

## The influence of diversity in fashion ads on underrepresented consumers: Exploring body and ethnic representation in the Fashion Industry

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**Introduction.** Advertising must represent diverse identities to meet the requirements of modern consumers. A 2022 report by Mintel found that 41% of Gen Z consumers prefer brands that represent their diverse identities. A 2021 study by Dillard revealed that Black women feel inferior due to inadequate representation in advertising. There is limited research on underrepresented populations, with most studies focusing on groups of people who are not considered underrepresented. More research is needed to target the opinions of underrepresented groups in advertising. After reviewing existing literature and past instances of diverse representation in fashion advertising, it is crucial to delve into consumer behavior and its interaction with diverse representation. A pivotal question guides this research: How does diversity representation in fashion advertisements impact the attitudes, brand affinities, and perceptions of underrepresented consumer groups, particularly college-aged Black and Latina females? This study acknowledges the importance of examining the effects of underrepresentation, particularly on individuals who have traditionally been excluded from seeing themselves represented in advertisements. In addition, the main objective of this research is to explore how perceptions of diversity within fashion advertisements influence brand affinity among underrepresented consumers, particularly college-aged Black and Latina women aged 18-24.

**Method.** To achieve this, a mixed-methods approach was used. Participants were recruited online through social media advertisement on Instagram, and the screening process ensured that participants self-identified as Black and Latina women over the age of 18 and had made a purchase from a fashion brand within the last 12 months. Qualtrics, an online survey tool, was used to create the questionnaire, and was also utilized for participants to answer the questions. The questionnaire consisted of multiple-choice questions regarding demographic characteristics, a screener to determine if they have purchased clothing in the past 12 months, a self-identification screener, open-ended questions regarding feelings about the diversity shown in three fashion ads, and finally questions regarding attitudes and the intent to support the brand. Participants viewed three fashion advertisement images to assess their judgments and attitudes toward the ads. Each photo featured varying levels of diversity in ethnicity and body type. The content of the ads was similar, with all of them being for some garment. In addition, brand names were omitted to eliminate potential brand bias. Any other determining factors, such as price, were excluded to create a neutral examination. Three ad campaigns were chosen to represent different levels of diversity in the fashion industry. The first ad with one of the fast fashion brands, Zara, presented low diversity where models are similar in appearance and body size. The second ad page with Thinx exemplified high diversity with models from diverse backgrounds and noticeable differences in height, weight, and body shape. The third ad,

Versace, illustrated moderate diversity with some ethnic diversity, but models share similar body shapes and sizes. Regarding the ad from Zara without the presence of ethnic or body diversity, participants generally felt negatively.

**Results and Discussion.** Out of 32 participants who responded, 27 fell into the targeted age category of 18-24, while five participants were aged 25-34. This sample of 22 participants consisted solely of women who identify as Black and Latina aged 18-34. The responses to the first image advertisement showed a range of emotions and perceptions, with a notable emphasis on the lack of diversity and the perceived exclusivity of the brand. In comparison, the second ad from Thinx, which showcases both ethnic and body diversity, received overwhelmingly positive responses from participants, particularly in terms of diversity, body positivity, and inclusivity.

However, in response to the third ad, a campaign by Versace that had ethnic diversity and no presence of body diversity, participants had mixed feelings. Some expressed reservations about its effectiveness and inclusivity. In summary, participants' responses to the first advertisement (Figure 1) from Zara reflected dissatisfaction with the lack of diversity and inclusivity, highlighting the importance of representation in fashion advertising to resonate with a diverse audience effectively. None of the participants indicated a willingness to support the brand, indicating a negative brand affinity. Participants' responses to the second advertisement (Figure 2) from Thinx highlighted the positive impact of diverse and inclusive representation in advertising, emphasizing the importance of body positivity and representation in fashion marketing campaigns. Based on the study results, it appears that the majority of participants (21 out of 22) are willing to support this brand, indicating a positive brand affinity. Finally, participants' responses to the third advertisement (Figure 3) from Versace highlighted concerns about diversity and inclusivity, as well as varying perceptions of the ad's effectiveness and appeal. Qualitative thematic data analysis from this study revealed several consistent themes among participants' responses. These themes included feelings of validation and empowerment when seeing diverse representations in fashion advertisements, a desire for authenticity and sincerity in diversity initiatives, and a willingness to support brands that align with their values of inclusivity and representation. Conversely, responses also reflected disappointment and frustration with a lack of inclusivity, and unwillingness to support a brand was often attributed to the absence of diversity. Participants emphasized the importance of diversity in shaping their attitudes and brand affinity, highlighting the need for brands to prioritize inclusivity in their marketing strategies. Thematic analysis was employed to explore the commonalities in their responses.

**Implications and limitations.** This study provides valuable insights into this population's attitudes and perceptions toward advertisements attitudes and perceptions toward advertisements of this population. The findings of this study contribute to a better understanding of the role of diversity in fashion advertising and how it can positively influence brand affinity. This study suggests that further research can help determine the effects of increased representation on underrepresented consumers' attitudes. Brands can use this information to increase consumer support, especially since underrepresented groups have significant buying power. The research can also redefine consumer perceptions and

revolutionize conventional beauty standards in the fashion industry. The research had some limitations such as a small sample size, difficulty finding certain individuals, and unclear responses. Future studies could use larger datasets and alternative research methods such as quantitative surveys or observational studies to address these limitations.



Figure 1. Zara Fall 2013 Collection.



Figure 2. *Thinx Campaign*



Figure 3. *Versace SS18 Collection*

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