**Inclusive Advertising in Fashion Brands**

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**Section I: Background and Objectives**

Advertising is a large part of fashion and retail brands consumer engagement. Studying the response to advertising from every day social media consumers can teach brands how to increase interest and engagement. This study aims to explore how inclusive advertising affects engagement with fashion and retail brands through qualitative data.

This research was sparked by past controversial advertising cases from fashion and retail brands. In 2018 H&M released an advertising that showcased a black child wearing a hoodie with the quote “coolest monkey in the jungle,” facing a lot of negative press surrounding the incident. This incident caused angry responses on social media from customers accusing H&M of being racist. This response also included “the Weeknd and G-Eazy, who both cut ties with the company” (West, 2018). Another company with similar problems who created an advertising campaign with no diversity is Torrid. In their recent Y2K campaign Torrid utilized mid-sized models that did not represent their plus sized audience. Customers and supporters of Torrid took to their social media pages to discuss how Torrid’s lack of representation was hurtful and disappointing.

**Section II: Procedures and Methods**

To gather consumer response and overall opinions of the cases, separate interviews were conducted with 2 participants. Interviews were conducted virtually due to participants being in different environments in terms of state and time zone, virtual communication was imperative to the success of the interview. Each interview was about 20-25 minutes long.

The ground rules were established in the beginning, that gave details of what the research topic was about. The rules also explained the recording of the conversation as well as the confidentiality clause of answers given. The main facilitation strategy was a balance between having a conversation and still directing the flow of the interview.

Two women were recruited via convenience sampling, who use social media and follow retail and fashion brands and businesses. They were recruited using convenience sampling because these individuals interviewed are known by the researcher. They were then asked some pre interview questions about their experience in advertising and comfortability discussing the topics. The pre interview questions included “Are you willing to sit in a 20-30 minute about fashion brand advertising,” “do you follow fashion brands on social media,” “are you comfortable discussing topics like plus-sized fashion, LGBTQIA, and race.”

The interview began by asking participants about their involvement and engagement with social media. These warmup questions included how long they spend on social media and which platform is used most by the interviewees. Along with these questions it was important to understand how many fashion brands they follow and the average number of advertisements that occupy their feed. The next set of questions inquired about their experience with inclusive advertising in fashion, questions like their preference of the people they see in ads and how diverse is their consumption. The final set of questions focused on brands the interviewee identified with and how these brands utilized inclusive advertising positively.

The concepts explored in this interview included social media usage, influence, and inclusivity. Social media usage was operationally defined as the amount of time a user spends on a social media platform. This includes creating content and observing the content posted on the feed. Influence was operationally defined as what contributes to the advertising the user experiences on their social media feed. This could be examined by the brands the user follows, in terms of size, small/local or big/global, and the user’s identity. Inclusivity was defined as the amount of diversity in each advertisement. Questions about the type of race, size, and gender identity of most models was explored.

**Section III: Detailed Findings**

To understand the results of the interviews, the responses were placed in categories, Brand Awareness, Representation, and Strategy. The themes were coded first with axial coding, implemented by examining the responses and grouping them together in the margins of the document. The interview transcripts were examined and coded multiple times to understand the themes and categories using constant comparative techniques.

Brand Awareness

In the interviews responses around a brands overall awareness explained a lot of what their advertising reflects.

1. Social Responsibility: “type of business self-regulation with the aim of social accountability and making a positive impact on society.” (Reckmann, 2022)

One of the themes is a brands ability to be socially aware of issues in the world. This gives both the brand and the advertisement relevance. Participant 2 discussed how brands only tend to highlight certain groups after a major incident occurs.

“…But I can’t tell you that I can think of a million ads where you see someone in a yamaka, unless it’s like winter and they’re doing something celebrating Hanukkah. I can’t just point out a time where you see just that, but also the Jewish community in America has not been directly targeted for any hate or violence. So, I feel maybe advertisement hasn’t intentionally included them because they don’t have to remind them that they’re included.”

Participants agreed that when a brand has a greater sense of brand awareness and social responsibility, they were more inclined to be consumers. The brand awareness and responsibility lend itself to authenticity of a brand.

1. Values: how a company operates and what drives their business

Participant 1 and 2 mentioned how a brand that has intentional values means a lot more in their overall engagement and can result in more inclusive advertising.

“I want to know, like, the story behind the brands, even if it's a smaller brand I find on Instagram or something like, if I see it, and it's interesting, and they have a cool story behind them then they can draw me in.” (Participant 1)

Participant 2 follows small businesses, black owned businesses, and local businesses intentionally because of their message and values.

“I just think that companies who are set up to be more inclusive, are more successful, top to bottom, like, they're, they're more likely to treat their employees better, they're more likely to all of those things, and I want to spend my money with people who are going to take care of people.” (Participant 2)

Representation

The category of representation was the largest. Participants felt the more they were able to identify with a brand’s advertisements the more likely they were to be engaged with the brand. When asked if participants prefer advertisements and why this preference exists, they responded back with the following:

“I do think if you want to open your doors for your products to other people, you should relate to that group of people as well. If I don't see something that could represent where I'm from, or somebody that I know, someone that looks like me, I'm not interested in the product, typically.” (Participant 1)

“I feel like you kind of search for yourself and certain things in everywhere… I intentionally seek those things out because I felt like all of us deserve to be represented, and be like, I want to support those who support all of us.” (Participant 2)

1. Diversity: In this study diversity represents the use of identifying factors in advertisement, specifically race.

Participants agreed that diversity of race has become a larger part of the advertisements created today. Though there has been an increase there still seems to be racial ambiguity and colorism in the advertisements, especially with men.

Participant 1 said “I don't see a lot of black men represented in ads, or there's a certain type of black man. And he's more like racially ambiguous or something. And they don't do a lot of sides inclusion for men out there.”

“When I was younger, it would be predominantly white children and people in advertisements, and then you would see like, a black person. Even the black people that I feel like were included, it was some colorism going on. Like you wouldn't see a lot of brown skinned black people, you would see like their skin or light skinned black people.” (Participant 2)

Strategy

1. Authenticity

Participants explained how brands with authentic marketing fair better in advertising and engagement than disingenuous brand. Participant 1 noted how brands will create advertising to “check all [of the] boxes... to pacify rather than represent the full community.” Brands often check the boxes of diversity to meet a standard rather than genuinely hope to include diversity.

Both participants discussed Abercrombie and Fitch as a brand who lacks authenticity. Each participant talked about how their brand is only focused on a specific audience but there is still no authentic effort to include others.

“Abercrombie for so long never targeted anybody other than white, middle of America, youth, and they were blatant about it… I can’t say ‘oh you should have plus size models because that’s not their market.’” (Participant 1)

“I don’t see myself in a Hollister or Abercrombie [advertising], maybe they don’t support me. So, I don’t want to go and purchase items to support them.” (Participant 2)

**Section IV: Discussion and Implications**

* The study found that inclusive advertising has a lot to do with identity and representation. Consumers want to feel as though the brand represents who they are and what they believe. Just as in the study completed by Miguel A. Zuniga, that found that ads with language, cultural cues, and other values were preferred by consumers.
* The ambiguity in size and race often comes of question to consumers when considering the diversity and inclusivity of an advertisement. This same sentiment was found in plus size models in mainstream media (Pounders 2019).
* The limitations of this study include the lack of diversity in sampling, with only 2 female participants in the same generation, the data may not be a representative sample.

**Section V: Suggestions for Future Research**

In future research it will be important to study why brands are able to be non-inclusive in their advertising methods and not be penalized by consumers. It will also be beneficial to take a deeper look at how holidays and major social climates impact the diversity and inclusivity of advertisement. Studying how advertisements influence consumers behavior can provide insight into why it is important brands represent their audience. A larger sample with multiple interests will be of benefit to the study and allow for a more representative population.

**Section VI: References**

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