical disabilities. Fashion advertising includes ads and imagery on social media and retailers’ websites, direct mailers with promotions and coupons, fliers, emails, commercials, billboards, and all other direct marketing efforts that consumers are exposed to on a daily basis. For this study, fashion advertising does not include magazines (e.g. VOGUE) as these sources already show increased diversity and most consumers experience limited exposure to these sources. This study focuses on the effects

of “everyday” fashion ads that consumers are exposed to several times throughout their day. I will investigate the following research question: How does the use of diverse models in fashion advertisements affect consumers? Findings from this study will add to the literature by documenting the impact of model diversity on diverse consumers.

In addition, this research introduces a new application of Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003) to understand the influence of current media images on female consumers. Minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) states that there are chronically high levels of stress faced by members of stigmatized minority groups. This stress is typically caused by many factors including poor social support. Stressors are typically related to social and cultural structures. Minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) can be applied to this study because media exposure to unattainable physical perfection is detrimental to women (Cash and Henry, 1995). There is a direct correlation between the frequency of media exposure and the likelihood of developing eating disorder symptoms (Stice and Shaw, 1994). Not only do current industry practices pose physical health threats, they also threaten viewers’ mental health. Exposure to female models who are thin and air-brushed is associated with depression and lower self-esteem in female viewers (Gerber, 2005). The industry also denies social support for plus-size models. Some plus size models can only get jobs for weight-loss ads as the before image. This practice can cultivate body shaming and negative self-perceptions (Schwiegershausen, 2014).

## **Significance of Proposed Research**

Idealized thinness and the lack of model diversity should be addressed due to the plethora of negative effects it has on viewers' self-perceptions (Gerber, 2005; Cash and Henry, 1995; Ellington, 2014; Hartocollis, 2013; Slater et al., 2012). Self-perceptions include body appreciation, body image, self-esteem, and body satisfaction. Increased model diversity has the potential to increase these self-perceptions. With the increase in eating disorders and cosmetic surgeries, it is important to make sure viewers feel good about their natural beauty.

The findings from this study can have a larger impact on the retail market. With increasing demand for self-model body congruity, catering to the plus size market will also increase diversity in the industry by increasing opportunities for plus size models who have been historically undervalued and unappreciated. Based on findings from my pilot study, consumers are willing to become loyal customers to stores that create advertisements with models who look like them, thus increasing brand loyalty. Brand loyalty makes consumers less price sensitive. It also lowers marketing costs, because retailers do not have to constantly try to attract a new customer base. Loyal customers are willing to disclose information regarding purchase intentions and buying behavior which allows retailers to perform a product selection analysis, market-basket analysis, enabling them to better their product offerings and product placement. Appealing to plus-size consumers will enable brands to reach new markets which will, in turn, increase market share. Thus, increased model diversity is beneficial for both consumers' self-perceptions and retailer profitability.

<b>Definition of key constructs</b>	
<b>Key Construct</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Self-Congruity</b>	The match between consumers' self-concept and the user image of a given product, brand, store, etc. (Kressman, Sirgy, Herrmann, Huber, Huber, & Lee, 2006)
<b>Self-Model Body Congruity</b>	Conceptualized as the match between the viewer's physical traits and the traits of the model.
<b>Body Appreciation</b>	A positive orientation about one's body (Swami and Abbasnejad, 2010). This is one of many self-perceptions.
<b>Minority Stress</b>	Chronically high levels of stress faced by members of stigmatized minority groups caused by many factors including poor social support (Meyer, 2003)
<b>Fashion Advertisements</b>	For the purpose of this study, fashion advertisements include weekly sales ads, commercials, imagery on direct mail, ads on social media and the retailer's website, emails, and billboards. This does not include fashion magazines (i.e. Vogue)
<b>Model Diversity</b>	A variety of body sizes, body shapes, ethnicities, ages, hair textures, hair colors, heights, skin tones, and eye colors.
<b>Idealized Thinness</b>	The idea that in order to be considered beautiful, one must be a size 4 or below, regardless if it promotes unhealthy habits such as eating disorders.
<b>Conventional Model/ Ideal Model</b>	The conventional model, commonly referred to as the ideal model, is White, very tall – 5' 8" or above, very thin – size 2 or below, long neck, minimal bust and curves, and historically blonde hair and blue eyes.
<b>Ideal Beauty/Western Beauty</b>	Very thin, tall, White, blue/green eyes, blonde hair, flawless skin

**Table 1. Definition of Key Constructs**

## **Role of the Researcher**

As a qualitative researcher, it is my responsibility to accurately and impartially interpret the participants' feelings towards and experiences with fashion advertisements and mass media. My world view aligns with the advocacy philosophical assumption and transformative paradigm (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). Researchers aligning with the transformative paradigm often address issues of social inequity and social injustice. I am intentionally focusing on providing an honest presentation of what is expressed by the participants with regards to mass media imagery, both in its current state and with the proposed increased diversity. Using an advocacy philosophical assumption, the purpose of this qualitative study is to aid in the process of revolutionizing what society sees as beautiful and to highlight the importance and positive outcomes of featuring the average woman.

Like all researchers, I have biases. I am a curvy Black woman who is part of the depicted minority group in mass media. The images we are shown usually fall into certain stereotypes such as being angry, attitude-filled, having nappy-hair, or we are objectified due to our curvaceous bodies. I sympathize with demographics that the media portrays as minorities (whether they are truly minorities or not) which unfortunately includes everyone who does not fit into the category of a skinny/muscular, white, young adult. People of different ages, sizes, and races are practically shunned by advertisers. The purpose of this paper is not skinny-shaming or to build an anti-white platform. The purpose is to advocate for inclusion, appreciation, and model diversity. I have bracketed

my biases in this study by first acknowledging them and writing them down. I revisited these written biases during each phase of this study to ensure that they did not interfere with the development of my interview questions and the data analysis.

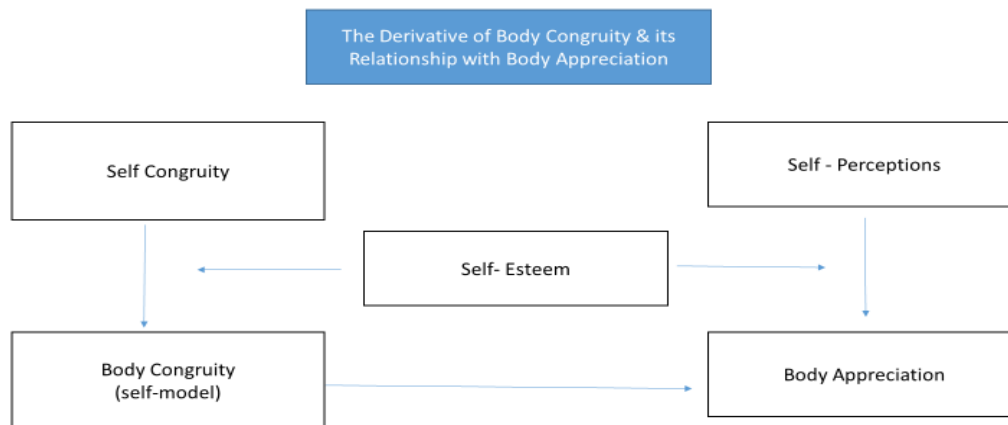
## **Chapter 2 - Review of Related Literature**

### **Theoretical Framework**

Fashion and beauty trends frequently change, but the types of models who showcase these trends rarely change. Social networking sites have given consumers a voice to say exactly who they want to see in mass media imagery. Some retailers, like Target, Lane Bryant, and Dove, are listening and shifting the societal norms for the types of models seen in advertisements. This study was designed using the stimulus-organism-response framework (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974) and supported by self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985) and minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003). In this study, I argue that seeing a model who looks like you in advertisements will increase your body appreciation. Fashion advertisements are a significant part of media imagery. Ads are seen by viewers as a direct reflection of the store's product offerings and of their target market. The models in media images create our society's standard of beauty (Schwiegershausen, 2014). Therefore, I argue that seeing models who looks like you being shown in a body positive manner in the media will influence your perception of beauty, thus increasing your positive self-perceptions.



One way to understand this phenomenon is through the self-congruity theory, originated in 1985 by M. Joseph Sirgy. Self-congruity is the match between consumers' self-concept and the user image of a given product, brand, store, etc. (Kressman et al., 2006). This theory was previously used to predict purchase motivation, brand preference, and brand loyalty, mainly in the context of personality attributes. I am applying this theory in the context of self-model body congruity between the viewer and the models in the advertisements. Derived from self-congruity, body congruity is conceptualized as the match between the viewer's physical traits and the traits of the model. I am directly investigating how self-model body congruity will affect the viewer's self-perceptions. Physical self-perceptions can include body appreciation, body image, and body satisfaction. Specifically, I am focusing on viewers' body appreciation. Body appreciation is heavily influenced by self-esteem. In its original form, self-congruity is directed by self-concept motives such as the need for self-consistency and self-esteem (Kressman et al., 2006). Since body appreciation is derived from self-congruity which is driven by self-esteem, it is plausible to predict that body-congruity with models in advertisements will lead to body appreciation (figure 1).



**Figure 1. The Derivative of Body Congruity & its Relationship with Body Appreciation**

## **2.1 The Positive Influence of Self-Model Body Congruity on Body Appreciation**

Critics may argue that companies do not use models with a variety of body shapes and sizes because it would not be as appealing as featuring thin models and would consequently lower sales. However, Halliwell and Dittmar (2004) found that advertisements containing average-size women were just as effective as those containing thin women when effectiveness was measured in terms of attitude towards the advertisement, attitude towards the brand, and purchase intentions. While appealing to large markets is compelling for retailers, industry leaders should also focus on the probable positive effects of model diversity on consumers' body appreciation. Several industry leaders are proving that diversifying their marketing strategies is a necessary shift.

In 2004, Dove's *Campaign for Real Beauty* featured television commercials, printed advertisements, and billboard ads (figure 2) that the company claimed would 'inspire women and society to think differently about what is defined as beautiful' (Campaign for Real Beauty, 2006). This campaign featured women of different sizes, ethnicities, and ages. In the commercial, each of these women said "I am beautiful because..." and they filled in the sentence with one of their personal attributes.



**Figure 2. Dove's *Real Beauty* Campaign**

Bissell and Rask (2010) set out to test the effectiveness of this campaign by specifically testing the effect of exposure to an ideal model, a Dove model, and a plus size model on perceptions of attractiveness and thinness. Their sample consisted of 138 women between the ages of 19 and 51 from three geographic regions in the United States. The racial profile of the sample is as follows: 9% African American, 85% White, 4% Asian, and 2% multiracial. Participants were asked to answer questions regarding media

use and societal views of thinness. Participants were shown a color photo of a model who was either categorized as idealized thinness, athletic, or plus-size. Respondents were instructed to fill out a questionnaire including questions involving similarities to the model and how accurately the image reflects the average woman. The Dove model (average size) received the highest similarity score. The Dove model and the plus size model were ranked the highest for reflecting real women and most participants ranked these two sizes as what women should see as the ideal size.

Dove also produced a video in which they showed a picture of a model from an advertisement that had been heavily edited using Photoshop, and they showed the process of what she looked like after taking away each effect. The goal of this video was to encourage women and teenagers to embrace and celebrate their bodies and their natural features by proving that even the model cannot look like the pictures that are showcased in advertisements.

Lane Bryant produced two campaigns in 2015 in an effort to promote plus size women appreciation and body positivity. Their first campaign, *I'm No Angel*, featured six diverse models in Lane Bryant lingerie in print advertisements, commercials, and on billboards in Time Square (Figure 3).



**Figure 3. Lane Bryant's *#I'm No Angel***

This campaign was instantly trending in the media. It was reposted by Fox, BuzzFeed, CNN, Today, Time, USA Today, Glamour, CBS, Refinery29, and Bloomberg Business. The *I'm No Angel* campaign was publicly endorsed by Zooey Deschanel and Sofia Vergara. *I'm No Angel* had 1.8 billion media impressions across TV, digital, and social media platforms in the first 48 hours. There were 7,000 tweets on the first day alone (Adams, 2015). This campaign simultaneously serves as supporting literature and as evidence of positive managerial implications for companies who are considering implementing advertising strategies using diverse models.

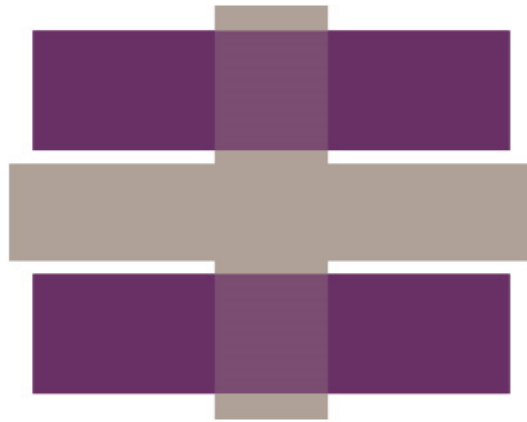
Lane Bryant's second campaign was *Plus is Equal* (figure 4) during which they revealed that 67% of women in the U.S. wear sizes 14-34. Unfortunately, 65% of these women feel that the retail industry ignores their needs. Furthermore, 92% of plus-size women feel that they are not equally represented in the media. This campaign consisted of print advertisements, commercials, and Billboards in Time Square. Women were encouraged to create their own virtual billboard to share on social media and on Lane

Bryant’s website. The “Plus is Equal” manifesto clearly demonstrates the minority stress that this group has been experiencing for decades:

“When I look around, what I see doesn’t represent me. I deserve more. I’m ready to share the spotlight. It’s time to see a change. To see a body like mine on a billboard and in magazines. I’m sexy, spirited, and stylish with nothing to hide. Worthy of being seen just as I am. It’s time to represent. Because my voice is one of many and I want to live in a world where we are all seen and celebrated”  
 (“#Plus is Equal”, 2015)



**Figure 4. One of Many *Plus is Equal* Ads**



**Figure 5. Lane Bryant's *Plus is Equal* Logo**

## **2.2 Media's Negative Effects on Self-Perceptions**

True to its definition as the main means of mass communication, media's reach spans far and wide. Media consists of the articles we read in printed newspapers, imagery in magazines, content on websites, the interpersonal relationships and roles in TV shows and movies, content on social media, ads on billboards and buses, and social networking sites. Media has created stereotypes, gender roles, set the standard for acceptable romantic relationships, influenced fashion trends, and certainly created the standard for beauty. "Media communicates and promotes beauty ideals for all women" (Ellington, 2014, p.24). Messages, both obvious and subliminal, can affect every aspect of the viewer's life.

Advocates for current beauty standards would argue that there is nothing wrong with hiring primarily thin models. However, research shows that media exposure to

unattainable physical perfection is detrimental to women (Cash & Henry, 1995). According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), consumers naturally compare themselves to others to self-evaluate. Downward comparison can lead to body appreciation and high self-esteem or vice versa with upward comparison. Consumers experience an increase in body dissatisfaction during upward comparisons when they are consistently exposed to unattainable idealized images (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Posavac H.D., Posavac S.S., & Posavac E.J., 1998).

Minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) states that there are chronically high levels of stress faced by members of stigmatized minority groups. This stress is typically caused by many factors including poor social support. The most well-known causes are interpersonal discrimination and prejudice. Stressors are typically related to social and cultural structures. A sense of belonging and community are important aspects of quality of life (Goswami, Köbler, Leimeister, & Kremar, 2010). This theory applies to this study because average size and plus size women, ethnic minorities, older consumers, height challenged individuals, and people with disabilities are portrayed as the minority based on the number of images we see of them in the media. Models who belong to these categories and ads catering to these target markets are not as accepted or celebrated as those featuring ideal beauty. This is reinforced by the small number of ads including diverse models that are seen during primetime.

Mass media is “saturated with depictions of thin women” (Holmstrom, 2004, p. 210). Despite the fact that society recognizes the health risks associated with ultra-thin images of feminine beauty, teen websites persistently host advertisements that continue to



promote western thin beauty ideals (Hartocollis, 2013; Slater et al., 2012). Consequently, viewers develop eating disorders and participate in extreme body modifications when they experience self-model body incongruity because the media-portrayed idealized thinness is related to eating pathology (Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw & Stein, 1994). Stice and Shaw (1994) found a positive direct correlation between the frequency of media exposure and the likelihood of developing eating disorder symptoms. Exposure to female models who are thin and air-brushed is associated with depression and lower self-esteem in female viewers (Gerber, 2005). One product of low self-esteem is negative body image. One has negative body image if they feel self-conscious, ashamed, and anxious about their body. One also experiences negative body image when they are convinced that only other people are attractive and that their body shape or size is a sign of personal failure. “People with negative body image have a greater likelihood of developing an eating disorder and are more likely to suffer from feelings of depression, isolation, low self-esteem, and obsessions with weight loss” (What is Body Image?, n.d., p.1).

As an assistant professor of sociology at Temple University, Amana Czerniawski decided to become a plus-size model to gain a better perspective while writing her dissertation on the position of plus size models and the impact they can have on beauty standards. She was a model for two and a half years and interviewed 35 plus size models. She found that most models started off being ashamed of their bodies and trying to cover up (Schwiegershausen, 2014). Once, they began modeling, many of the models gained positive self-images and became spokes-models for size acceptance (Schwiegershausen, 2014). While conventional models deem success as walking in couture runways and

becoming a Victoria's Secret Angel, Czerniawski found that plus size models define success as merely getting jobs due to sheer lack of opportunity (Schwiegershausen, 2014). Some plus size models can only get jobs for weight-loss ads as the before image. This setting can cultivate body shaming and re-activate negative self-perceptions (Schwiegershausen, 2014). Due to limited opportunities, most models cannot live comfortably on their modeling income alone. The modeling industry does not adequately support plus size models, thus fostering a sense of minority stress. This stress is triggered by the lack of opportunity, pressures to unrealistically alter their body size and shape, and emotionally harmful job opportunities.

Despite the fact that plus-size women represent a majority of the female population in the United States (“#Plus is Equal”, 2015), they are depicted as the minority in the media through underrepresentation. Most advertisements feature women who are a size 4 or below (“Do I have”, n.d), leaving 67% of plus size women feeling ignored by the media and 92% of plus size women feeling underrepresented (“#Plus is Equal”, 2015). Women perceive the media as a primary source of pressure to be thin. Women reported more body image disturbances when exposed to conventionally thin models than when they are exposed to plus size models (Irving, 1994). According to Stice and Whitenton (2002), continual exposure to the thin ideal often leads women to adopt the presented ideal as an attainable goal, however, for most women an ultra-thin body is unattainable, and consequently promotes body image dissatisfaction.

When depicting racial minority groups, the media feeds into negative stereotypes creating environments with poor social support. African American women wearing natural hair are a “minority within a minority” (Ellington, 2014, p.24). Media sources have tried to claim that African American natural hair is somehow unprofessional. At one point, a business placed restrictions on hairstyles specifically “prohibit[ing] employees in particular jobs from wearing Black hairstyles” (Russell et al.,1992, p. 132). Industry-leading publications have reported several instances in which African American people wearing natural hair have suffered/endured discrimination because of their hairstyle choice (Evans, 2001; Simkins, 1990). Ashe (1995) found that African American males have unconsciously become subject to preferring the Western standard of beauty. Consequently, “Black women continue to fear adorning their natural hair, especially in the workplace because of the spectacle an authentically Black aesthetic will create, and the potential negative impact on one’s economic mobility” (Thompson, 2009, p. 852). While their White peers can simply wash their hair in the morning and come into the office with wet hair, Black women feel obligated to manipulate their hair to avoid negative consequences. This is a prime example of minority stress experienced by Black women due to discrimination and poor social and cultural structures.

Ellington investigated if being a member of a natural hair community would increase self-esteem and positive self-perceptions. “Media communicates and promotes beauty (ideals) for all women which include guidelines for what is acceptable and unacceptable hairstyle; however, promoted ideals for African-American (AA) women not only compromise thoughts of physical beauty and psychological beauty but also cultural

beauty and acceptance” (Ellington, 2014, p.21). Most mainstream media targeting the African American community and depicting African American women feature African American women wearing long straight hair instead of their natural hair textures (Thompson, 2009). As a result, African American natural hair is not fully accepted within either mainstream society or African American sub-cultures. Thus, African American women lack knowledge of how to properly care for their natural hair. Non-acceptance of their natural hair due to societal conformity, “communicates to the rest of the world that they are not fully accepting of their ethnicity, culture, and overall identity” (Ellington, 2014, p. 21). The non-acceptance and lack of support of natural hair has resulted in many African American women seeking social support via social networking sites (Perry, 2011). Ellington (2015) conducted three semi-structured focus groups with a total sample of seventeen college-aged African American women wearing natural hair. Favorite sites included Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Tumblr. Each site was considered encouraging and was a great source of information providing product information, styling inspiration, and tutorials. YouTube was most widely used and was identified as a major support system.

Many participants expressed fear of going natural, due to being ashamed, lack of acceptance among family members, and fear of being considered less feminine and unattractive to the opposite sex. Most participants reported an increase in their self-esteem about their natural hair after engaging in the natural hair community on SNS. For minority groups, the road to self-acceptance is harder than the majority. “The African American community’s lack of acceptance of natural hair is rooted in history and the

societal meaning of lesser status that comes with having kinky natural hair. Participants stated they had to be ‘bold’ and ‘not care what others thought’ in order to go natural. They discussed having to educate themselves about the history of natural hair to overcome the stigma that it represented” (Ellington, 2014, p.26). SNS assisted in the acceptance process due to positive dialogue about natural hair textures. This supports my claim that media imagery sets beauty standards. Therefore, I argue that when one experiences body congruity with the model in advertisements, she will experience body appreciation because someone who looks like her is being featured in a body positive manner in mass media.

### **Research Question**

1. How does the use of diverse models in fashion advertisements affect consumers?

### **Conceptual Model**



**Figure 6. Conceptual Model**

## **Chapter 3 - Method**

This qualitative study was designed using the stimulus-organism-response framework (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974) and supported by self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985) and minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003). It was executed by conducting fifteen one-on-one interviews in Chicago, IL, San Antonio, TX, and Minneapolis - Saint Paul, MN during January through February, 2017.

### **Pilot Study**

In March 2016, I conducted a pilot study to investigate if all body sizes are marketable and how diverse models would impact the viewer's body appreciation and store loyalty. This qualitative study was supported by self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985) and minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003). It was executed by conducting three one-on-one interviews. This pilot study helped me further develop the research question for the main study.

The convenience sample included three plus-size Black women with natural hair ages 24-48 from Chicago who were recruited via email. These women represented clothing sizes 10-18. Participants were asked to describe their feelings towards the current models in the industry and beauty standards. They were also asked to discuss the ways they wanted to see increased diversity and how those changes would affect their purchase intentions. Lastly, I investigated whether it was important to consumers to see models that looked like them.

Four themes emerged during data analysis. The first theme was that there is a perceived lack of diversity for models in fashion advertisements. I was surprised to discover that consumers are affected by the size of the mannequins used for display.

The second theme was that idealized thinness and lack of diversity may lead to low self-esteem, negative body image, and loss of patronage. Two of my interviewees said that they will not shop at a store or purchase anything from a store that does not have advertisements that include models who look like them. They feel as if the store doesn't cater to them, automatically assuming from the advertisement that the merchandise is not a good fit.

Furthermore, one participant discussed how this media programming has affected Black women's romantic relationships. During the rarity that Black women are in the media during primetime, they usually have a small waist, wide hips, and a big butt. The interviewee discussed how men have fallen for this and believe that all women should fit this idealized standard of beauty because that is how society tells us Black women should look.

The third theme that surfaced was that women would become loyal customers to stores that used fashion advertisements with models who looked like them or who were more diverse in general. Each interviewee said that they would definitely support a store that included models who looked like them. Their reasoning was that if a store has models who look like them in their advertisements, then they know that the clothes will fit them properly. They also expressed that they would patronize the store because model diversity aligns with their values and they would be happy to support inclusion.

The last theme revolved around the idea that increased model diversity leads to positive body image and increased self-esteem. One participant said “It’s not just one standard of beauty. There are different standards of beauty. Therefore, seeing different people embrace their beauty, would help them boost their confidence and self-esteem. It would help them think positively about their body image, as well”. It is hard for women to believe they are beautiful when models with similar physical traits are rarely featured in a body positive manner.

### **Insight for the Main Study**

After conducting my pilot study, I decided to solely focus on the impact that model diversity could have on the viewer’s self-perceptions, specifically body appreciation because I felt the need to further investigate the social psychology aspect of advertising. I also decided to expose the participants in my final study to stimuli, to accurately measure their reactions toward specific body shapes, body sizes, and ethnicities. The results from interviewing these three women helped further develop the interview questions for the final study.

### **Sample Selection**

My convenience snowball sample included five African American women from Chicago, IL, five White women from Minneapolis/ St. Paul, MN, and four Hispanic women and one White woman from San Antonio, TX with ages from 18-71. San Antonio represents a culture that is predominantly Hispanic regardless of the individual’s








ethnicity. Participants were recruited via email. Black, Latina, and White women were chosen because they represent the three largest ethnicities in the United States. The sample selection was also modeled after the Dove study which surveyed women from three geographic locations (Bissell and Rask, 2010). Women in this age range are the most active shoppers in our society today. See Table 3 in Chapter 4 for full participant profiles.

### **Data Collection**

Eight ads were chosen after reviewing copious online ads with my adviser to ensure each ad met the desired criteria. These ads were chosen to measure the interviewees' responses to various combinations of ideal standards, races, and sizes (Table 2). After selecting the stimuli, I used Photoshop to remove all branding. Removing branding eliminated potential biases toward the brand. Participants were exposed to 8 ads total. Figure 8 represents the conventional/ideal model who is White and very thin. Figure 9 represents racial diversity within one image. Figure 10 represents racial diversity from conventional standards featuring a Latina model. Figure 11 represents size diversity featuring plus size models. Figure 12 represents racial diversity from conventional standards featuring Black models. Figure 13 represents racial diversity and the ideal featuring ethnically diverse models who are thin. Figure 14 represents size diversity and ideal featuring a White plus size model. Lastly, Figure 15 represents size and racial diversity featuring a variety of plus sizes and ethnically diverse models. The final stimuli can be found in chapter four.

**Table 2. Stimuli Criterion**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Stimuli</u></b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Ideal &amp; Diversity Combination</u></b></p> <p>Key: Ideal – White/Thin Mixed w/ Size diversity &amp; Race Diversity</p>
	<p>Ideal/Conventional –  White &amp; Thin</p>
	<p>Racial Diversity –  within one image</p>
	<p>Racial Diversity –  from conventional - Latina</p>

	<p>Size Diversity - Average size women &amp; curvy body shapes</p>
	<p>Racial Diversity – from conventional – African American</p>
	<p>Racial Diversity &amp; Ideal – Racial Diversity &amp; Thin/Athletic body shape</p>
	<p>Size Diversity &amp; Ideal – Plus size &amp; White</p>



## Size Diversity & Racial Diversity

### Procedure

The fifteen one-on-one interviews were conducted in local coffee shops for approximately 30 minutes each during January through February, 2017. Participants were greeted, then we reviewed the consent form. Upon receiving signed consent, the participants were asked a series of warm up questions about their current shopping habits. Then, participants were exposed to one ad at a time in random order with instructions to “describe what you see in the presented stimuli”. After viewing each ad separately, the ads were shown side-by-side and the participant selected the ads that (a) made her want to shop at this store, and (b) ads that made her feel good about the model representation (i.e. diversity). Participants were exposed to eight ads total. The interviews were recorded and I took field notes during each interview to record facial expressions, body language, and laughter in response to each ad.

## Interview Questions

Follow-up and probing questions were used for each participant using the following questions to guide the interviews:

1. How often do you shop, both online and in-stores?
2. What forms of media do you use to decide where to shop and what to buy?
3. How do you feel about shopping for apparel?

While being exposed to one ad at a time:

4. When looking at this ad, what do you see?
5. Describe your feelings about the advertisement.

While comparing the ads:

6. Which ad makes you want to shop? Why?
7. Which ad do you relate to the most, in terms of model representation? Why?

Questions without stimuli:

8. Describe your feelings toward models and beauty in advertisements and social media. Why do you feel this way?
9. How do you culturally identify?
10. Do you see models of your ethnicity in fashion advertisements and mass media?
11. Do feel that your culture is accurately represented in ads and the media? Why or Why not?
12. How have these representations or lack thereof affected how you feel about yourself or your culture?

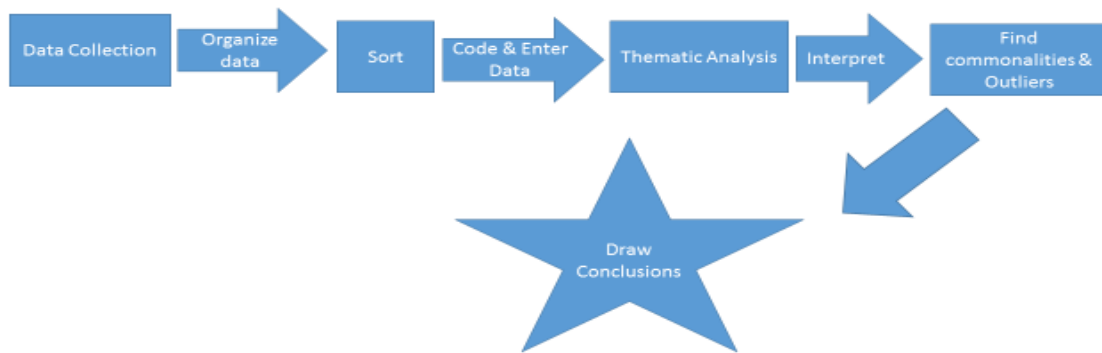
13. How would you feel if advertisements featured more diverse models (e.g size, race, skin tone, hair texture, height, age, disabilities, etc.)?
14. Is it important to see models that look like you? Why?
15. What does ideal beauty look like to you?
16. How do you define diversity?
17. Do you think that advertisements should be more diverse? If so, in what ways?
18. What size category do you fall in right now? 0-4, 6-10, 12-16, 18-22, 24+.
19. How does your size/race influence how you feel about models?
20. What else do you want to tell me?

## **Data Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed from the audio recordings. To ensure accuracy I listened to the recordings and read the transcriptions concurrently. Following Bloomberg and Volpe's (2016) method, the data was analyzed several ways (Figure 7). After reading through each transcript from start to finish, I went back and reviewed them again by reading each answer to the same question to discover common themes. Responses that stood out as commonalities or outliers were highlighted in each interview. I also used color-coding by giving the three sub-populations (Hispanic, Black, White) their own color during the highlighting process. This enabled me to discover common themes within ethnicities and potential differences between them. I also highlighted excerpts that I could use as direct quotes to support my findings. My coding process involved a few different categories: colors, numbers, and asterisks. Colors enabled me to know who was

saying what and keep track of each participant's responses. Numbers were used to keep track of highlighted statements that supported the same theme. Each theme had a number that was written next to corresponding excerpts. Lastly, asterisks were used to identify direct quotes. After identifying each of these elements, I reviewed the interviews again to look for unexpected findings and deviant responses.

**The Data Analysis Process:**



**Figure 7. Data Analysis Illustration**

## **Chapter 4 - Findings & Interpretation**

Using an advocacy philosophical assumption, the purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the impact of the lack of diversity in media images on consumers' self-perceptions. Ultimately, this study should aid in the process of revolutionizing society's current definition of beauty by highlighting the importance and positive outcomes of featuring diverse models in advertisements and mass media imagery. This study also introduces a new application of minority stress theory and self-congruity theory to understand the influence of media images on viewers. Minority stress theory states that there are chronically high levels of stress faced by members of stigmatized minority groups (Meyer, 2003). Self-congruity is the match between consumers' self-concept and the user image of a given product, brand, store, etc. (Kressman et al., 2006).

After asking questions about the interviewee's shopping habits, each woman was asked to describe what they saw in the ads and how it made them feel. Eight ads were presented to each interviewee in randomized order. These images were selected to test the effect of several combinations of model sizes and ethnicities (see Table 2). As Latinas and African Americans, the samples from San Antonio, TX, and Chicago, IL act as the racial minority groups and the White sample from Minneapolis – Saint Paul, MN act as the racial majority. To better understand the perspectives of the participants and whether self-model body congruity is occurring with each image, refer to the participant profiles in table 3.



**Table 3. Participant Profiles**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Geographic Location</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Physical Description</b>	<b>Age</b>
<b>Renee</b>	Chicago, IL	Black/ African American	size 12-14, medium skin tone, natural curly black hair, brown eyes, average height	61
<b>Lily</b>	Chicago, IL	Black/ African American	size 18-22, dark skin tone, natural wavy hair, brown eyes, black and grey hair, average height	70
<b>Naomi</b>	Chicago, IL	Black/ African American	size 6-10, light skin tone, natural black hair, brown eyes, below average height	21
<b>Melissa</b>	Chicago, IL	Black/ African American	size 14-16, light skin tone, natural black hair, hazel eyes, average height	20
<b>Lisa</b>	Chicago, IL	Black/ African American	size 10-12, medium skin tone, relaxed black hair, brown eyes, below average height	40
<b>Ana</b>	San Antonio, TX	Hispanic	size 18-22, brown hair with high-lights, brown eyes, average height	20s
<b>Emily</b>	San Antonio, TX	Hispanic	size 12-16, brown hair, brown eyes, below average height	60s
<b>Samantha</b>	San Antonio, TX	White	Size 14-16, red hair, green eyes, average height	upper 30s
<b>Diana</b>	San Antonio, TX	Hispanic	size 10-12, brown hair, brown eyes, below average height	40s

<b>Pearl</b>	San Antonio, TX	Mixed- Hispanic & White	size 6-10, brown hair, brown eyes, average height	49
<b>Grace</b>	Twin Cities, MN	White	size 10-12, Blonde hair, green eyes, above average height	35
<b>Julie</b>	Twin Cities, MN	White	Size 12-14, sandy blonde hair, below average height, brown eyes	30
<b>Becky</b>	Twin Cities, MN	White	size 6-10, red hair, green eyes, average height	mid 20s
<b>Ashley</b>	Twin Cities, MN	White	size 6-10, brown hair, brown eyes, above average height	mid 30s
<b>Ruth</b>	Twin Cities, MN	White	size 6-10, blonde hair, blue eyes, average height	upper 40s
<b>Legend: Chicago, IL = Chicago; Twin Cities, MN = MSP; San Antonio, TX = SA</b>				

## 4.1 Stimuli Reactions

**Figure 8:**



**Figure 8. Ideal – White & Thin Photo: Sunglass Hut**

Figure eight represented the conventional/ideal model as white and thin. Most of the women felt that this pictured symbolized wealth and unrealistic expectations. Each woman expressed that this is what is usually seen in the media and that it is not relatable. The women from Chicago expressed that this ad is typically what is portrayed in the media. Each woman felt that this ad was not relatable and that there was a disconnect for them. The three women above forty felt that this ad was meant for teenagers. Melissa expressed that this ad is *“not realistic, it makes me feel like I’m not good enough to shop at this store”*.

The women from San Antonio (SA) identified these models as stereotypical and affluent. Pearl felt *“this is more of the Vogue ad, the ones that you see in high fashion*

*magazines that tend to look like a certain type. It's not diverse". Samantha believed it was "conveying a lifestyle you should aspire to...it sells an unreal[istic] expectation".*

Two women from Minneapolis/Saint Paul (MSP) remarked that this ad resembles a Beverly Hills lifestyle. Four of the women felt that the models were showcasing a wealthy lifestyle. They are *"stereotypically affluent and young; they're just sort of generic, wealthy, skinny girls"* (Ruth, Julie). Ashley satirically commented *"they're really small, it looks like the sexy blondes' in a convertible club"*. Becky said *"this is typical blonde, white girls that you see everywhere in fashion"*.

**Figure 9:**



**Figure 9. Racial Diversity - within one image Photo: Honest Beauty**

Figure nine represented racial diversity within one image. Each participant positively remarked on the ethnic diversity in this image. Thirteen women enjoyed the natural makeup, the remaining two women felt that the women looked airbrushed. The majority of the Chicagoans enjoyed this ad because of the diverse ethnicity, hair textures

and colors, and the natural makeup. *“I love this [ad] because of the diversity. The hair texture is different; the hair colors are different; the skin tones are different; the nationalities are different. But yet, they’re all women that look comfortable in their own skin”* said Renee. All of the women from San Antonio appreciated the diversity. Becky from MSP said *“it's nice how they are all different, but they're all wearing a classic white shirt. It kind of shows that it doesn't matter what you're wearing, you can be yourself”*.

**Figure 10:**



**Figure 10. Racial Diversity (Latina) – diverse from conventional Photo: Rosie Mercado**

This study investigates how women will feel when they see models who look like them being shown in a positive manner. Figure ten represented racial diversity from conventional norms by solely featuring a Hispanic model. While the reactions of the Hispanic women from SA were the primary focus, this image appealed to women of each

ethnicity. Each woman smiled while looking at this picture. They described the model as fun, free, energetic, happy, curvy, and confident. While several women acknowledged that she is Latina, more women commented on her being a plus-size model. Most of the women agreed that plus-size models are not as equally represented as conventional models.

All of the women from Chicago agreed that plus-size models have a smaller presence in the media. *“She seems like a very happy person in her size, in her life. Her smile shows that she seems free and unencumbered by society and their norms. She seems really happy with who she is, and I think she makes other people happy, being in her presence”* said Lily. Renee expressed *“this is definitely a plus-size model who shows confidence in her beauty. She has on a fashionable outfit. She’s not confined by solid colors. She’s not inhibited by her size. According to the media, the way they have previously depicted models, it might make her somewhat self-conscious, because she doesn’t fit into that size three to seven or no more than a size ten, and that would probably be considered overweight, a size ten. But she seems confident in her own skin. I applaud her for that. She’s working it!”*

The SA women, collectively, described this model as joyful, very beautiful, and fun. Emily said that she is *“a very attractive, heavy set woman wearing something that probably she's comfortable in...She looks like fun. She's wearing an outfit that is not really trying to hide anything, so she's sort of comfortable with herself”*. Samantha remarked *“it makes me happy that she's not stick thin”*. Julie from MSP expressed *“she*

*looks like she's having fun and enjoying herself so, you know, I wouldn't mind seeing this”.*

**Figure 11:**



**Figure 11. Size diversity (plus-size) – diverse from conventional Photo: Ashley Stewart**

Figure eleven represented size diversity by featuring several plus size women. These plus size models were described as a happy, beautiful, confident, realistic depiction of how our society looks in terms of size and shape by most of the participants. As African Americans, the women from Chicago enjoyed seeing African American models. Each of them was happy to see models who were diverse from conventional standards and who were representing average size women. Melissa expressed *“this ad is an example of how I prefer to see African-Americans. They can be beautiful and classy and beat the stereotype”*. Most of the women from SA believed that these models represent the average woman in our society in terms of shape and size. Overall, most of the interviewees expressed that this image was a realistic depiction of how our society looks in terms of size and shape.



**Figure 12:**



**Figure 12. Racial Diversity (Black) – diverse from conventional Photo: H&M**

Figure twelve represented racial diversity from conventional standards by featuring solely African American models. Aligning with the purpose of this study, the reactions from the African American women from Chicago were the primary focus for the image. Once again, this image invoked favorable remarks from each ethnicity. Many women categorized this ad as high-fashion.

The African American women from Chicago enjoyed seeing natural hair in an advertisement. Renee said *“I see two African-American, medium-size women with very fashionable outfits and with natural hair. That shows me that they are proud of their ethnicity and not ashamed or afraid to show it”*. Melissa beamed with pride while saying *“that's what I was talking about! Two Black girls loving each other, not love like that, but*



*like peace. Definitely that African Queen kind of vibe and real natural; they don't have a lot of makeup on either". Naomi described them as "beautiful black women, natural. And it looks like they don't have on a lot of makeup, if any. You don't really see a lot of models rocking their natural hair. It's either straight hair or like natural curly".*

*Diana (SA) expressed "these ladies are naturally beautiful. We are hearing more about that trend where people are representing females that are less made up, so we see some classically beautiful ladies here that are not overly enhanced. I just saw Alicia Keys on [TV], and she looked awesome. She's one that's really saying I'm not going to wear makeup anymore. I am going to be true to myself and all of that, which is kind of cool. I'm really impressed that people are embracing that and I think that takes a strong person to just go out there and be who you are and not feel like you have to conform to society and look like something you can fit into a slot. I think [society and the media] really try and tell you what beautiful is. So, when you have a picture like this or you hear about Alicia Keys telling you that beautiful doesn't have to look like that, it could be natural, it could be more the way you want to be, it's good. I think it's a little bit more of a trend to be just healthy and natural. That's a beautiful picture".*

The women from MSP really liked the models' clothing, describing it as fashion forward. Ashley said *"one of the first things that I noticed is that they're black models, because I don't see that a lot in Minnesota and in the things that I consume".* Julie said *"the woman in back has really great hair. They're both conventionally pretty but in really interesting ways. I'd totally buy what they're selling in that".*

Many women wondered if this ad was also advocating for same-sex marriage due to the models holding hands. This reaction was surprising as it was not the intention when selecting this image. Ashley expressed *“they're holding hands, which suggests they might be partners or good friends. That's kind of maybe in the past like a faux pas or something that isn't shown”*. Ruth challenged the way that women have been depicted by saying *“they often position women together in ads to appeal to kind of like a blatant sexuality between women. You're always seeing things through the male gaze. Even if it's not intended for men, it's often produced that way”*.

**Figure 13:**



**Figure 13. Racial Diversity & Ideal dual – Race diversity & Thin Photo: Nike**

Figure thirteen represented racial diversity and the ideal featuring models who are ethnically diverse and have thin/athletic body shapes. All of the women described these models as athletic and appreciated the racial diversity. However, there were some mixed reviews on this being an unattainable body shape.

Renee from Chicago remarked *“this looks more like the models that you are privy to see in magazines [and] on the runway. They are skinny, and they're almost all the same height, but I do like the diversity of looks. They're diverse in their nationality, and*

*that's always good". Samantha from SA commented "[they are] kind of stereotypical models, I would like abs like that but I know that's never going to happen. It is a little intimidating because honestly I don't think that I would wear the apparel without a t-shirt over it or something". Pearl from SA said "it's attainable, but there's a lot of discipline and sacrifice if you want to look a certain way, then it can almost become a job to look a certain way. It's probably not the norm. There are fewer and fewer people that have the time to devote to look like that".*

Ruth from MSP said *"the first thing I see is really skinny models and really young models, which I can't relate to either". Ashley from MSP said "the women are all very fit and athletic-looking, and I'm really encouraged by this woman's arms, because I have thick arms, and I feel like that's something that bothered me as a teenager and a young woman conscious of my appearance. I always had kind of a bigger upper body, like broader shoulders and thicker arms, and so seeing models that had stick-thin arms, I was really self-conscious. So I like to see that these women have some muscles, although I do think that this is a stereotypical image of a fit woman, because I think that a woman or anyone, can be strong and be in shape and have muscles and not be really thin. These women are all pretty thin".*

**Figure 14:**



**Figure 14. Size Diversity & Ideal – Plus size & White Photo: Tess Holliday for Torrid**

Figure fourteen represented the ideal and size diversity featuring a White plus size model. Many interviewees were surprised to see a model with tattoos. This model was described as pretty, edgy, and as plus size by most of the women.

Naomi from Chicago said *“she has tattoos, which is something you really don't see on models. I've never really seen a whole lot of models being advertised with tattoos. The clothes [are] super cute. Women with tattoos shouldn't be singled out or shouldn't get the opportunity to model just because they have body art. I would like to see more plus size models, as well, because who's to say that plus size women can't be pretty or they can't be fashionable?”* Lily described this image as *“three overweight women, who are showing off that they're not hiding behind their weight. They're dressed well according to their size. They have tattoos, so they try to get out of the conventions of society”*.

Diana (SA) said *“I see a model, a plus-size model, a pretty lady. She's a little edgy. She's got her tattoos showing. I'm happy that the industry is recognizing more plus size models and we're starting to see that more”*. Ana smiled while saying *“that's exciting to see a plus-size model out there. I feel proud of her”*. Samantha remarked *“I would rather see something like this than stick thin [models]”*.

Ashley from MSP said *“I'm surprised that the women aren't very, very thin or very athletic-looking which is what's normally seen. I love her outfits. I would buy one of these. I really like her tattoos also. I think something like this I would want to see more of it, because I'm a woman and not the skinniest stick-thin woman like models, so I do like to see women of all different shapes and sizes in advertising. That's encouraging to me”*.

**Figure 15:**



**Figure 15. Size & Racial Diversity – varying plus sizes and racial diversity, Photo: Torrid**

Figure fifteen represented size and racial diversity featuring models of different ethnicities and varying plus-sizes. Overall, the models in this image were described as pretty and diverse in terms of race, body shape, and body size.

Renee from Chicago said *“I see stylish plus-size women in casual wear that is fashionable. I feel really good about this, because for many, many years, it was just the small, maybe petite, or they’re tall, really skinny models. But I think this is more realistic in having plus-size, fashionable models”*. Lisa remarked *“I see a lot of things that I would purchase. I like it. It’s well put together. I like the diversity of figures in it. I would prefer to see an ad like this, because it will give you different ideas of how you can put the outfit together, depending on your figure”*. Melissa said *“I see empowerment,*

*because buying new jeans is hard, especially if you're plus size. This makes me feel good. It makes me feel like I want to put some jeans on". Naomi believed that this ad was "promoting being happy in the skin that they [are] in and the size that they are".*

Samantha (SA) described this image as *"diversity, I mean it's real. You have women of all different sizes, colors, hairstyles". Ashley (MSP) said "I'm happy to see the variety of different kinds of women in the image, like different shapes, different races. I have been seeing [an increase in] different sizes of people and shapes of people, which I like, and I have noticed that there is a shift towards people looking more natural". Julie said "this one's nice. I like that there is a variety of body types, a variety of different ethnicities and hairstyles. They're proportioned differently, which as a consumer, I find really helpful".*

Overall, figure fifteen which represented size and racial diversity by featuring models of diverse ethnicities and varying plus-sizes was voted the most relatable advertisement. Participants were most persuaded to shop by figure fifteen and figure twelve which represented racial diversity from conventional standards by featuring solely African American models. These findings suggest a preference toward increased diversity in models' body shape, body size, and ethnicity.



### Most Relatable



### Most Persuaded to Shop



The duration of the interview proceeded without stimuli. The remaining interview questions have been grouped together to form two themes: the influence of current model representation on the viewers' self-perceptions, and desired diversity and its influence on viewers' self-perceptions. See appendix for the categorization of the remaining interview questions.



## 4.2 The Influence of Current Model Representation on Viewers' Self-Perceptions

Interviewees were asked to describe their feelings toward the models in ads and current beauty standards; if they felt that their culture is accurately represented in the media; and how these representations or lack thereof have impacted their self-perceptions. When asked to describe the models who are usually seen in advertisements, most of the women described White models who were tall, skinny, and good looking with long straight hair. While many women acknowledged the improvements that have been made over time, all of the women suggested that current self-model incongruities still create a sense of minority stress and there is a long way to go in order to reach equal representation in the media. The women from Chicago candidly described a breeding ground for minority stress. Naomi said *"I mainly see White skinny models. It's a push to still put smaller models out on the frontline. They don't promote natural [hair] models. It's always long hair, wavy, straight, loose curls, like that type of stuff. You don't really see the tight coils and the big afros, you don't see that at all. I don't see models of my ethnicity [African American] in ads that often and I don't see a lot of light-skin models either. When they are black models, they're more of the darker complexion"*.

In the 1980s *"it was more of a slim fit, and all the models were White. This made my peers feel like they always had to be smaller, in order to fit in the model world"* said Lisa, *"I think it's getting better [now]"*. Lily expressed *"I like what they wear, but I don't relate to them, because I can't connect to them. We have very little in common"*.

Renee said *“years ago, it was like the Twiggy movement where they were very, very thin-- they almost looked malnourished-- and I think the media tried to give an image that, if you want to be beautiful, that’s how you should look: thin, skinny, almost malnourished. Today, I feel very good about the various sizes, and the various hairstyles on the models”*.

Melissa said that when she was growing up in the 90s *“it was like everything’s perfect, nothing was ever realistic, everyone was trying to be like Barbie. The models looked like Barbie, like very perfect. This affected my self-esteem a little. Growing up, I always thought I was so fat”*.

The impact of TV and movies was referenced throughout multiple interviews from the women in Chicago. Lily referenced My 600 pound life while discussing the line between plus-size and obese and how obesity can drastically lower an individual’s quality of life. Renee mentioned enjoying a TV show in which a disabled male was lead actor. She also said *“on TV and in the media, when an African-American played a character years ago, it was a maid, a slave, or something derogatory. Now, we are playing lawyers and the head of companies and major roles that were not offered to us before. [When I see African Americans getting opportunities like this], I feel compelled to support. I feel a sense of pride knowing that African-Americans have come this far. I want to encourage them. So, I think we are making progress. I can’t say that it’s enough right now, but I think we’ve come a long way”*.

The women from San Antonio also acknowledged the progress in media representation but said that there is still much to be desired. Samantha described the

current model representation as *“a bit of a spectrum but it is mostly thinner women with the smaller sizes. I get emails and some of them just don't look realistic. It does create unreal expectations”*. She felt that advertisers are catering to two very distinct markets on opposite ends of the spectrum, while completely ignoring women of a myriad of lifestyles, ages, and sizes. Samantha said *“it's kind of two different ends of the spectrum, it's either you're really young and revealing and skinny and this whole kind of image that is kind of unattainable and then there's the family, mom type and there's nothing really in between. I mean sometimes you'll see a career woman but it's still often an unrealistic body type or [they're] wearing four inch heels to the office”*. As a plus size White woman with red hair, Samantha does not feel that her culture is accurately represented in the media. She explained *“when you see White or White models, it's typically skinny, typically kind of either the Haute Couture or more preppy, kind of that idealized. It's like we're all supposed to have one body type. It seems like other cultures have more acceptance of curves and the womanly figure. But no, I would not say that my culture is portrayed necessarily accurately, I think that each ethnicity has a whole range of body types and there's not just one representation of anybody”*.

Diana believed that *“[advertisers] are going less towards super-thin [models]. They are recognizing the need for diversity. I do see improvement in the industry where they are trying to recognize more of the everyday person and put them into pictures and scenarios, so that you're able to envision yourself with that product a little easier rather than unattainable and somebody else's life”*. When Diana was growing up, *“all the models were blonde. I remember my dolls when I was little, were all blonde baby dolls.*

*Consequently, I wanted light hair. I wanted light eyes because that was what the industry's idea of beautiful was in the '70s. They did have more of a cookie-cutter look. When they came out with a brunette Barbie, my mom would be like, 'We'll get you that doll'. She tried to make sure I had a couple of brunette dolls. When my kids wanted to get the American Girl dolls, I made sure they didn't pick out the blonde, blue-eyed ones. They picked out the ones that looked a little bit more like them and a little bit more like our friends. I wanted to make sure they understood that all of these dolls were beautiful”.*

*Pearl said “I think the advertising world is trying to make an effort to reflect more of what real people look like. Hispanics are the fastest growing minority in our nation, so I certainly see more of a slant towards more Hispanic and Latina models. It's becoming more diverse, as far as-- they know that that's a group that will purchase. I think it's also become more diverse with regard to shape and size of people, as well. Definitely ethnicity, you see a wide variety of people even within a certain race, you'll see a variety of the different shades, which I think that's great, because we're all kind of mixing and blending, so there's a variety of people, shapes, ethnicity. I think also as far as models, the movement even to show models without makeup. People are saying, 'I know that's Photoshopped. I know you've shellacked a lot of makeup on people or done whatever'. So, showing that people don't need all that to be beautiful”.*

*Ana said that the industry seems to be “moving away from unattainable models, the stick figure look, and going more towards people that you can see yourself in, and that are more true to the average, everyday woman. Also, more social media-launched people, like the beauty bloggers who look more normal and like you would see them shop*

*in a Target with you, [rather] than the Jenner girls or Gigi Hadid. As a whole, I feel like people are going more towards every day, normal people in ads”.*

Emily felt that digital advertising has shifted from the models to solely showing the products. When she was growing up, most of the models were “*tall, skinny and blonde. Of course, this made me wish that I was tall, skinny, and blonde. Now, because I don't really watch television, It's the ads that show up on the feeds; they don't show me models they show me clothes”.*

The participants from MSP were White. Their perspectives of current representation are enlightening because the majority of models represent their ethnicity. Many would think that this group was content because of this fact, however, this group is displeased. This is ironic as most of the ads are made to cater to the White consumers. Ashley said “*I think there's a shift towards wanting to be more natural and also having a socially conscious product”.* When she was asked if her culture was accurately represented in the media, she responded “*that's tough. Yeah, there's a lot of maybe white people in ads, but I don't try to be blonde and have Coach bags. I'm kind of like an outdoorsy person, so there's maybe not always as much stuff that's more practical”.*

Grace said “*ten years ago it was the typical young White female who was extremely beautiful in the eyes, skinny, a perfect look. Now I think they're gravitating towards people that have some unique characteristics. Like freckles on the face or really curly hair or sometimes they're finding beauty as imperfections. I know in the industry we are catering more towards different styles and body shapes. Growing up as a young girl, I found very quickly that I had to shop at certain stores. There were certain styles that*

*didn't work for me, and it limited my options. As a child, it was really hard. I was an overweight kid and I struggled with that through high school. You use media, teen magazines, and what you see on TV as a guide for what you should look like, or that's the style, or I should get clothes that look like that, but when you put that against a variety of diverse people, sometimes it doesn't work. So, I think fashion industries are almost starting to cater towards a wider mass, so they can broaden their customer base. I still think there's a lot of pressure, especially on young girls, with online media, of what you look like and how you should be perceived. These visuals are what young men and women are seeing as kind of what they're comparing themselves to as a benchmark. So, I think it's loosened up [compared to] when I was a kid. I think there's more diversity in the models. But still, it may not represent an average, everyday man or woman”.*

After saying that she sees models of her ethnicity in advertisements, Grace shared an interesting perspective. As a White woman with blonde hair and green eyes, she felt *“that there's a push to add a lot of diversity into pictures and models. The more classic, White blonde is less found. I think there is such a push to be diverse that sometimes I feel that even where I would see myself is almost a little taboo. Per se, because it's almost like well, it's been done so much. That classic [look] is almost now faux pas. It's like the beauty in imperfections or just the beauty in other cultures are coming out more”*. Grace was advocating for more of the homogenous imagery that has been shown for decades because that is what she identifies with.

Ruth's thoughts about current industry practices were *“the fashion industry tries to act like it's doing these breakout things every once in a while. Some designer will have*

*plus size models for one show. But I don't think that's the standard. I think they're still very much pushing a fairly narrow ideal of women. I do think that there's a tendency towards androgyny with some of the models, at least in terms of hair cut/hair style and the way they style them. They just tend to look very flat chested and small because they weigh 90 pounds. I'm talking more about the runway system where I think that's still held up. There are more women of color in modeling. I still think it's a small percentage represented. The ideal is pretty conventional, although there are starting to be some changes. I'm hesitant to say that because it seems like, no matter what, it's always still through that kind of waifish. I don't think that most women are [reflected in] what they show. I just don't think it's very indicative of the average person, in either size or height or in how I wear clothes or what I'm willing to buy or just my price point".*

*Julie feels that models are "the same sort of coat hanger figure over and over again, which I find really frustrating, 'cause I've no idea how clothing is going to look on me based on that. If there is a representation of other figures it's normally really extreme in the other direction. I see that there's a couple different styles evolving. I'm on Instagram fairly often lately and there's a couple different aesthetics that come up there. There's the very skinny, rich, soft focused girl, but then there's also more realistic like, you know, more naturalistic ones that come up. I find that the former tends to get more media attention than the latter, but the latter is more interesting".*

*Becky said "in the past, they were the same, like, generic tall, skinny models versus now you're getting people that are plus size or not even plus size, just larger than a size 0 modeling and they have pretty faces too. Sometimes I think they have prettier*

*faces than the small ones because the small ones look sick. I think it's really encouraging especially for young girls because there is such a variety of models out there now. It makes me think of Winne Harlow [who is a supermodel with a skin condition, vitiligo] you would have never seen that ten years ago. I think it's good because it does help [girls' self-esteem]. You know, when you're a young girl, you always go through that awkward phase and I think it helps younger girls transition more smoothly because they're not looking up to these models that they think they have to be, which they never will be. Instead, you're going to find someone that you believe resembles you as a person and you're not fitting into a box. [When little girls try to fit into a box] you get personality disorders and eating disorders. It really messes with the psychological part of a person, when you're trying to be someone you never will be. It has really bad effects on youth especially, and even older generations as well, because there are older models that people still want to be like, but it's not going to happen”.*

While Becky acknowledges the large presence of White models, she believes that Whites are misrepresented in lifestyle marketing and in the media. *“In ads and [media], Whites are usually extremely upper class. It's rarely portrayed as middle to lower class, which there's more Whites in the middle class than people know. Because of that, White people are portrayed as wealthy and usually really standoffish, especially in the media and what's been going on lately [U.S. 2016 presidential election], it's been really bad”.*

As a trigger of minority stress, discrimination and social injustice have perpetuated in America for centuries with racism, sexism, and now ageism. Several participants above 35 years old believe that there is significant ageism in the media and in



our society right now. As a 70 year old Black woman, Lily explained why she felt that older Black women were not represented in the media. *“Most of the time you see [older people] on advertisements when you're AARP, you know, the retired people. I feel that we're not accepted, especially older black people. We're on the fringes of society. That's how it has affected me, that we're not an important commodity, even as a consumer, unless it's insurance. We still have to find a more acceptable place in society, since they don't have a lot of us involved in a lot of things. We're still struggling to find our place. A more powerful place”*. Ruth from MSP also felt disconnected from the media as she expressed *“for now, I just feel old, because I'm much older. Occasionally they'll have an older model but clearly, she's still the older beautiful model with like white silver hair or some ridiculousness. People are crazy about youth culture now, and the Millennials. I feel like there's a real disconnect just generationally between me and them”*. Grace felt a sense of exclusion when trying to imagine where she will shop as she gets older. *“I'm 35 years old and I'm going to get to a point in my career where I'm going to be more senior and there will be younger women who move into the industry and they'll have a different look and feel and I'll have a more senior business suit type. My age will have to start showing in what I wear. At that point, where do I shop? Am I an Ann Taylor shopper? I will still want to look like I have fashion sense and like I'm trending with the market too”* said Grace.

These responses show the influence that media imagery has on the viewer. Several women described scenarios in which they saw certain types of models or had certain types of dolls and it made them want to resemble what they saw. This illustrates

the process of social comparison, in which individuals compare themselves to those around them as a means of self-evaluation. The data suggests that the absence of diverse models, resulting in self-model body incongruity, can foster minority stress symptoms resulting in negative self-perceptions. Most of the women discussed the unfortunate consequences of not having diverse models in advertisements and mass media imagery. They inferred the need for women to be featured in diverse settings and roles in lifestyle marketing and in TV shows and movies.

These findings suggest that little girls, adolescents, and mature women are influenced by the diversity of their toys, what they see in advertisements, the roles and relationship dynamics that women are given in TV shows and movies. Diana discussed that when she was growing up men were doctors and women were nurses. Consequently, she took her children to female doctors and dentists to show them that they could do anything that they put their mind to. Pearl and many other women remarked on the importance of little girls and adolescents seeing women in positive, powerful situations. These desires suggest that self-model body congruity has a positive influence on female viewers. Many women described instances in which seeing women who resembled them shatter glass ceilings in various industries made them better about themselves and helped them to believe that their potential was limitless. Women also described feelings of hope, pride, and confidence when seeing unconventional models shown in a body-positive manner. Thus, self-model body congruity can positively impact viewers' self-perceptions.

### 4.3 Desired Diversity and its Influence on Viewers' Self-Perceptions

#### Ideal Beauty

Ideal beauty is controversial and highly subjective. Industry professionals have classified ideal beauty as White models who are thin and tall with long, blonde hair and blue eyes. However, consumers most likely have a different definition. So, what does ideal beauty really look like? I asked each interviewee and their answers were surprising. Collectively, the women expressed that ideal beauty is more about a beautiful soul than physical traits. Lily said *“ideal beauty doesn't have to be beautiful skin, beautiful eyes, beautiful teeth, but something that comes from the inside. You can tell by the way the person smiles, the way the person acts, the aura that you get when you're in their presence. To me, that's beauty”*. Melissa believes that real beauty is embracing your body and being confident in who you are by defining it as *“living with what God gave you and having a nice personality”*. Naomi had similar thoughts by saying *“I think ideal beauty is loving yourself no matter what others think. You feel comfortable in your skin and you're comfortable with your flaws”*.

The women from San Antonio also believed that ideal beauty isn't solely about your appearance. Samantha believes that ideal beauty is *“confidence, self-assurance, and taking pride in your appearance, whatever that might be”*. Ana said *“I feel like when somebody is comfortable with themselves, that is beautiful. When somebody has the confidence and you can see it from within, that's beautiful. You can be the most gorgeous*

*person, but if you don't believe in yourself then that is empty*". Pearl, Diana, and Becky gave similar definitions of beauty.

Grace from MSP thought of her daughter while defining ideal beauty *"I tell my daughter every day that your outward beauty is about your personality, and that has to shine through"*. Ruth also answered with her daughter in mind *"I don't like to define beauty. I have a 4 1/2 year old girl and to me, she's the most beautiful kid in the world. But I know technically [conventionally] she isn't. You know what I mean. But I really think she is. I hate to think of that being really affected as they get older"*. Ruth somberly thought about how *"narrow ideal standards"* could someday affect her daughter's self-perceptions. Ashley said *"it has a lot to do with confidence, being comfortable in your own skin, and having your own interests, skills, and talents and being able to present those to the world but also being gracious and compassionate about it. So, it's more of a personality than a look"*.

When asked to describe ideal beauty with physical traits, most of the women were reluctant to give a response. They felt as though it was putting women into another box and that beauty comes in many forms. Renee expressed *"there's not just one skin tone. I have seen very dark-skinned people and think, 'oh, their skin is so pretty'. They might have the wavy, kinky hair and dark eyebrows and thick black eyelashes, and I think, 'oh, they're just really beautiful'. I have seen lighter-skinned African Americans that might have hazel eyes, pretty hair, and fair skin, but they are just so beautiful. I have seen white people that I think, 'wow, you're really a very attractive person. Hispanic, Chinese-- it just doesn't matter. If you have that outward look, you are blessed to have*

*that look, no matter what nationality you are. But again, I want to say I feel real beauty comes from within, because you could not be so attractive on the outside, but if your spirit is right, then that's the real beauty". Lisa expressed "I think it comes in all shapes, all sizes, different skin complexions, different hair textures". Emily defined ideal beauty as "healthy, not terribly made up, kind of more natural looking, not the real dolled up look". Julie identified clear skin as one of "the very few universal identifiers of beauty".*

### **A Desire for Self - Model Body Congruity**

To determine if there was a desire for self-model body congruity and its potential effect on consumers, I asked the participants if they thought it was important to see models who look like them. Most of the women explained how self-model body congruity can affect their self-perceptions, while some added the practical, retail perspective. Pearl from SA said *"I think it definitely is. It's important to see an older woman. Talbot's, I shop there now because they kind of cater to my age group. It does help to see models that you can actually relate to or identify with. It's like the Barbie. Little girls need to see that there are people like you. More and more, we're showing that anyone can do anything that they want. I think there's more role models for little girls to look up to, that they can say, 'Oh yeah, I can do that'. Whereas in the past maybe people had to be trailblazers to do certain things. I'm glad that now they're showing models that are all shapes and sizes, because there was a point when I was growing up when people would do crazy things just to be a certain size. Variety is what makes us all unique, so we should appreciate the variety we have".*

The women from MSP gave mixed responses. Ironically, Grace felt that seeing models who look like her was unimportant, but she previously remarked on being disappointed by not seeing the classic, blonde model anymore. Advocating for congruities in lifestyle marketing, Ashley said *“it's less important to see models that look exactly like me physically, than [models who I can relate to] situationally and what they're wearing-- a bunch of women sitting on a yacht is not my life experience”*. As a White woman, Ruth answered *“that's hard to say, because I'm so used to seeing White models. I think it would be different if I was an ethnic minority. My answer might vary. It would be important for me to see women that were similar in my shape. But, in terms of age, yeah [it's important]”*. Due to the large presence of White models, Julie also felt that seeing her ethnicity was not her highest priority, but she would like to see her body shape in the models more frequently. She said *“I think it's important to see them every once in a while. They don't have to look exactly like me, but I like to see bits of myself every once in a while. I'd be way more interested in seeing a black woman with a similar figure than I would be seeing a white woman with a different figure because that has more useful information for me. So, it's about seeing all the different aspects [of myself] represented at some point or another”*.

Some of the women responded with a retail perspective. Lisa would like to see models who look like her because *“that gives me an idea of how that outfit could look on me”*. To the same point, Melissa answered *“of course, because it's more relatable”*. Samantha said *“a lot of the Caucasian models are tanned, blonde hair, blue eyes and they can look great in oranges, yellows, and hot pinks, I look like crap in those. Seeing*

*brown hair, brown eyed or red hair, brown eyed with cooler skin tones, that [makes me say], 'Oh hey, I really like that on her and that would look good on me'. It would probably catch my attention a bit more". Ana felt that it wasn't necessary, "but I think it helps, because just the recognition of being relatable helps in advertising". Diana said "yeah, I would like to see that. If you identify more, I think you're more likely to go shop in that store. Yes, absolutely. I look for things like that, for diversity in my ads and stuff". To the same point, Becky believes that it is important because "everyone wants to see themselves and it helps them relate more. If you see someone that looks like you, you're going to be more willing to buy that product. Whereas if you see someone that you cannot relate to at all, you kind of pull away from it".*

Renee from Chicago believes that seeing an increase in the representation of African Americans in the media "gives you a sense of hope that you have a chance to be what you want to be, do what you want to do, say what you want to say, live where you want to live, drive what you want to drive, wear what you want to wear, and be more accepted socially, in the community, and in business. I'm not saying I want all [models] to look like me, because variety is good, but of course, it is important to see models that look like me". Naomi responded "I feel like it is important because when I was younger, I always wanted to be like the White girls in the magazines that I saw, because I never really saw Black models. Or like the Barbie dolls I had, most of them were the little White Barbies and I wanted to look like them. So, it is important, especially for kids at young ages". As a 70 year old African American woman, Lily believed that it is important to see models who look like her "because I want to feel accepted. I wanted to feel counted

*in, in society. I want to feel that we're important. I want to feel that our image counts, in a world where there are more and more people over 65 that are living, and we count”.*

*She further explains the effect of not seeing models who represent older generations “we won't shop as much. See, the older population's putting money into the economic system of our country, so we step back, not shop as much. Our self-esteem is affected because we don't feel worthy of attention. We shun away from different things, especially shopping. We see advertisements where they feature people that don't look like us, like we don't count and I'm not going to shop there, because they don't include me”.*

All in all, 14 women expressed the desire to see models who look like them. They believed that it could have a positive effect on their self-perceptions and self-efficacy. From a practical perspective, many women believed that relating to the advertisement would increase the purchase intentions and their loyalty to the retailer.

### **Defining Diversity**

It was important to ask the women to define diversity to ensure that we are referring to the same concept throughout the interview. Collectively, the Black women from Chicago defined diversity as “*differences in language, ideas, culture, height, weight, ethnicity, thoughts, lifestyles, and occupations. Differences in people is diversity*”. The Hispanic women of SA said “*diversity is to look around and see a little bit of everybody. I like to see the young, the old, the immigrants, people of different backgrounds, beliefs, skin colors, countries, disabilities, genders, gender identity, and cultures. It's really just representation*”. The White sample’s definition of diversity was

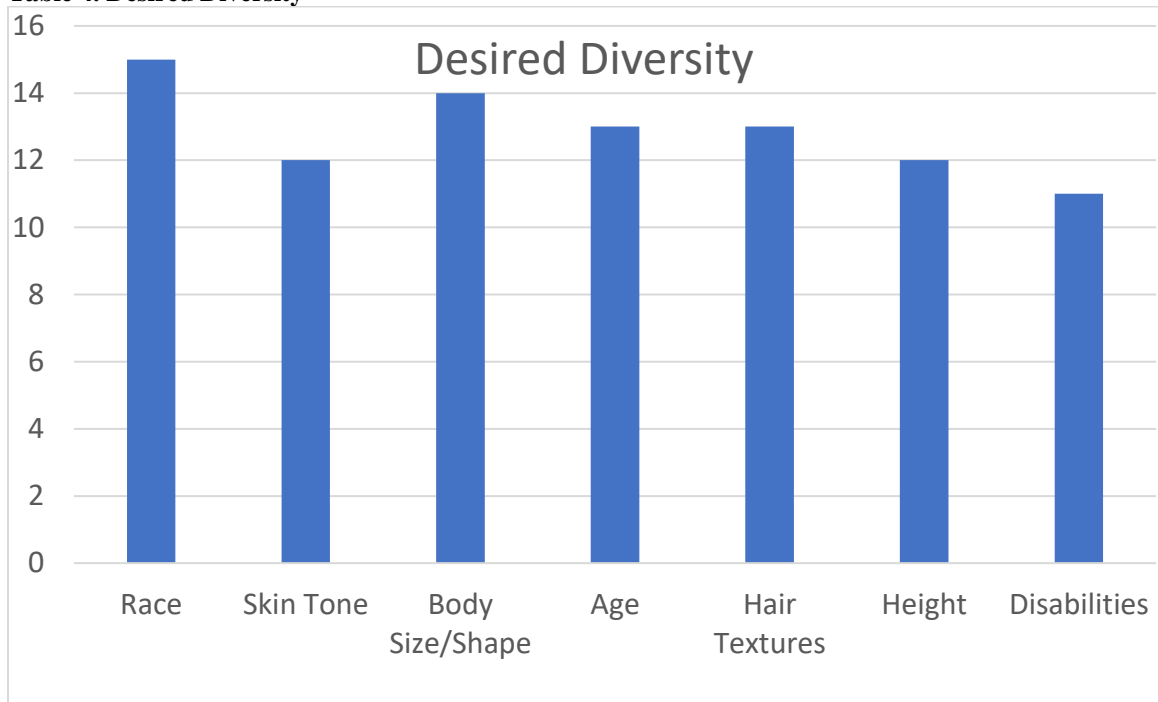


vastly different from the minority groups' definitions. They said *“not only do you have visual diversity of skin tone or gender, you also have the diversity of personality, educational background, religion, economic background, lifestyle, and age”*. Many women also highlighted the need for acceptance of these differences. Lisa said *“diversity is an acceptance of every walk of life”*. Furthermore, as a Jewish American, Ruth said *“there needs to be tolerance [of diversity], but there needs to be leadership that condemns that kind of behavior”*, in reference to the rise of unpunished hate crimes and police brutality in the U.S. and the 2017 Muslim Ban.

### **Desired Diversity**

At the culmination of the interview, the women were granted the opportunity to express the areas in which they would like to see greater diversity in terms of models and/or lifestyle marketing (Table 4). Interviewees were also asked to describe how they would feel if increased diversity came to fruition.

**Table 4. Desired Diversity**



All of the women expressed the desire to see increased diversification of racial representation. Within this group, twelve women would like an increased range of skin tones within a race. Renee “absolutely” believes that there is a direct positive correlation between the representation of African American models in ads/media and the acceptance of African Americans in society. Furthermore, Diana said *“film and print ads are very powerful. Little kids see it, and they connect. That forms their ideas of what's beautiful and what's normal. So, I'm glad to see people really making an effort to show that beautiful is a lot of things, not just one thing”*.

Fourteen women would be pleased to see increased diversity in model’s size and body shape, primarily greater representation of plus size models and curvier models. Renee said *“I didn’t have a problem with the smaller model size. I just think you should be fair and be diverse, and people that design clothes should design fashionable clothes*

*for all sizes*". Julie also advocated to normalize plus size models and curvier body shapes while saying *"I get bored seeing the same body type every time because it doesn't help me learn how clothing looks on different figures and different proportions. Different fashions look good on different figure types and I feel like the fashions that look good on the rail thin model get over-represented. And it's not that those are bad fashions, it's just that they don't necessarily translate. There are things that look really good on curvy girls that don't look nice on those rail thin models"*. Furthermore, *"I don't want to feel pressured to be stick thin or look airbrushed and perfect"* said Samantha.

All of the participants above 35 years old believe that ageism is currently undeniable in the media and advertisements because middle-aged and senior women seem to be severely underrepresented. Consequently, thirteen women would like to see an increase in the age diversification of models. Recently, there has been a movement to return to wearing natural hair in the African American community. This movement has been controversial. Some companies have deemed natural hairstyles as unprofessional. On the other hand, the military recently raised some restrictions on permitted hairstyles for women with natural hair. Thirteen women would like to see models with more diverse hair textures. Twelve women would like to see models of various heights in the media. Julie expressed *"I actively seek out shorter curvier people [in ads and the media]"*.

Eleven women would like to see people with disabilities afforded more modeling opportunities. Pearl said *"there is a young woman that had Down Syndrome and she's been modeling. I think that's wonderful and I think we should do more of that. There should be more real people modeling stuff in advertising because then we can relate"*.

Renee expressed *“I would feel great about [an increase in the diversity of model]. They’re showing more people in magazines that are in wheelchairs, that are handicapped, but that doesn’t stop them from putting on a good outfit. It makes me feel good for them and feel good knowing that our society is seeing people that are handicapped as [real] people and accepting them for what they can bring to the table. I was watching a TV show called Speechless. It’s about a little boy who’s in a wheelchair. He doesn’t say a word the whole show, but he can act, and the expressions he gives are perfect for what he’s trying to say without saying a word. There’s [also] a show about a person that’s blind now, but that doesn’t stop that person’s intelligence. Just because you’re blind doesn’t mean that you don’t have something to offer. So, I absolutely love the mix I see now in the media, on TV or in magazines as you look. And I think a lot of magazines have tried to feature family togetherness. I’ve seen pictures of mother and daughter, grandparents and grandchildren, husband and wives, boyfriend-girlfriend, just children, just older people, middle-aged people. I love it”*.

In conclusion, the women expressed that seeing diversity invokes positive emotions. Melissa remarked *“when I see diverse people in ads, it makes me feel good. Then it makes me want to go to that company and support them. Yeah, shop with them or whatever the ad would be [for]”*. Lisa said *“it would be great, because then that will give younger girls the perception that all shapes and sizes are accepted, are beautiful, are wanted, instead of feeling there’s just one in particular style of a model”*. Some women spoke specifically on lifestyle marketing. Ashley expressed the desire to feature women in more outdoors settings. While Samantha expressed her desire to see middle-aged

women shown in situations other than being a mom. She advocated for diversity by saying “*I think retailers would have a better time and actually get more people in the door, versus ordering stuff online, if they embraced some of the nontraditional, like the woman with the tattoos and kind of edgier style*”. All in all, each woman advocated for increased diversity of models and lifestyle marketing (Table 5).

**Table 5. Findings**

Pseudonym	Age	Shopping Frequency	Media used to determine where/when to shop	Desired Diversity	Stimuli that makes them want to shop & Stimuli that they relate to
Renee	61	<p><b>online:</b> rarely</p> <p><b>in-store:</b> based on sales - could be twice a month or twice a week</p>	mailers and emails	size, race, skin tone, hair texture, height, age, and disabilities.	<p><b>Shop: 11, 12</b> - I think that people try to see themselves in what they're looking at and even the size. I think people would choose a picture based on their size. (reason for choosing #11)</p> <p><b>Relate to: 11, 12</b> - privy to my race and the elegance of their clothing, I would shop at this store because I think that they would have something for me for a dressy occasion. (reason for choosing #12)</p>
Lily	70	<p><b>online:</b> twice a month</p> <p><b>in-store:</b> two to three times a week</p>	mailers, emails, sometimes TV commercials	age, size, race, skin tone, hair texture, and height.	<p><b>Shop: 10</b></p> <p><b>Relate to: 10</b> - she looks happy with her life and her size, she looks like one who overcomes. Where society has tried to</p>

					put her in a box, she's fought her way out.
<b>Naomi</b>	21	<b>online:</b> once a month <b>in-store:</b> once every three months	mailers, Instagram, and emails	hair texture- African American models with natural hair and various skin tones, and models with disabilities	<b>Shop: 15</b> - I love denim <b>Relate to: 12</b>
<b>Melissa</b>	20	<b>online:</b> once a week <b>in-store:</b> once a week	Facebook & Instagram	size, race, skin tone, hair texture, height, age, and disabilities	<b>Shop: 15, 10, 12</b> <b>Relate to: 15, 12</b>
<b>Lisa</b>	40	<b>online:</b> once a week <b>in-store:</b> once a week	internet	race, plus size models, and diverse body shapes	<b>Shop: 15</b> - what they're wearing and how they're wearing it <b>Relate to: 15</b> -their figures and the variety of models
<b>Ana</b>	20s	<b>online:</b> once a week <b>in-store:</b> once a week	Instagram & Facebook (social media)	more plus size models and curvy body shapes,	<b>Shop: 9</b> - Jessica Alba's hair is to die for, <b>14</b> - because I know that I can fit the clothes (plus-size model) <b>15</b> - for the same reason as 14 <b>Relate to: 9, 14, 15</b> - I would respond to the ads that I could relate to.

<b>Emily</b>	60s	<b>online:</b> once a month <b>in-store:</b> once a month	social media & emails	size, race, skin tone, hair texture, height, age, and disabilities	<b>Shop: 9</b> - it looks more like why I used to shop (social event), <b>11</b> - somehow you think that if you buy those clothes, then you'll look like that, but you won't. <b>12</b> - it looks comfortable, like regular people and not intimidating <b>Relate to: 12</b>
<b>Samantha</b>	upper 30s	<b>online:</b> twice a month <b>in-store:</b> twice a month	company websites and emails	curvier body shapes, more plus size models, models with red hair, and edgy models with tattoos	<b>Shop: 12, 15</b> <b>Relate to: 15</b>
<b>Diana</b>	40s	<b>online:</b> once a week <b>in-store:</b> once a week	emails	size, race, skin tone, hair texture, height, age, and disabilities	<b>Shop: 12, 9, 11</b> <b>Relate to: 12</b>
<b>Pearl</b>	49	<b>online:</b> daily <b>in-store:</b> rarely	Instagram	size, race, skin tone, hair texture, height, age, and disabilities	<b>Shop: 12</b> <b>Relate to: 13</b>
<b>Grace</b>	35	<b>online:</b> once a week <b>in-store:</b> twice a month	emails	more middle-aged and senior women	<b>Shop: 12</b> <b>Relate to: 10</b>
<b>Julie</b>	30	<b>online:</b> twice a week <b>in-store:</b> once a month	internet searches, social media, emails	size, race, skin tone, hair texture, height-shorter models, age, and disabilities	<b>Shop: 12, 15, 11, 9, 14</b> <b>Relate to: 15, 12, 14, 11, 9</b>

<b>Becky</b>	mid 20s	<b>online:</b> once or twice a week <b>in-store:</b> every other week	emails	size, race, skin tone, hair texture, height, age, and disabilities	<b>Shop: 15</b> <b>Relate to: 15</b> - it seems more welcoming and accepting of everyone
<b>Ashley</b>	mid 30s	<b>online:</b> once a month <b>in-store:</b> less than once a month	print media	size, race, skin tone, hair texture, height, age, and disabilities	<b>Shop: 13</b> - I prefer to dress comfortably <b>Relate to: 15, 13</b> - I like the image of strong women and being athletic
<b>Ruth</b>	upper 40s	<b>online:</b> three times a month <b>in-store:</b> twice a month	emails, print catalogs,	size, race, skin tone, hair texture, height, age, and disabilities	<b>Shop: 15</b> <b>Relate to: 15</b>

## Chapter 5 – Discussion & Conclusion

This qualitative study was designed to gain insight on the impact of the lack of diversity in media images on consumers’ self-perceptions. Furthermore, using an advocacy/transformational philosophical assumption, the findings from this exploratory study will hopefully succor the reformation of society’s current definition of beauty. This study is supported by self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985) and uses a new application of minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003).

The findings from this study answered my research question which explored how the use of diverse models in fashion advertisements effects viewers. First, women expressed a desire to see increased model diversity in fashion advertisements and mass media imagery. Many women believe that seeing diverse models play various roles, will



show little girls that their opportunities and potential are limitless. Most of the women wished that they had diverse models when they were growing up because it would have helped them avoid the rough phase of trying to look like someone who they would never look like. Consequently, the women believed that seeing diverse models will lead to self-acceptance, higher self-esteem, and body appreciation.

The data suggests that there is a perceived lack of model diversity in fashion advertising. Based on repetitive precedents, conventional beauty was defined with ease as tall, thin, White models who have long, blonde hair and blue eyes. However, many women struggled to define ideal beauty. They believed that real beauty can come in many shapes and forms. Some of the women hesitated to define ideal beauty altogether because they felt that it just put women into another box. A majority of women complained about the pressures that they felt to conform to unrealistic conventional standards. The lack of self-model congruity made it hard for the women to relate to the advertisements. Many women above age 35 felt left out and forgotten due to the lack of middle-aged and senior women in advertisements and mass media imagery. Some women complained that when models of these age groups are shown, it is usually in the role of a mother or grandmother.

The data from this study supports self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985). All the women said that ads are more relatable when they can identify with the models. They indicated that it was easier to relate to the models when there were physical or lifestyle (for lifestyle marketing) similarities. Many women longed to see models who looked like them, suggesting a desire for self-model body congruity. The findings suggest that there

is a direct, positive correlation between model diversity and viewers' positive self-perceptions. On the other hand, when the models and the viewers are physically incongruent, viewers experience minority stress symptoms. This study also supports the new application of minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) to fashion advertisements and mass media imagery. Most of the women disclosed that the narrow standard of beauty made them experience low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction. Feeling unaccepted and unappreciated made their peers engage in risky behaviors to be considered conventionally beautiful including eating disorders, bleaching their hair, getting colored contact lenses, and getting plastic surgery. Minority stress is developed in situations with a lack of social support. Some may consider unequal representation as discrimination, which is an antecedent of minority stress. These expressions suggest that current standards of beauty have cultivated minority stress systems. Therefore, industry leaders should acknowledge how their choices have affected our society and commit to creating an inclusive environment for diverse women who live diverse lifestyles.

Many women lit up at the opportunity to proclaim the areas in which they would like to see increased model diversity. The women stood in solidarity when expressing their desire to see models who reflect the average woman in terms of size and shape. Many women described the average size of American women as size 14. Consequently, women would like to see greater representation of plus-size women, curvy body shapes, and athletic body shapes. There was a general consensus for greater model diversity in age, race, skin complexions, and heights. The women from Chicago and San Antonio specifically advocated for an increased presence of models wearing their natural hair.

Several women wanted models with disabilities to be given more opportunities. Each woman said that increased diversity would make them feel great about themselves and the morals of our society.

In conclusion, the data suggests that there is a lack of model diversity. Consequently, underrepresented groups are experiencing minority stress symptoms. The women unanimously believed that increased model diversity would increase their positive self-perceptions. The findings suggest that self-model body congruity, through increased model diversity, can lead to an increase in viewers' positive self-perceptions.

### **Managerial Implications**

Upon analyzing the findings from this study and the revolutionary practices of industry advocates, retailers should realize that it is time to take a stand and change the way they present fashion. Retailers have the resources to conduct a nationwide survey during which a questionnaire is sent to their consumers via email to ensure that similar findings are derived from a significantly larger sample size. They could also survey their models to understand the pressures that they face and whether there is truly a lack of opportunities for unconventional models.

The effect of the lack of toy diversity and the desire for diverse dolls was an unexpected finding. However, it is a finding that is widely supported by our general population. Naturally Perfect Dolls - a diverse toy line that features dolls of color with wider noses, fuller lips, and curly hair – received a \$200,000 investment on *Shark Tank* to fund production that will put these dolls in major retailers. In their pitch they revealed

that multicultural girls are the majority in the American society now, however, they are only represented in less than 10% of dolls. Furthermore, a video of a little girl receiving a custom doll with a prosthetic leg that matched hers, went viral. The importance of self-doll congruity is undeniable. Retailers should invest in including a higher percentage of diverse dolls in their product selection and should encourage their suppliers to create more variety in their dolls.

Retailers generally need monetary incentives to make socially-responsible decisions. So, marketing to diverse consumers makes the brand user image more relatable. Viewers feel more connected to the ad and the company when they experience self-model body congruity. Therefore, more people should be willing to visit the store. Increased foot traffic gives the retailer the opportunity to convert first-time shoppers into loyal customers. Increasing the number of loyal customers not only increases the retailer's market share, but it also lowers marketing costs, because retailers do not have to constantly try to attract a new customer base. Each year, retailers spend a significant amount of money trying to attract new customers. It is less expensive to simply retain the current loyal customer base. Brand loyalty makes consumers less price sensitive. Loyal customers are willing to disclose information regarding purchase intentions and buying behavior which allows retailers to perform market-basket analysis enabling them to better their product offerings and product placement. Committing to this social responsibility initiative would increase diversity in the industry by creating modeling careers for segments that have been historically undervalued and unappreciated.

## **Limitations**

There are limitations to each study. My sample size was relatively small, with fifteen interviewees. I interviewed five women from each location because of the limited time and resources. Also, the sample was selected from only three geographical locations.

## **Further Research Recommendations**

Media's effect on self-perceptions is an extremely complex issue. This research opened the door and raised several research questions for future research. To further this research, one could interview more participants from more locations. Perhaps they could use different regions, such as the East coast, the West coast, the South, and the Midwest. The researcher could also interview different ethnicities. Instead of focusing on ethnicity and location, one could choose their sample based on education, income, culture, size, height, religion, occupation, etc. Furthermore, one could choose to organize their findings by these categories instead of race/location. This study should be replicated with a sample of people with disabilities to understand how they are affected by current model representation and their desired changes. To reach more people, the researcher could turn this into a quantitative study and create an online questionnaire.

Several interesting issues came up during the interviews. The perceived presence of ageism was an unexpected finding. A researcher could investigate the presence of ageism in advertisements and how it is affecting middle-aged and senior women in the American society. The effect that mass media imagery has on teenage girls was referenced by several women. Therefore, one could also research the effects of model

diversity on adolescent girls' self-perceptions, attire, and goals. Several studies focus on media's impact on women. To expand this line of research, one could investigate how men are affected by models. One could also advocate for ending the use of stereotypes-like smart Asians, White trailer trash, angry Black women, and thuggish Black males – by exploring the effects that they have on the stigmatized groups and how these stereotypes change how other people view these groups. Some of my participants believed that women are often encouraged to show a blatant sexuality amongst themselves and that ads are often produced through a male gaze. One could investigate if other women feel this way and suggest a realistic alternative.

The importance of doll diversity was an unexpected finding also. There are several ways that one could address this research problem. Some people have contested the gender associations with the presentation of toys. Therefore, some retailers have eliminated girls' and boys' toy aisles and merged them. Consequently, one could research if these changes adequately address the problem and how children are responding to this. One could further research the affect that doll diversity is having on little girls. One could also examine the affect that the lack of doll diversity had on girls who are adolescents now to measure any long-term effects. Furthermore, the findings from these studies should be used to help persuade toy manufacturers to make more diverse toys and to encourage retailers to offer these products and to thoughtfully plan their product placements.

As a continuation of studying the media's influence on societal norms, I am considering examining the ratio of how often happily married couples, the divorced or

those who are having marital problems, and singles are shown in the media. It would be fascinating to discover if showing more happily married couples in TV shows, movies, and ads, over a period of time, would decrease the high divorce rate. News outlets seem to report celebrity divorce issues far more than they celebrate healthy long-lasting marriage. When discussing this research topic with my peers, many of them indicated that married couples are often shown as being immensely happy and that having arguments or disagreements is somehow failing at marriage. This led me to believe that perhaps happily married couples who endure realistic bumps in the road might be somewhat extinct in the media, TV shows, and movies. If this is the case, minority stress theory could potentially be applicable to this study, as happily married couples are conveyed as the minority in mass media.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions without stimuli– Part 2 of the Interview

#### Current Model Representation & Its Effect on the Viewer

- Describe your feelings toward models and beauty in advertisements and social media. Why do you feel this way?
- How do you culturally identify?
- Do you see models of your ethnicity in fashion advertisements and mass media?
- Do feel that your culture is accurately represented in ads and the media? Why or Why not?
- How have these representations or lack thereof affected how you feel about yourself or your culture?

#### Desired Model Diversity & Its Effect on the Viewer

- How would you feel if advertisements featured more diverse models (e.g. size, race, skin tone, hair texture, height, age, disabilities, etc.)?
- Is it important to see models that look like you? Why?
- What does ideal beauty look like to you?
- How do you define diversity?
- Do you think that advertisements should be more diverse? If so, in what ways?
- How does your size/race influence how you feel about models?