



The Impact of the Incorporation of Body Size Inclusivity on Brand Response: Case Study on H&M Consumers

By

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ABSTRACT

The fashion industry has endorsed unattainable beauty standards for years through them glorifying an idealistic image of tallness and thinness which has been reinforced through the utilisation of thin models in media and through the limited shapes and sizes of clothing being produced for women. This unattainable portrayal has contributed to numerous women's negative self-images as part of a downward comparison.

With the recent slow shift towards body appreciation and representation of different shapes and sizes in media, the quantitative study focuses on investigating the relationship between the incorporation of body size inclusivity by a fashion brand and the brand response it receives from its customers which directly affects the customer-based brand equity.

Through the use of an online survey questionnaire that allowed for the data to be collected across South Africa, it was found that female H&M consumers, who are between the ages of 21 and 35 that live in South Africa, would positively respond to body size inclusive fashion brands as they have positive feelings and judgements about them.

The study academically adds knowledge around the new phenomenon body size inclusivity and contributes to the customers' desires and perceptions context in fashion diversity studies which is limited.

Key Words: Unattainable beauty standards, Body size inclusivity, brand response, customer-based brand equity, customer feelings and judgements

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the **research report** submitted for the BCom Honours in Strategic Brand Management to The Independent Institute of Education (The IIE) is my own work and has not previously been submitted to another University or Higher Education Institution for a postgraduate qualification.

Signature______ Date_____5/12/2022_____

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on a brief overview of the research report and the purpose it is intended for. It highlights the unattainable beauty standards are ingrained into the fashion industry globally and how this has resulted in a lack of body size inclusivity on a national level.

1.1. Contextualisation

The fashion industry has portrayed unattainable beauty standards to women for numerous years (Cavusoglu & Atik, 2021). These standards focus on the ideal shape being thin and tall, which is reinforced by fashion brands globally through producing limited shapes and sizes of apparel that do not conform to this image, as well as the utilisation of thin models in the endorsements of the brands' clothing (de Freitas & Hughes, 2018).

With the idealised image of thinness being glorified by fashion, it has resultingly led to a lack of body size inclusivity in the South African fashion industry as countless women are underrepresented in terms of clothing sizes. This has contributed to negative body image problems in women (Pounders, 2018; Mabry-Flynn & Pounders, 2019).

With the slow shift towards appreciation and representation of different shapes and sizes in media (Hakeem, 2020), the study focuses on exploring the incorporation of body size inclusivity by fashion brands and how this would have a direct impact on the brand response it receives from their customers. This brand response inevitably affects the brand's equity (Keller, 2001).

A case study on H&M consumers, particularly females between the ages 21 and 35, is the focus of the research to understand the judgements and feelings around body size inclusivity.

Due to H&M, which is a global fast fashion brand that has a presence in South Africa, making efforts towards being more body size inclusive in their ranges (McKinsey &

Company, 2019), centring the study around its consumers will give insight towards the relationship between body size inclusivity and brand response.

1.2. Rationale

With research studies of fashion diversity in the customers' desires and perceptions context being limited, the aim of the research is to explore the relationship between the incorporation of body size inclusivity and brand response which is based on its customers' judgements and feelings around the phenomena (Cavusoglu & Atik, 2021). The study focuses on H&M consumers as the brand is seen to making steps towards body size inclusivity as of recent years (McKinsey & Company, 2019).

The study will encourage fashion brands locally and globally to incorporate body inclusive sizes into their existing clothing collections by being body positive and catering to all shapes and sizes. Simultaneously the study aims to add new academic knowledge towards the influence of customers' judgements and feelings on brand equity by gaining insights based on the customer-based brand equity model.

1.3. Problem Statement

Globally, the fashion industry endorses idealised imagery and unrealistic beauty norms to women through reiterating thinness, which can negatively affect personal body image, satisfaction, and self-esteem (Cavusoglu & Atik, 2021).

Whilst there has been a gradual shift towards representation in fashion, the lack of body size inclusivity continues to be a prominent issue within the South African fashion industry with little incorporation thereof in fashion brands that have a presence in the country (Mabry-Flynn & Pounders, 2019).

Due to there being a lack of knowledge around the phenomenon body size inclusivity, there is a gap in understanding why it is not being incorporated in fashion industry as well as the customers' feelings and judgements around it.

1.4. Purpose statement

Due the lack of body size inclusivity in the South African fashion industry being prominent, the purpose of the research is to explore the relationship between the incorporation of body size inclusivity by a fashion brand, like H&M, and its brand response which is based on its customers' judgements and feelings around the phenomena.

The study specifically examines female customers from South Africa who are between the ages of 21 and 35 years who shop at H&M as they are aware of the efforts of body size inclusivity in an inclusive brand like H&M and therefore have an idea of the phenomena.

1.5. Research questions

Primary Question:

How does the incorporation of body size inclusivity by a fashion brand, like H&M, impact its brand response?

Secondary Questions:

What are the customer judgements and perceptions of fashion brands that are body size-inclusive?

How do customer feelings towards body size inclusivity affect a fashion brand's customer-based brand equity?

1.6. Research Hypotheses

H1. A positive relationship exists between the incorporation of body size inclusivity by a fashion brand, like H&M, and the brand response it receives.

H2. If customer judgements and feelings towards body size inclusivity are positive, the brand's equity will increase because customers will be exposed to size-inclusive clothing when shopping from them.

Conclusion

Through emphasizing the challenges that women face in the fashion industry and the effects this has on their feelings and body image, the chapter framed how the research report aims to investigate the concept of body size inclusivity and customer-based brand equity to contribute academically and socially to the branding and fashion industry.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

With the fashion industry continuously endorsing idealised imagery and unattainable beauty norms to women predominantly as mentioned in the previous chapter (Cavusoglu & Atik, 2021), the study aims to investigate the shift toward body size inclusivity and how the incorporation thereof, into a fashion brand like H&M and others, impacts its brand's response which is based on the favourability of customer judgments and feelings.

Whilst there has been much academic research on idealised imagery in advertising and how that affects women's body image, research around fashion diversity, in this case body size inclusivity, in the customer's feelings and judgements context is limited and is therefore a gap the study aims to fill through its data collection (Cavusoglu & Atik, 2021).

The chapter emphasizes the thematic literature review which aims to focus on different elements of body size inclusivity from credible academic sources through understanding the beauty norms in the fashion industry, the influence body positivity has in the gradual shift towards representation in fashion, and the role of customer judgments and feelings towards investigating the new phenomena.

Additionally, the chapter highlights conceptualisation and theoretical foundations used in the study to gain a better understanding of the research problem around the lack of body size inclusivity in the South African fashion industry.

2.1. Theoretical Foundation

2.1.1 Customer-based brand equity

The customer-based brand equity (CBBE) model is utilised to show how a brand's strength and success is directly associated with the customer's feelings and perceptions of that brand (Keller, 2001).

Keller (2001) believes that from a marketing perspective, the model's aim is to ensure that customers' desired perceptions, judgements, beliefs, and feelings become linked to a brand through the four brand-building steps.

The steps toward developing a strong brand with good brand equity are brand identity, brand meaning, brand response and brand relationships, with the focus of this study being brand response. It is to be noted that there are six elements which are referred to as brand building blocks that are utilised to achieve the four steps (Keller, 2001).

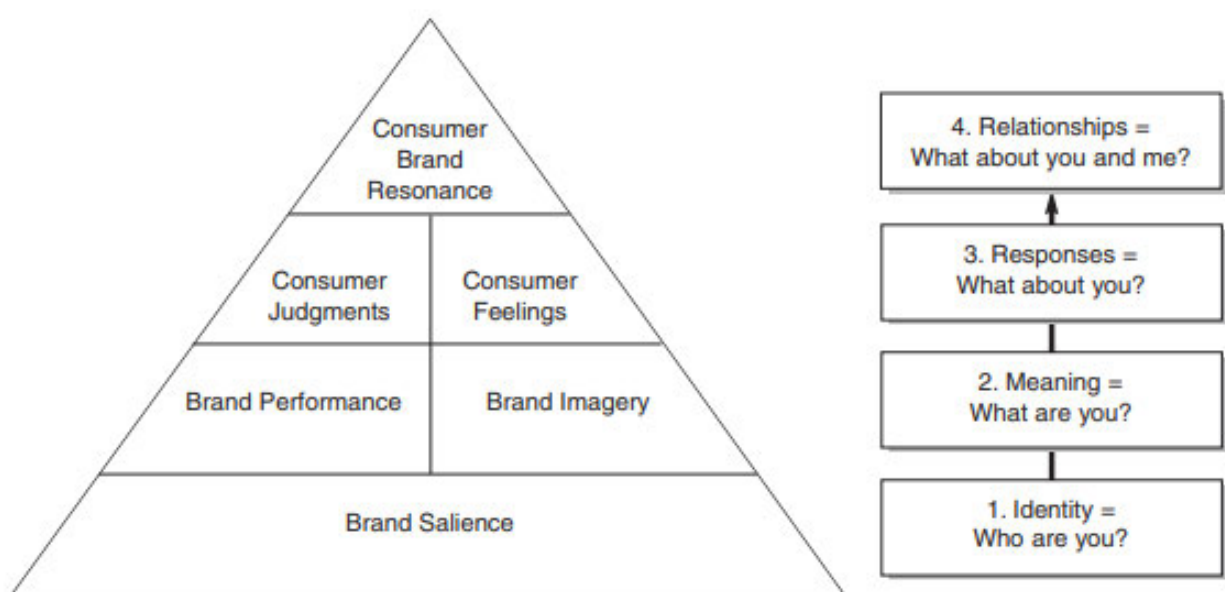


Figure 2: Customer-Based Brand Equity Pyramid (Keller, 2001)

Brand identity:

In essence brand identity is the various elements of a brand as well as the marketing and core messaging that allows a customer to differentiate it from other brands (Keller, 2001). This is based on brand salience which identifies brand awareness as a vital part of evolving brand equity (Keller, 2001).

Brand meaning:

Although brand salience is an essential first step in developing a brand, it is not adequate by itself which is why brand meaning is the following step. This step is about

what the brand is about and whether it aligns with the value the customer stands for (Keller, 2001).

It is achieved through brand associations, brand performance and brand imagery, that the customer has whereby if a brand's performance is high and the brand has a unique image, the customer will favour the brand thus increasing its equity (Keller, 2001).

Brand response:

Keller (2001) elucidates that brand responses describe how customers respond to a brand like H&M and/or its marketing activities based on what the individual believes or feels about the brand. These responses are recognised by customer judgments and feelings about the brand.

In terms of this study, the focus will be on brand response and how the customer's personal judgments and feelings around the phenomena of body size inclusivity can favourably impact their behaviour and reactions to the brand, being H&M. The study aims to test the theory of customer-based brand equity by exploring if favourable customer judgements and feelings positively impact H&M's brand equity due to them incorporating body size-inclusive clothing. This knowledge will impact the shift in the fashion industry towards body size inclusivity as other brands will be able to see how their customers strongly value size inclusivity in which their brand response directly creates positive brand equity.

When viewing judgements as an element to brand response, it can be explained as the customer's personal sentiments and evaluations of the brand. In terms of developing a strong brand with good brand equity, customer judgements of the brand in terms of brand quality, credibility, consideration, and superiority need to be aligned with their opinions and evaluations (Keller, 2001).

Additionally, brand feelings can be justified as the customers' emotive reactions concerning the brand, in this case H&M and the phenomena body size inclusivity (Keller, 2001). These are viewed as a social currency that is induced by a brand as well as how the brand plays a role in how the customer feels about themselves as an individual (Keller, 2001).

Together the judgments and feelings of a customer can favourably influence elements like customer behaviour and purchase attention based on a customer's positive response to the brand (Keller, 2001).

The purpose of the study is to explore the relationship between the incorporation of body size inclusivity by a fashion brand, H&M, and its brand response which is based on its customers' judgements and feelings around the phenomena. The study specifically examines female customers from South Africa who are between the ages of 21 and 35 years who shop at H&M.

If the customer's judgements and feelings around body size inclusivity are positive with customers praising the body positivity movement and diversity for ensuring more fashion brands, like H&M, are body size inclusive, it will mean that their brand response will be positive thus increasing the brand's equity.

The study utilises the customer-based brand equity model, specifically focusing on brand response, to predict that a positive relationship exists between the incorporation of body size inclusivity by a fashion brand and the brand response it receives and that if customer judgements and feelings towards body size inclusivity are positive, the brand's equity will increase because customers will be exposed to size-inclusive clothing when shopping.

Brand relationships:

Lastly, the final step of the customer-based brand equity model is brand relationships which concentrate on the highest level of awareness and relationship a customer has with a brand (Keller, 2001).

It is accomplished through brand resonance which is considered by the bond that the customer has developed with the brand which has led them to feel a sense of community, attachment, continuous engagement and loyalty (Keller, 2001).

In all excelling in all these steps leads to customers favouring a specific brand, like the size inclusive H&M, compared to others which increases its brand equity.

2.1.2. Social Comparison Theory

The social comparison theory explains the idea that humans have the ambition to evaluate their opinions and abilities. When they can't assess their opinions and abilities objectively, they tend to compare themselves to other individuals based on the similarity and dissimilarity of abilities (Festinger, 1954).

The theory touches on the upward comparison, which is when individuals compare themselves to other individuals who are more capable and have more abilities than them, and downward comparison which is when individuals compare themselves to others whom they deem as less capable (Festinger, 1954).

Essentially, the process is about self-evaluating oneself on how similar they are to a comparison standard. With the shift towards body size inclusivity, many female H&M customers will go from downward comparison, by comparing themselves to the idealised standard, to upward comparison as their comparison standard will be reflected through body size inclusivity and diversity by fashion brands, like H&M (Pounders, 2018).

The theory elucidates the psychological factors as well as consumer feelings from the problem of idealised imagery and how the reiterating of thinness, negatively affects customers' personal body image, satisfaction, and self-esteem (Cavusoglu & Atik, 2021).

Through the shift toward body size inclusivity, there has been upward comparison which has developed self-acceptance that has driven women to support more body size-inclusive fashion brands (Hakeem, 2020).

In all, the theory explains how through more fashion brands incorporating body size inclusivity like how H&M has, more women will feel better about themselves and the brand, therefore, increasing brand response. It encourages body size inclusivity by fashion brands and reducing the research problem at hand.

2.2. Literature Review

2.2.1. Idealised Imagery

In essence, idealised imagery is the beauty standards that are portrayed across media. This standard of perfection, which is unattainable and unrealistic, has been depicted for years and is the practice that the majority of global and local fashion brands utilise (Cavusoglu & Atik, 2021). This theme introduces the understanding of beauty standards in the fashion industry to highlight the problematic influence of it and its effects on women as well as to explain the contribution to the lack of body size inclusivity in the fashion industry for years.

Cavusoglu and Atik (2021) elucidate that Western standard has significantly influenced what is known to be the ideal image in fashion, and women who do not directly reflect or portray these standards have been criticised and neglected by the fashion industry. This can be seen across many clothing brands having limited sizes like Zara, as well as brands like Victoria's secret glorifying thinness and refusing to stray away from only using thin models in their shows and advertising (Pounders, 2018).

The ideals of thinness have been reinforced through fashion models across brands globally (de Freitas & Hughes, 2018), with media playing a significant role in the romanticisation and portrayal of these idealised images (Lou & Tse, 2020).

Volonté (2019) explains that idealised imagery, in terms of shape, size and weight has become the dominant reference across countries. The unattainable thinness in fashion is maintained through the production of limited shapes and sizes by fashion designers which is prescribed in the evolution of the fashion system (Volonté, 2019).

The force of idealised imagery had led to there being a lack of body size inclusivity in the South African fashion industry (Mabry-Flynn & Pounders, 2019). This is due to idealistic beauty dismissing underrepresented female groups in terms of media representation and fashion brands refusing to be body size inclusive, which has led to many individuals feeling inadequate with themselves (Lou & Tse, 2020).

With the recurring image of thinness in media and advertising, Abdeltawab, Adil and Lecointre-Erickson (2021) suggest that these standards become compatible with social ideals. Through understanding the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), it is evident that if individuals compare themselves to the unattainable idealised appearance, they will be engaged in upward comparison which leads to negative self-image and perception.

The negative self-image and perception have provoked psychological and behavioural disorders like decreased self-esteem, lowered body satisfaction and body image problems across many women (Pounders, 2018).

It is to be noted that individuals, specifically women, have started protesting idealised imagery in both fashion and media in the past few years to make way for body size inclusivity and more diverse representation by fashion brands (Pounders, 2018). Through understanding what the beauty norms and ideal has been for years in the fashion industry, an investigation around the shift toward a body positive and inclusive environment can occur as well as to see the impact of it on brand response of H&M customers.

2.2.2. Body Positivity

Body positivity is the movement towards the equality and appreciation of all body shapes and sizes. In recent years, it has aimed to challenge idealised imagery and unrealistic beauty standards as social ideals (Hakeem, 2020), by introducing diverse representation into media and the fashion industry globally.

There has been a cultural shift of importance across various social contexts globally where women are disregarding the Western standard of beauty whereby being white, tall, and thin is the idealised appearance (Lou & Tse, 2020). The majority of women are demanding realistic imagery in media and fashion through inclusivity and diversity of body shapes and sizes as well as gender, ability, and ethnicities (Pounders, 2018).

Although idealised imagery has been and presently is a significant influence on body representation in media and fashion, there is a gradual shift towards diverse representation (Mabry-Flynn & Pounders, 2019). This is evident in the success of the lingerie brand, Savage X Fenty (Hakeem, 2020), which offers body-size inclusive lingerie pieces and promotes inclusivity and diversity across its channels through its 'real' models, wide range of sizes and centred message.

It is to be noted that the shift from idealised imagery toward the support of body size-inclusive brands is evident in the unprofitable Victoria's Secret brand and the success of Savage X Fenty. This shows that there is a positive relationship that exists between the incorporation of body size inclusivity by a fashion brand and the brand response it receives.

With the gradual rise of the movement, it has shifted the lens of the social comparison theory for many women. Many individuals will go from utilising downward comparison, by comparing themselves to unattainable idealised standards, which in return provoked psychological and behavioural disorders like decreased self-esteem, lowered body satisfaction and body image problems across many women (Pounders, 2018), to utilising upward comparison as their personal idea of beauty and imagery which will be reflected and represented through body size inclusivity and diversity by fashions brand like H&M (Festinger, 1954).

This upward comparison has birthed self-acceptance which has driven women to support more body size-inclusive fashion brands (Hakeem, 2020). This showcases the influence of the body positive movement and how powerful customer perceptions specifically their judgements, and feelings are in contributing toward customer-based brand equity. This attributes to the hypothesis that if customer judgements and feelings toward body size inclusivity are positive, the brand's equity will increase because customers will be exposed to size-inclusive clothing when shopping.

Abdeltawab, Adil and Lecointre-Erickson (2021) explain that there is a relief effect that transpires when women feel positive emotions about their bodies after seeing models that look like them which increases purchase intention and thus the brand response.

In all body positivity has played a significant role in propelling fashion brands to be body size-inclusive and offering diverse representation which reduces the lack thereof. As predicted, this incorporation of body size inclusivity will positively impact the fashion brand's response in this case being H&M.

As mentioned, customer feelings and judgements played a vital role in creating the gradual shift towards body positivity and brands being body size inclusive.

2.2.3. Customer feelings and judgements

The shift toward body size inclusivity has been a direct reflection of how women felt about brands that had limited sizes, lack of diversity as well as how these fashion brands made them feel (Mabry-Flynn & Pounders, 2019). This shows how powerful customer judgments and feelings are in a branding context which a gap the study aims to fill in terms of body size inclusivity.

In essence, customer judgments and feelings focus on customers' attitudes, perceptions of value, emotional reactions, and responses to a brand (Keller, 2001). This theme explores how customers feel about a brand, like size inclusive H&M, based on their feelings around body size inclusivity and how these judgements and feelings can impact their response thus impacting the brand's equity.

As part of the customer-based brand equity model, Keller (2001) elucidates that judgements are the customer's beliefs and evaluations concerning the brand, in this case being the female customers from South Africa who are between 21 and 35 years old who shop at H&M. These judgements are categorised into brand quality, brand credibility, brand expertise and brand considerations as mentioned (Keller, 2001). Additionally, the feelings are explained as the customer's emotive responses concerning the brand which includes factors like how the brand affects the customer's personal feelings about themselves and association with other individuals (Keller, 2001).

Based on the customer-based brand equity model (Keller, 2001), customers' judgements and feelings about the brand can affect customer behaviours if they have positive responses to the brand. The study predicts that female customers from South Africa who are between 21 and 35 years old who shop at H&M will have a positive brand response to H&M as it is seen as a body size-inclusive fashion brand.

The prediction is likely to be true as Savage X Fenty has been successful since it started in 2018 due to it applying a business model and strategy of focusing on inclusivity and diversity across sizing and representation (Hakeem, 2020). It has received such support as it has made many women feel beautiful, empowered, seen and confident (Hakeem, 2020), which shows how customer feelings and judgments favourably impacted the brand's response which in return increases its brand equity.

Although the consensus from the academic sources is that idealised imagery provokes psychological and behavioural disorders (Pounders, 2018), and the shift toward diversity and body positivity creates self-acceptance which has driven women to support more body size-inclusive fashion brands (Hakeem, 2020), it is to be noted that Pounders (2018) mentions that there has been negative sentiments and backlash toward campaigns that include plus-size models as some individuals see this as promoting unhealthiness. This reflects that customers will support a brand that they see as acceptable.

In all customers are progressively demanding remarkable diversity and inclusion regarding body shape and size from fashion brands (Pounders, 2018). This predicts with customer feelings and judgments around body size inclusivity being positive, the brand response will be favourable to H&M that incorporates it.

2.3. Conceptualisation

2.3.1. Body Size Inclusivity

Body size inclusivity is a relatively new phenomenon that has been birthed by the likes of the body positivity movement (Hakeem, 2020). It is the shift away from idealised

imagery whereby being white, tall, and thin was the idealised appearance and was represented across media and the fashion industry (Lou & Tse, 2020).

Body size inclusivity is when underrepresented people in society and elements are glorified, in this case being when fashion brands like H&M include a variety of designs, models and sizes of clothing for different shapes and sizes into the available collection of clothing (Hakeem, 2020).

Due to body size inclusivity not being limited to plus size women but also petite, tall friendly, clothing that fits curvy women, pear and apple-shaped friendly clothing and so on, the female customers from South Africa who are between 21 and 35 years old who shop at H&M won't be chosen based off their body proportions but rather that they shop at a fashion brand this seen to be body size-inclusive within their ranges as they will be more aware of the inclusivity as compared to consumers from a fashion brand that isn't inclusive (McKinsey & Company, 2019).

2.3.2. Customer Perceptions

Customer perceptions can be described as the customer's general feelings and beliefs, in this case the female customers from South Africa who are between 21 and 35 years old who shop at H&M, around a brand concerning what it's about, and the products from it (Keller, 2001).

In this case, the focus of customer perception is on H&M's female customers and what their opinions and thoughts are about H&M in terms of their incorporation of body size inclusivity and in general fashion brand's that are size inclusive.

2.3.3. Brand Equity

Brand equity can be described as the value and the worth of a brand, like H&M. A strong brand in terms of its success and performance is seen to have favourable and strong brand equity (Keller, 2001).

When referring to brand equity in the study, it is in relation to customer-based brand equity whereby the customer perceptions, specifically customer judgements and

feelings influence the overall success and accomplishment of a brand, like H&M (Keller, 2001).

In this case, if customer judgements and feelings around body size inclusivity are positive, it means there will be a brand response which positively contributes to the increase of H&M's brand equity.

Conclusion

Whilst idealised imagery has been a significant influence in media and the fashion industry in terms of the lack of diversity reflected as there was a set idealised beauty standard, there has been a gradual shift towards body size inclusivity which has been led by customers demanding greater diversity in the landscape.

The sources highlighted in this chapter have shown that customers are propelled to support body size-inclusive fashion brands, like H&M, based on their positive judgements and feelings around the phenomenon which means that the female customers from South Africa who are between 21 and 35 years old who shop at H&M's judgements and feelings will positively impact the brand response of H&M and other body size inclusive fashion brands.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodological selections of the study which comprises of the positivism paradigm that is explained in an epistemological and ontological standpoint. Additionally, the chapter addresses the approach of the study.

Furthermore, the parameters and characteristics of the population are outlined, the sample size and method utilised are explained, and the online survey questionnaire is detailed. On the other hand, the data collection method used when conducting primary research and the method used to analyse said data is comprehensively explained in the chapter as well.

3.1. Research Paradigm

3.1.1. Paradigm

Park, Konge and Artino (2020) elucidate that scientific research deliberated through research paradigms that develop different statements and beliefs about how the world functions. These paradigms are principles that have an effect on what is to be studied (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014).

3.1.2. Positivism

The positivist paradigm utilises the method of the natural sciences to investigate phenomena like body size inclusivity and its impact on brand response (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). The paradigm depends on deductive logic to develop hypotheses and through formulating predictions based on measurable results (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Through the use of the hypotheses that a positive relationship exists between the incorporation of body size inclusivity by a fashion brand, like H&M and the brand response it receives as well that if customer judgements and feelings towards body size inclusivity are positive, the brand's equity will increase because customers will be exposed to size-inclusive clothing when shopping with the brand, practical

relationships can be obtained from casual, explanatory influences and results (Park *et al.*, 2020).

Positivism is utilised in the study as it aims to detect patterns in the incorporation of body size inclusivity by H&M and how that impacts brand response which is depicted by customer judgments and feelings. Through the development of hypotheses, the study utilises quantitative research to collect and interpret the relationships (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

3.1.3. Epistemology

This epistemological position of the positivism paradigm views knowledge as an outcome of factual and observable evidence which is attained through testing hypotheses like if customer judgements and feelings towards body size inclusivity are positive, the brand's equity will increase because customers will be exposed to size-inclusive clothing when shopping (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014).

This position explains that knowledge should be established objectively (Park *et al.*, 2020), and investigated through reason (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The study ensures objectiveness with the researcher not including themselves with respondents and utilises survey questionnaires to ensure that the truth found is objective.

In all, the purpose of the research is to explore the causal relationships, like the relationship between the incorporation of brand size inclusivity by female H&M customers and brand response from its customers, to predict the positive relationship between the two phenomena (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014).

3.1.4. Ontology

This positivist position focuses on a singular, orderly reality that is both observable and measurable. This physical and social external reality, which is objective, is ruled by laws (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). Ontology is described to be naïve and realist as it

asserts that the accusations made, through hypotheses, are seen to be knowledgeable and justified (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

With reality having a sense of regularity in it, predictions can be made around factors like human behaviour (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). The study predicts that if H&M's female customer judgements and feelings towards body size inclusivity are positive, the brand's equity will increase because customers are exposed to size-inclusive clothing when shopping at the store. Through testing the hypotheses mentioned by utilising quantitative research, the findings are considered knowledgeable when justified.

3.2. Research Approach

The research methodology utilised for the study is quantitative research as it intends to generalise numerical data to a much larger population by finding patterns, testing causal relationships, and making predications (du Plooy-Cilliers & Cronje, 2014). With the use of this type of research, the study can generalise the findings around the impact of body size inclusivity on brand response to a larger scope.

Through a deductive approach, the study tests an existing theory being that customers' brand response directly influences a brand's equity taking into consideration body size inclusivity. With the existing theory in mind, hypotheses are curated like how positive relationship exists between the incorporation of body size inclusivity by a fashion brand, like H&M, and the brand response it receives. The hypotheses are tested by statistics and quantities, which in this case is through survey questionnaires and graphical representation (du Plooy-Cilliers & Cronje, 2014).

Additionally, it is be noted that a cross-sectional design is used to ensure a general picture of a phenomenon at a single point in time (du Plooy-Cilliers & Cronje, 2014). In the study, once the respondents from the sample size have answered the survey questionnaire that they would have received through a Google forms link shared on Instagram and WhatsApp stories, the survey questionnaire will be closed and there will be no repeats in terms of collecting more data from the respondents.

In all, through describing the customer-based brand equity model and social comparison theory, the aim of the research is to explore the relationship between the incorporation of body size inclusivity and brand response which is based on its customers' judgements and feelings around the phenomena (Cavusoglu & Atik, 2021).

Through descriptive research, information collected won't have manipulating information and will be analysed statistically (du Plooy-Cilliers & Cronje, 2014).

3.3. Population

The broad population for the study is all the customers globally who shop at H&M with the unit of analysis being the customers. The population parameters can be identified as the female customers between the ages of 21 and 35 who have access to and shop at H&M.

For this study, the target population is female customers from Africa who are between 21 and 35 years old that have access to and shop at H&M. Additionally, it is to be noted that the accessible population consists of the female customers from South Africa who are between 21 and 35 years old who shop at H&M and have access to social media platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp.

A case study on H&M consumers, specifically females between the ages 21 and 35, is the focus for the research to understand the judgements and feelings around the body size inclusivity. Due to H&M, which is a global fast fashion brand that has a presence in South Africa, making efforts towards being more body size inclusive in their ranges (McKinsey & Company, 2019), centring the study around its consumers will give insight towards the relationship between body size inclusivity and brand response.

Additionally, females are the focus due to the negative effects of idealised beauty standards in the fashion industry having affected them for years and the slow shift towards body size inclusivity has been a result of their demands towards the body positivity movement (Cavusoglu & Atik, 2021). On the other hand, the age bracket has been chosen as the ages 21 to 35 are whereby the choice of where an individual shops is based on their own perceptions and needs.

Additionally, this age can be seen to prioritise having fashionable clothing that is on trend which means they would have an opinion on body size inclusivity as its when all shapes and sizes are incorporated within clothing ranges.

It is important to note that access Instagram and WhatsApp is important as the survey questionnaire will be shared through the researcher's mentioned platforms.

3.4. Sampling

The type of sampling method utilised is non-probability sampling due the population parameters being set criteria like age, location, gender, which fashion brand they shop at in this case H&M (Pascoe, 2014). This suggests that a subset of the population can be utilised for data collection based off the criteria that they must be female H&M customers who live in South Africa and are between 21 and 35 years. Additionally, this suggests why random sampling could not be utilised for this research study.

In this case purposive sampling has been utilised as particular characteristics, like age, location, gender, and shopping habits needs to be considered when choosing which members will be included in the survey questionnaire as mentioned. Through this sampling method, the sample size is 50 customers who fall within the population parameters with the confidence level having been 90% and the margin of error being 5% (SurveyMonkey, 2022). These respondents have been regulated through a set of qualifying questions that focus on specific characteristics the accessible population has as mentioned. These qualifying questions were asked at the beginning of the online survey questionnaire on Google forms to isolate respondents who do not fit criteria.

In the case of the research study, it isolated 46 respondents who didn't fit the criteria of being female H&M customers who live in South Africa and are between 21 and 35 years which led to 50 respondents as the sample size.

Additionally, convenience sampling is utilised as the point of collection is convenient to the researcher which is sharing the online survey questionnaire link through their social media platforms specifically being Instagram and Whatsapp (Pascoe, 2014).

3.5. Data Collection (RESEARCH INSTRUMENT: ANNEXURE A)

The data collection method that was utilised is survey questionnaires that followed a cross-sectional survey design to ensure data collected around the impact on the incorporation of body size inclusivity on brand response, looking at the female customers from South Africa who are between 21 and 35 years old who shop at H&M, is at a specific point in time (du Plooy-Cilliers & Cronje, 2014). This was ensured through the researcher closing the survey questionnaire when they reached saturation and analysing from then.

The survey questionnaire was curated using Google forms and was shared via an online link to the accessible population through the researcher's Instagram and Whatsapp whereby there were qualifying questions in the beginning of the survey questionnaire to ensure only the accessible population were contributing to the study.

Through the use of different types of questions, like general questions; open and close ended questions and so on, responses were quantified and generalised into findings to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions curated around body size inclusivity and brand response (du Plooy-Cilliers & Cronje, 2014).

The survey questionnaire was made to be online to reach a relatively bigger sample size as well as being able to broaden the geographical scope from Durban to South Africa. This allowed for more people across the country that fit in the set criteria to answer the survey questionnaire therefore the researcher was able to collect the data and receive generalised findings and patterns with the bigger sample size.

Due to the geographical scope being wide, the findings to answer the research questions and address the hypotheses and could be generalised on a South African

scope as the main patterns between body size inclusive brands and brand response were applied across the country through the respondents,

3.6. Data Analysis Method

A descriptive statistical analysis was utilised to collect data from female customers from South Africa who are between 21 and 35 years old who shop at H&M. This analysis ensure that the data was analysed objectively, and knowledgeable conclusions were taken from the response to summarise the characteristics of this data set and to implicate the findings (Khan, 2014). The data was analysed through the use of statistical methods being mode and range whereby an understanding of what majority of the respondents said to the questions being asked as well as noting the range between the responses to understand the different reasons and feelings (Khan, 2014).

Through this type of analysis, the study was able to test its mentioned hypotheses through interpreting if there is a positive relationship between the incorporation of body size inclusivity by fashion brands , such as H&M, and its brand response which is based on its customer judgements and feelings and if customer judgements and feelings towards body size inclusivity are positive, the brand's equity will increase because customers will be exposed to size-inclusive clothing when shopping from them.

Through analysing the data using the mentioned statistical methods as well as synthesising data through excel and utilizing graphical representation, patterns and relationships were formed to understand that the respondents have positive feelings towards body size inclusive brands and have positive responses to them as well which therefore increases body size inclusive brands' equity.

It is to be noted that although there was both close-ended and open-ended questions, statistical methods were used to describe the findings accurately and objectively (Khan, 2014). Pie charts and bar graphs were used to graphically represent the findings for each question.

The analysis addressed the hypotheses, answered the research questions, and highlighted the research problem of idealistic imagery.

Conclusion

This chapter explained the thinking and reasons behind the choices of the population, research instrument and collection and analysis methods chosen. It can be concluded that an objective standpoint is ensured throughout the research study, with a quantitative approach being addressed within the collection and analysis stages.

The population parameters, sample size and data collection method of purposive and convenience sampling have allowed for the study to be collected across the country therefore reflecting insightful patterns and relationships between brand response and the incorporation of body size inclusivity by fashion brands like H&M.

With a clear understanding and set plan from the chapter, the researcher was able to evaluate and reach insightful findings from the data collected through the use of the descriptive statistical analysis mentioned.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

The following chapter outlines the main findings and insights obtained from the quantitative data collected through the online survey questionnaire curated on Google forms.

The responses of the respondents have been analysed utilising descriptive statistics, using the method of mode mostly, to find relationships and common patterns between the incorporation of body size inclusivity by a fashion brand , having H&M specific questions and general questions, and the brand response from the customers which is based on their feelings and judgements of body size inclusive brands and the phenomenon overall.

The chapter presents the findings explained alongside graphical representation and it includes the interpretation of the findings practically incorporating previous information mentioned in other chapters and linking the findings to the research problem, research questions and hypotheses detailed in chapter 1.

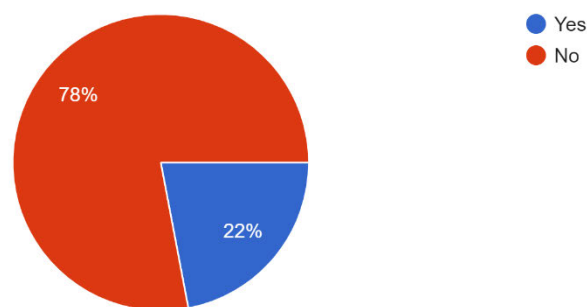
4.1. Findings

Through analysing the data collected from the online survey questionnaire, which had 50 female customers from South Africa who are between 21 and 35 years old who shop at H&M participate, findings can be described.

It is to be mentioned that the target population was ensured through the use of qualifying questions one to four which ensured respondents fit the required characteristics.

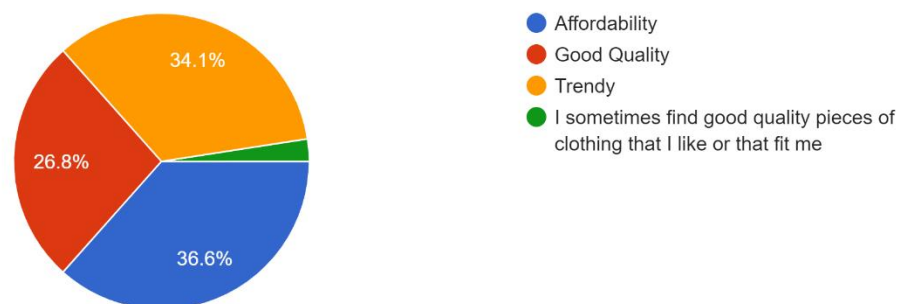
5. Do you shop at H&M because it's making an effort towards being body size inclusive?

50 responses



6. If no , why do you shop at H&M?

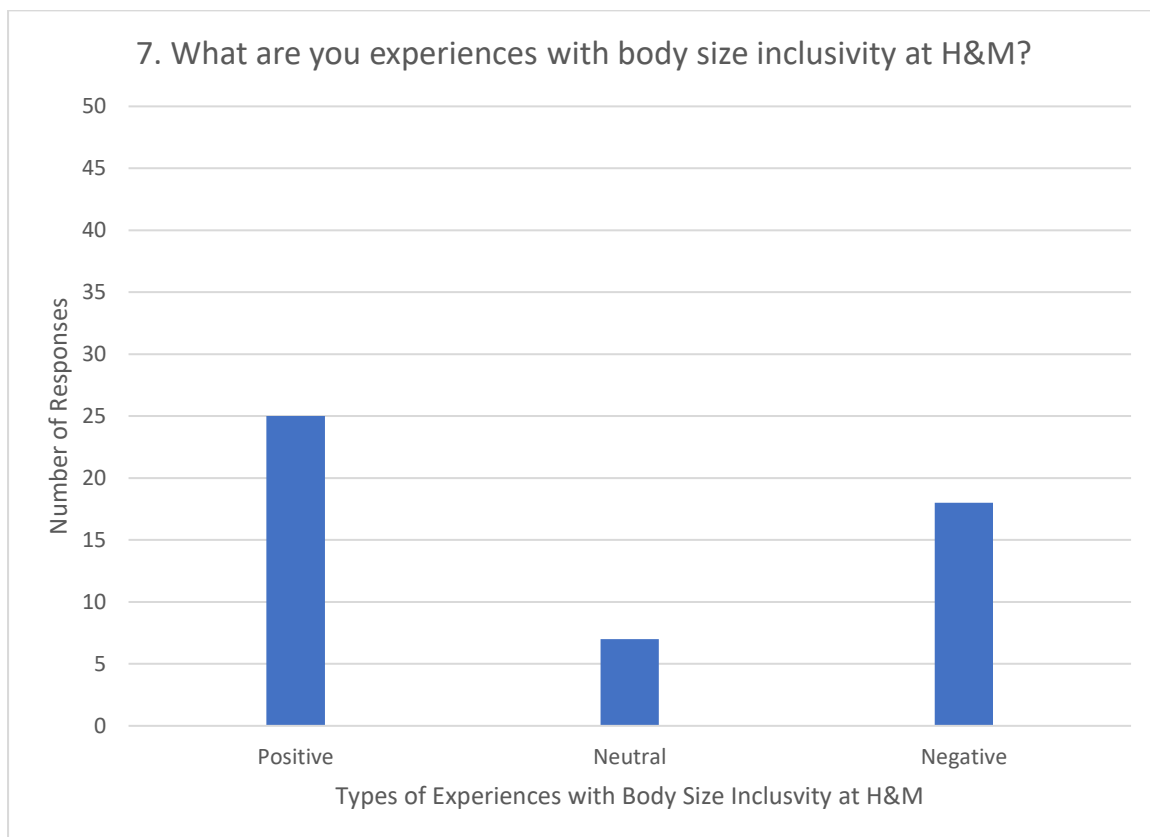
41 responses



Majority of the respondents, being thirty-nine of them, claimed that they do not shop at H&M because it is making an effort towards being body size inclusive by prioritising adding inclusive apparel within their clothing ranges (McKinsey & Company, 2019). Findings show that the main reasons the respondents shop at H&M is because they perceive it as affordable and fashionable in terms of being up to date with the global fashion trends.

Majority of the respondents, being thirty-nine of them, claimed that they do not shop at H&M because it is making an effort towards being body size inclusive by prioritising

adding inclusive apparel within their clothing ranges (McKinsey & Company, 2019). Findings show that the main reasons the respondents shop at H&M is because they perceive it as affordable and fashionable in terms of being up to date with the global fashion trends. Other factors that are to be mentioned is the H&M is seen to have good quality items.



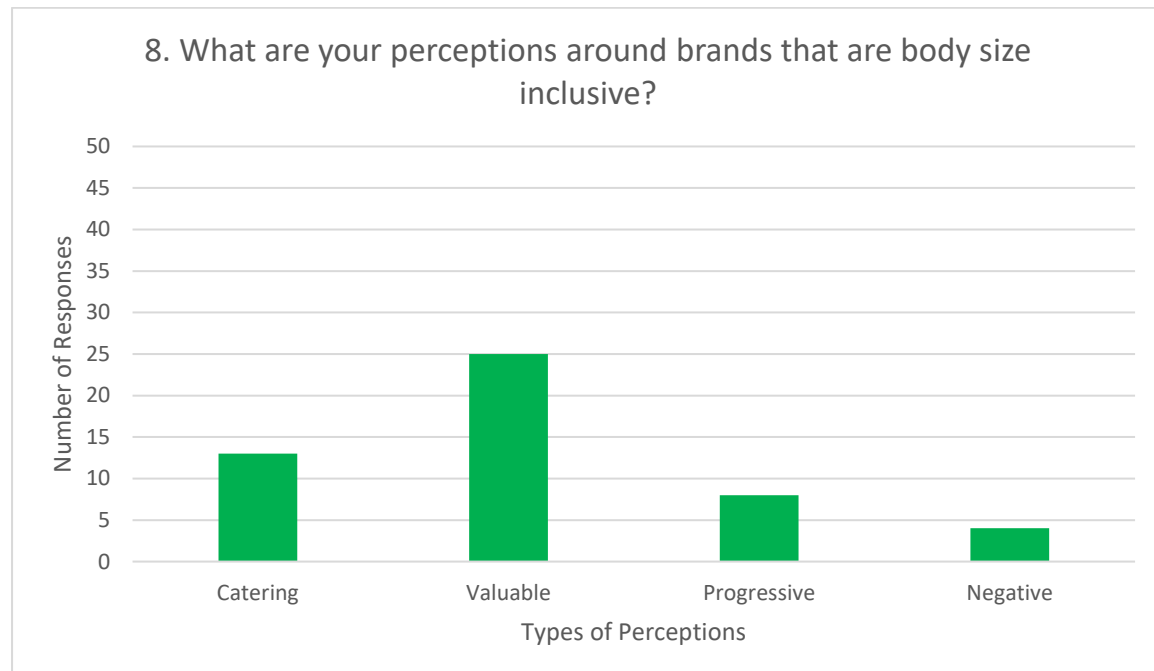
When asked what the respondents' experiences with body size inclusivity at H&M were, it can be found that their experiences with either positive, neutral, or negative. Although the H&M female customers who are between the ages of 21 and 35 and live in South Africa, don't necessarily shop at the fashion brand mainly because it is body size inclusive, it can be seen that most of their experiences in terms of size inclusivity are positive.

Their positive experiences include finding apparel that fits their size as well as catering to their body shape. They explain how the variety of the H&M sizes accommodates different bodies and the fashion brand is seen as inclusive overall with a specific mention of their denim jeans.

On the hand there are eighteen respondents that feel like H&M is not inclusive and lacks consistency across their apparel. H&M is perceived to be inclusive and making efforts only in their denim jeans and not in the other items which has led to quite a few respondents having a negative experience with the brand in terms of body size inclusivity.

Whilst there are both positive and negative experiences, there are a selected few customers who feel unaffected and are not aware of the body size inclusivity efforts at H&M therefore concluding they have a neutral experience in terms of size inclusivity.

With the first few questions focusing on H&M, it allows for the understanding of the target populations' feelings and perceptions of the fashion brand in terms of body size inclusivity. It focuses on whether what the brand identifies as is perceived accurately through the female H&M customers' experience. The experience in terms of body size inclusivity is relative and is mostly based on individual body size and shape but in all, it is mostly positive.



Additionally, general questions around body size inclusive fashion brands were asked to further investigate H&M female customers', who are between the ages of 21 and 35 and live in South Africa, judgements and feelings of the phenomena as well as to

see whether they would support fashion brands that are body size inclusive. The questions offer information on their feelings and test the social comparison theory as well as the customer-based brand equity model showcasing how the incorporation of body size inclusive fashion brands creates positive feelings of their body and positive feelings towards brands that adopt size inclusivity (Festinger, 1954; Keller, 2001).

Respondent's perceptions of fashion brands that are body size inclusive is that they are mostly valuable as well as catering. It is found that the respondent's deem body size inclusive brands as valuable when they are body positive, and care about their customers which can be related to how they cater to all body types and sizes through being diverse in their clothing variety.

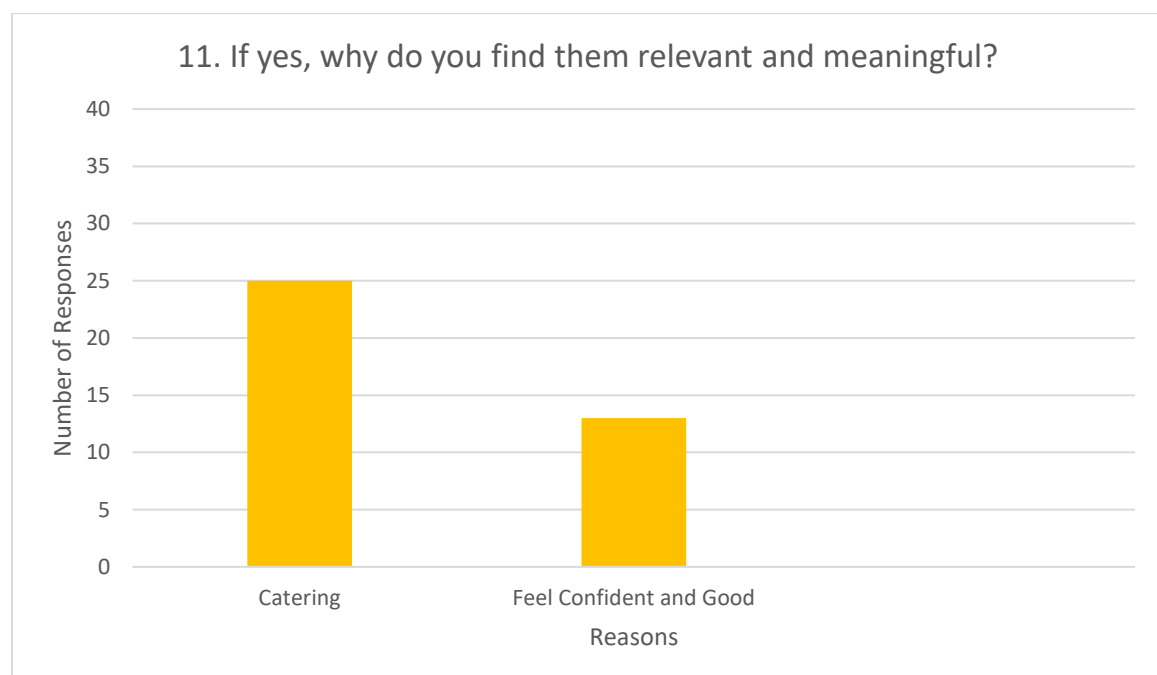
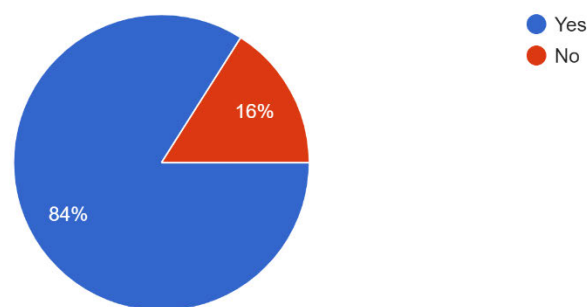
Additionally, they are seen as progressive and socially aware as they have shifted away from idealised standards that are adopted in the fashion industry (Cavusoglu & Atik, 2021; Lou & Tse, 2020), and towards being body positive and accommodating women's' everchanging bodies (Hakeem, 2020).



Majority of the overall respondent's highly value shopping at a fashion brand that caters to their body shape and size when looking at the levels or degrees of value in terms of the incorporation thereof. This can be linked to how the respondents, 84 percent of them, also majorly feel like these size inclusive fashion brands are relevant and meaningful to them.

10. Do you find fashion brand that are body size inclusive relevant and meaningful to you?

50 responses



Once having analysed the responses it can be found that the reason why 84 percent of the respondents find that fashion brands that are body size inclusive are relevant and meaningful to them is because they are perceived as catering and the inclusion makes them feel confident and good about themselves.

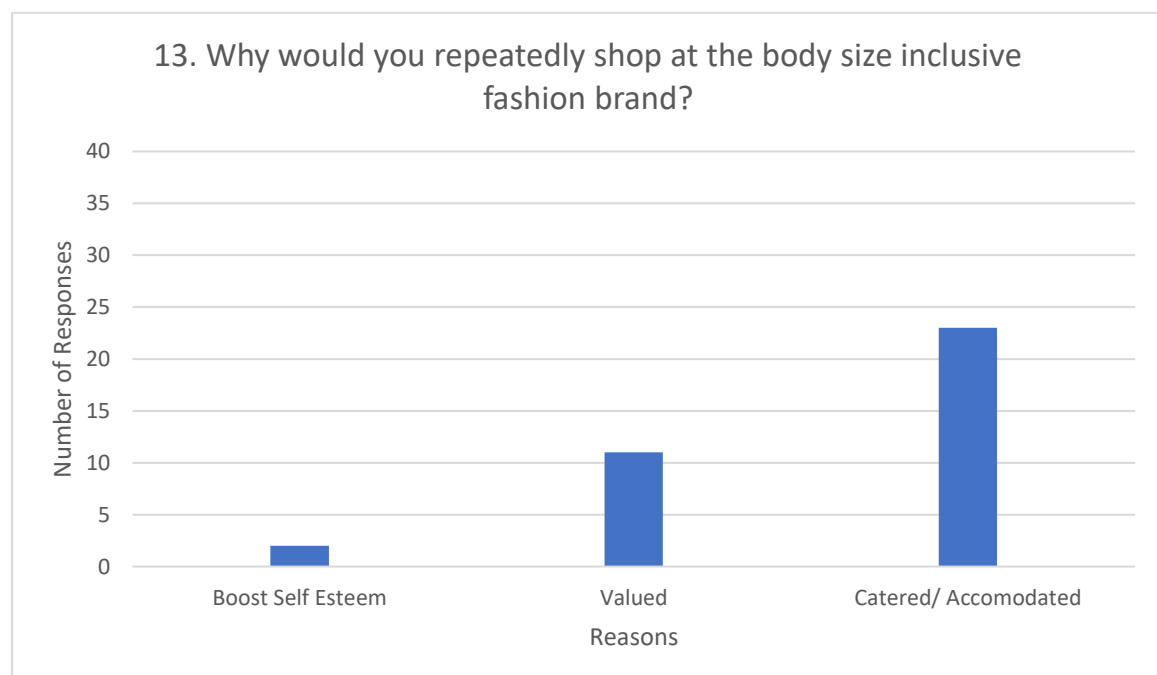
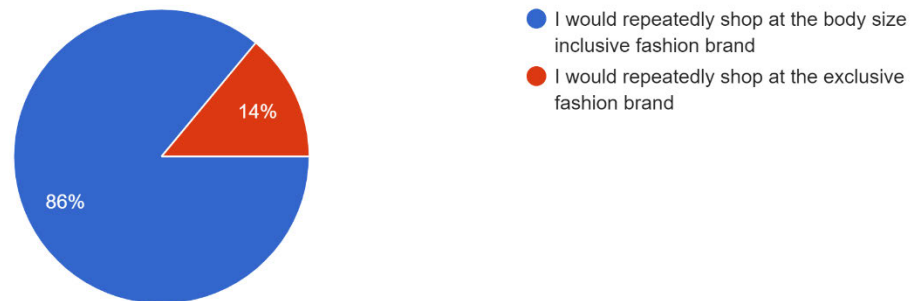
It is found that the respondents appreciate when body size inclusive fashion brands are catering in terms of offering a variety of size inclusive clothing options that are flattering on all sizes. They also see them as feel like they are being recognised and acknowledges when they find clothes that fit them.

On the other hand, when fashion brands are body size inclusive it makes the H&M female customers who are between 21 and 35 and live in South Africa feel confident and good about themselves thus boosting their self-esteem. It is found that size inclusive brands make them feel confident in their bodies, comfortable and makes them feel beautiful and good in what they are wearing.

These positive feelings can directly be linked to how Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory whereby there will be a shift from downward comparison to upward comparison by women as their bodies are represented by body size inclusive clothing and campaigns. This upward comparison means there's positive feelings about the individuals' self-image and body which can be found in the responses explaining how they feel confident and good when they are catered for at body size inclusive brands.

12. Would you repeatedly shop at a fashion brand that is body size inclusive as compared to one that is not?

50 responses



To further understand how the respondents feel about body size inclusive fashion brands whether they would continuously support them, question twelve and thirteen were asked. Through the responses, it has been found that majority of the respondents would shop at a body size inclusive brand as to compared one that is not because it accommodates their body shape and size.

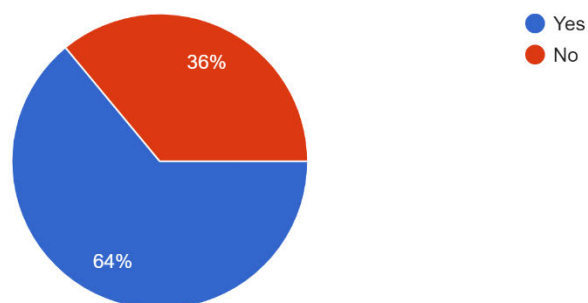
Accommodation and being catered for is seen through the data to be something that the respondents prioritise and care for from fashion brands. They long for finding clothing that fits them, looks good on them and makes them feel comfortable.

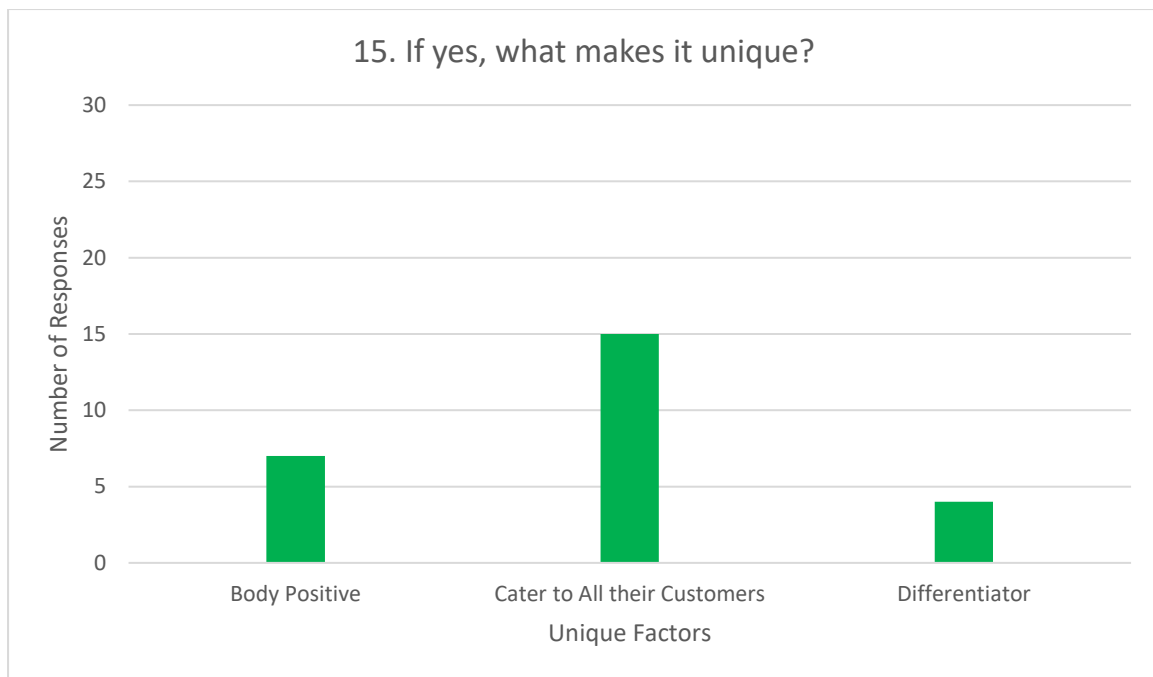
Additionally, they like feeling valued in terms of feeling important and represented through clothing options as well as feeling a sense of relatability and being acknowledged by fashion brands which is what the body size inclusive ones do.

The positive feelings around body size inclusive brands links to Keller's (2001) customer-based brand equity model whereby the model explains that when a customer has positive judgments and feelings about a brand, they will positively respond which therefore increase the brand's equity.

14. Do you find a fashion brand that is body size inclusive unique compared to a fashion brand that isn't?

50 responses



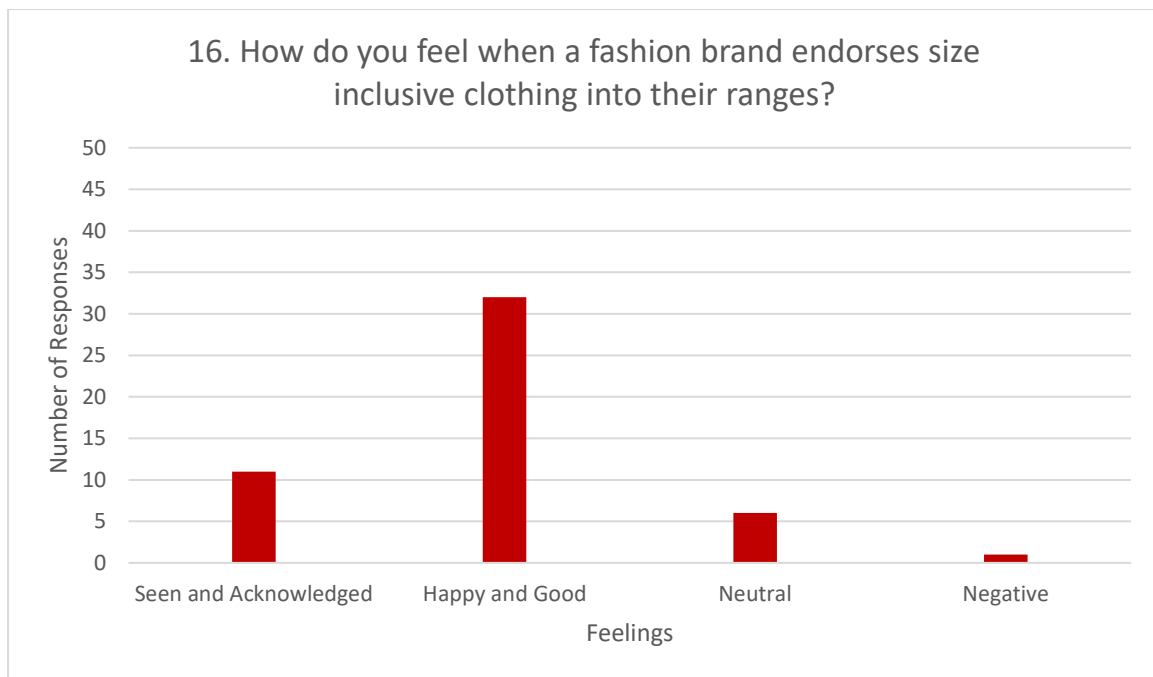


Through investigating whether being body size inclusive as a fashion brand is a unique factor and a possible competitive advantage or differentiator, it was found that 64 percent (thirty-two respondents) feel that body size inclusive brands as unique compared to those that aren't inclusive.

The respondents perceive body size inclusive brands as unique mostly because they cater to all their customers. Through them catering, they make a conscious effort to make their customers feel included in the trends despite their shape and size which makes the customers feel like they belong as the inclusive brands change the beauty perception of idealised imagery into body positivity (Lou & Tse, 2020; Hakeem, 2020).

Additionally, they are seen as unique as they are body positive due to them not conforming to idealised beauty standards that have been portrayed in the fashion industry for years. Continuously, they are perceived as different by the respondents as not many shops are body size inclusive or take it into account when producing their clothing.

By the respondents finding body size inclusive fashion brands unique it means they are more likely to support them as compared to fashion brands that aren't.



Majority of the respondents have positive feelings when a fashion brand endorses body size inclusive clothing into their ranges with the main feelings being that it makes them happy as well as seen and acknowledged.

Respondents feel happy about the endorsement because it makes them feel comfortable in their body and empowered as they can see that there's an embrace of the female body in its entirety and through all its shapes and sizes. They appreciate they diversity and body positivity.

Through the size inclusion they feel seen and acknowledged as the size inclusive brands care about the struggles women have been facing in terms of not finding clothing that fits their shapes and sizes for years. The respondents feel that body size inclusive brands care about their experience in fashion.

Despite the majority having positive feelings, there is a small percentage that neutral due to them feeling like size inclusive should be a bare minimum requirement within fashion brands as well as them feeling unaffected by it.

4.2. Interpretation

Based on the findings explained, it can be concluded that the female H&M consumers who are between 21 and 35 and live in South Africa feel as though H&M isn't known for its body size inclusivity and although it is making efforts towards being body size inclusive, it could prioritise being more consistent in its inclusivity.

Throughout the findings, there is a common theme of positive feelings and perceptions towards body size inclusive fashion brands with respondents viewing them as valuable and accommodating to all body shapes and sizes. By inclusive fashion brands being perceived as such, it has in return made the female respondents feel as though fashion brands that are body size inclusive are relevant and meaningful as they make them feel beautiful and boost their overall self-esteem.

With the lack of body size inclusive fashion brands in the South African fashion industry (Mabry-Flynn & Pounders, 2019) being the main problem, it can be concluded from the findings that there is a space in the fashion market for body size inclusive brands. The findings acknowledge the importance thereof in the country through emphasizing how women, in this case specifically female H&M consumers who are between 21 and 35 and live in South Africa, feel strongly about the phenomena and in the incorporation of it as well how they demand it. Through their demand, it can be analysed how they would support based on their needs and the positive feelings about their body they feel through upward comparison (Festinger, 1954).

With idealised imagery being the beauty standards for years in the fashion industry and being a major contribution of the lack of body size inclusion and diversity (Cavusoglu & Atik, 2021), women, focusing specifically on the respondents of the survey questionnaire, feel as though brands that are body size inclusive are progressive and socially aware by catering to all body shapes and sizes.

Through the shift towards body diversity and positivity globally, there has been more demand for realistic representation of bodies by brands (Pounders, 2018), this is evident through the findings as the respondents feel as though body size inclusive

fashion brands are relevant and meaningful as well as seeing them as unique compared to those that portray idealised imagery.

As mentioned in the literature review, with the shift towards body size inclusivity comes a shift of the lens of the social comparison theory for many women. From downward comparison where the result was negative self-image to a shift toward upward comparison whereby women's beauty ideas are reflected, and a birth of self-acceptance occurs (Festinger, 1954). This shift is evident in findings through the personal feelings body size inclusive brands rise within their customers. The customers feel confident, comfortable, and good about themselves.

Additionally, taking into consideration that Keller (2001) explains in the customer-based brand equity model that customers' feelings and judgements about a brand can directly affect the customers' behaviour in terms of support and response which then impact the brand equity, this was further studied through the survey questionnaire.

The findings align with the prediction that female H&M customers from South Africa who are between 21 and 35 years old will have a positive brand response to body size inclusive brands, such as H&M. Whilst they don't primarily shop at H&M because its inclusive, they do have positive feelings in terms of it and in terms of general body size inclusive brands, the respondents have positive judgments and feelings toward them claiming that they would repeatedly shop at an inclusive fashion brand as compared to one that isn't.

In all the findings from the online survey questionnaire align with the previous evidence in the literature review.

4.3. Relation to Research Question, Problem, Hypotheses

With the fashion industry endorsing idealised beauty standards and profiting off the negative effects of it on women psychologically (Cavusoglu & Atik, 2021). The research's aim was to explore the relationship between the incorporation of body size inclusivity and brand response which is based on its customers' judgements and feelings around the phenomena (Keller, 2001).

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that body size inclusive brand has positive perceptions and are perceived to be relevant and meaningful to the 50 female H&M consumers who are between the age 21 and 35 years old and live in South Africa.

Through leveraging their size inclusivity, they make majority of the respondents feel valued, accommodated, confident and happy with themselves thus resulting in the support through repeatedly shopping at these inclusive brands as compared to ones that aren't which is most stores in the less inclusive South African fashion industry (Mabry-Flynn & Pounders, 2019).

The study's research questions have been answered through the specific focus of customer feelings and judgements of body size inclusive brands and evaluating the degree of which they value these inclusive brands and whether they would support them.

By the study doing so through its survey questionnaire, it answered the research questions.

Research questions

Primary Question:

How does the incorporation of body size inclusivity by a fashion brand, such as H&M, impact its brand response?

Secondary Questions:

What are the customer judgements and perceptions of fashion brands that are body size-inclusive?

How do customer feelings towards body size inclusivity affect a fashion brand's customer-based brand equity?

It has addressed the research questions by reflecting that through strong positive feelings towards body size inclusive brands, the respondents will positively respond to a body size inclusive fashion brand thus increasing its equity which can be seen through the mentioned implications of the findings.

Additionally, the hypotheses were addressed.

Research Hypotheses

H1. A positive relationship exists between the incorporation of body size inclusivity by a fashion brand and the brand response it receives.

H2. If customer judgements and feelings towards body size inclusivity are positive, the brand's equity will increase because customers will be exposed to size-inclusive clothing when shopping from them.

These hypotheses were addressed by proving that Keller's (2001) customer-based brand equity model is evident practically. The findings showcase how when customers', in this case female H&M customers who are between the ages of 21 and 35 and live in South Africa, judgments and feelings of a brand are positive, this increases their brand response thus its brand equity. In this case, the findings reflect that due to the respondents having strongly positive perceptions of the phenomena in general and specially body size inclusive fashion brands, they have a positive brand response in terms of willing to continuously support an inclusive brand compared to one that isn't which then increases the inclusive brand's equity.

In conclusion the findings addressed and tested the hypotheses correctly with the positive relationship exists between the incorporation of body size inclusivity by a fashion brand and the brand response it receives being evident and the prediction of hypotheses two being reflected.

In all the study intends on encouraging fashion brands locally to incorporate body inclusive sizes into their existing clothing ranges by being body positive and catering to all shapes and sizes. Additionally, through the findings, it showcases how female customers feel about brands that are inclusive which increases the brand response through supporting and repeatedly shopping at these brands. This response thus increases body size inclusive brand's equity as mentioned.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the primary research conducted through the use of online survey questionnaires has reflected insightful patterns and relationships that answer the research questions and hypotheses.

The primary research findings that have been analysed, accompanied by the secondary research from credible sources mentioned in the literature both explain that H&M female consumers in South Africa, who are between the ages 21 and 35 , will have positive customer feelings and judgements about a body size inclusive fashion brand as essentially they feel acknowledged and happy that their size is catered for.

These positive customer judgements and feelings, means that they would continuously support, in the form of purchasing and advocating, the said body size inclusive fashion brand thus contributing to its brand equity.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The chapter concludes the research report through outlining the key research findings in relation to the aim of the research and research questions, whilst highlighting implications and recommendations of the study as well as the anticipated contribution and value of the research report.

Additionally, validity and reliability are explained as well as the ethical considerations and limitations of the overall research study.

5.1. Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are crucial elements in research that ensure credibility and value of results (SÜRÜCÜ & MASLAKÇI, 2020).

Validity of research is degree to which the research instrument, being survey questionnaires on Google forms, measures the intended constructs which is the impact of the incorporation of body size inclusivity on brand response (Koonin, 2014; SÜRÜCÜ & MASLAKÇI, 2020). If the meaningful interpretation of data collected is attained and it aligns with the research purpose and so on, it can be concluded that the research is valid.

Through the use of internal validity, the study ensures that research methodology answers the research questions and hypotheses curated by having a quantitative study that is deductive and aims to describe the customer-based brand equity theory through exploring the relationship between body size inclusivity and brand response which is predicted to be positive based off the favourable impact explained in the theory (Koonin, 2014).

More so, through external validity, findings collected could be generalised from the study's intended sample size of 50 to a larger population. Due to the geographical scope of the research being South Africa, there is confidence that the same research design and method would yield similar results to a broader population (Koonin, 2014).

On the other hand, reliability is the credibility of the data collected through the research instrument and the consistency of it over a period of time. Reliability illuminates that identical or similar results would be formed if the research was applied or repeated at different times (Koonin, 2014; SÜRÜCÜ & MASLAKÇI, 2020).

With the use of the same survey questionnaire on Google forms, there would be similar generalised findings and trends collected despite the change in data collection times and respondents within the same population of H&M female consumers between 21 and 35 in South Africa. This use of inter-rater reliability will enhance the reliability of the study (Koonin, 2014).

Additionally, it is to be noted that the study is testing the theory of customer-based brand equity which explains how positive customer judgements and feelings lead to a favourable impact on brand equity (Keller, 2001) whereby many studies have proved this to be true. Taking this into consideration, it means the study of the impact of body size inclusivity on brand response would be reliable.

5.2. Implications

Based on the findings evaluated, the implication of the study is that if a fashion brand is not body size inclusive in their collections, it would receive less support from its female consumers, specifically between ages 21 and 35.

A fashion brand that is not inclusive, in other words is exclusive, would see less brand response as many respondents would feel uncatered for and not acknowledged. Their limited shapes and sizes in their clothing collections would create a downward comparison and result in women having negative feelings about themselves and body (Festinger, 1954).

This is exclusive brand would reinforcing the idealised imagery of the fashion industry which is the main problem in fashion currently and has been for years (Mabry-Flynn & Pounders, 2019).

5.3. Final Conclusions

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between the incorporation of body size inclusivity by a fashion brand, like H&M, and brand response which is based on customer judgments and feelings of body size inclusive brands and around the phenomena body size inclusivity.

The results indicate that whilst H&M advertises itself as body size inclusive, it isn't mainly identified as body size inclusive by its female consumers in South Africa that are aged between 21 and 35 due to the inconsistency of its efforts across types of apparel.

Whilst this is the case with H&M, there is a high support towards fashion brands that are body size inclusive with majority of the respondents having positive perceptions and feelings towards such brands as they promote body positivity and equality through the accommodation of all body shapes and sizes within existing clothing collections.

In all, the incorporation of body size inclusive fashion brands in the South African industry would make the respondents feel more valued, confident, and good about themselves and their bodies which is due to an upward comparison. With this outcome of positive feelings, due to feeling acknowledged by body size inclusive brands, the respondents are more likely to support these type of fashion brands through repeatedly purchasing from them as they deem them meaningful and relevant.

The act of support and repeat purchasing is based on their positive feelings and judgements of body size inclusive brands and the general phenomena and is directly translated to a positive brand response. This increase in positive brand response from respondents towards body size inclusive brands would then positively affect the brand's equity, through customer-based brand equity.

This concludes that there is a positive relationship between the incorporation of body size inclusivity of a fashion brand and the brand response it receives as well as if customer judgements and feelings towards body size inclusivity are positive, the brand's equity will increase because customers will be exposed to size inclusive clothing when shopping from them.

5.3.1. Anticipated Contribution

The study will offer a deeper understanding of the relatively new phenomena, body size inclusivity, by adding new academic knowledge of it in terms of customer judgements and feelings. This will reflect the high demand of it and the value of it in current society, which will ensure the academic gap is filled.

Additionally, it adds to existing academic knowledge surrounding customer-based brand equity as it tests and proves Keller's model and the social comparison theory through the curated hypotheses.

Through exploring the relationship between the incorporation of body size inclusivity by a fashion brand, being H&M, and its brand response, the study will evaluate which sizing strategy South African and global fashion brands should adopt when wanting to ensure they have strong brand equity based off the respondents' judgments and feelings that have been collected.

In all the study aims to encourage South African fashion brands to incorporate body size inclusive sizes into their existing collections by reflecting the positive results of brand response, thus customer-based brand equity, through incorporating these accommodating sizes for women.

5.3.2. Recommendations

As a proposal for further research, the research could divide the women into categories depending on their shape and/or size whereby they ask each group the same body size inclusive questions. This will allow for a deeper understanding into the similarities and differences in perceptions across the groups in terms of body size inclusive brands, as well as which group/s are affected the most by the problem of the lack thereof of body size inclusivity in the South African fashion industry.

Additionally for further research, researchers could focus on men and how the lack of body size inclusivity in the South African fashion industry affects them as well as whether the incorporation of it for them would affect their brand response in any way.

On the other hand, fashion brands should incorporate body size inclusivity within their clothing collections and across their types of apparel. Through including body size inclusivity into their business and brand strategy, they are likely to satisfy their consumer's needs, especially if their primary market are women aged between 21 and 35. Additionally it will increase their brand equity through having female consumers responding positively to them.

5.5. Ethical Considerations

Respondents, being the sample size of 50 who have been chosen purposively based on criteria being that they must be female customers from South Africa who are between 21 and 35 years old who shop at H&M, were informed about their participation in this research study through an accurate description of the research; what was required of them and a clear indication as to how the results of the data were used. This information was clearly written at the beginning of the survey questionnaire on Google forms, stating that their contribution in answering the questions means that they are formally giving their consent and understand all the terms (Louw, 2014).

Additionally, anonymity is a factor that needs to be taken into consideration which in this case was ensured as there was no point in the data collection process where names of the respondents were to be asked (Louw, 2014). Links were shared on social platforms whereby the population voluntarily chose to participate. Through the use of

the link, they saw the survey questionnaires which detailed demographic questions, eliminating and respective questions, this ensured the identities of the respondents could not be matched from the data. At no point were the names or email addresses of respondents needed in their contribution.

Lastly through the use of a quantitative process and statistical analysis, it was ensured no distortion of the results and falsifying of the information took place as the study was objective (Louw, 2014).

5.6. Limitations

Due to the research study being at an Honours level, the time and the scope of the research was relatively short and small (Enslin, 2014). In this context, the study focused on a small data pool, being female customers South Africa who are between 21 and 35 years old who shop at H&M, which meant the findings could only be generalised on a national scale and not continental or global. Taking into consideration the time constraints, the sample size was relatively small as well.

An additional limitation that has was noted is the lack of academic research around the relatively new phenomena body size inclusivity in the way this study is viewed it, which means there was a narrow view of the phenomenon body size inclusivity (Enslin, 2014).

A delimitation for the study is the focus on women, specifically between 21 and 35 South African H&M consumers, as the population as compared to men (Enslin, 2014). The focus on women was due to academic studies explaining the unattainable beauty standards that have been in the fashion industry for years, mainly negatively affected women (Cavusoglu & Atik, 2021).

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the study has been successful and is one that is credible as it deems valid and reliable. Additionally, although it identified limitations, recommendations for further research were highlighted whilst ensuring ethical considerations were met.

Additionally, taking into consideration findings from the study, it can be concluded that H&M as well as other fashion brands that have a local presence have the opportunity to grow their customer-based brand equity by satisfying their consumers' demands of body size inclusivity, especially if their primary consumers are South African women aged between 21 and 35.

By satisfying these demands , through incorporating body size inclusivity into their clothing collections, they will increase the brand response received by consumers thus increase brand equity.

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ANNEXURES

Annexure A: Research Instrument Questions

Body Size Inclusivity Survey Questionnaire

The survey questionnaire responses will be used towards exploring the relationship between body size inclusivity of fashion brands like H&M and its brand response. This is for research proposal purposes

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DEFINTION:

It is to be noted that **body size inclusivity** refers to the representation of all body shapes and sizes into clothing ranges which includes petite, tall-friendly, curvy, pear and apple-shaped friendly clothing etc. Your identity will remain anonymous, and through your contribution, you are consenting to the use of the responses.

Thank you in advance for taking part in the research study.

Time: 5 minutes

ABOUT YOU

1. What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary

2. What age bracket do you fall in?

- ☐ 18-20
- ☐ 21-28
- ☐ 29-35
- ☐ 36+

3. Where do you stay?

- ☐ South Africa
- ☐ Outside South Africa

4. Do you shop at H&M?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

5. Do you shop at H&M because it's making an effort towards being body size inclusive?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

6. If no, why do you shop at H&M?

- ☐ Affordability
- ☐ Good Quality
- ☐ Trendy
- ☐ Other

7. What are your experiences with body size inclusivity at H&M?

8. What are your perceptions around brands that are body size inclusive?

9. How much do you value shopping at a fashion brand that caters for your shape and size?

Do not value

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5

Highly value

10. Do you find fashion brands that are body size inclusive relevant and meaningful to you?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

11. If yes, why do you find them relevant and meaningful?

12. Would you continuously shop at a fashion brand that is body size inclusive as compared to one that is not?

- ☐ I would continuously shop at the body size inclusive fashion brand
- ☐ I would continuously shop at the exclusive fashion brand

13. Why would you repeatedly shop at the body size inclusive fashion brand?

14. Do you find a fashion that is body size inclusive unique and better than a fashion brand that isn't?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

15. If yes, what make it unique?

16. How do you feel when a fashion brand endorses size inclusive clothing into their ranges?

THANK YOU
FOR YOUR CONTRIBUTION

Annexure B: Vega Ethics Checklist



Vega Ethics checklist: RESE8419/p/w

Student Details												
Title	Prof	☐	Dr	☐	Ms	☒	Mrs	☐	Mr	☐	Mx	☐
First name(s)	Thembaletu											
Last name(s)	Khumalo											
Title of study	The Impact of the Incorporation of Body Size Inclusivity: Case Study on H&M Consumers											
Qualification	BCom Honours in Strategic Brand Management											

Supervisor Details												
Title	Prof	☐	Dr	☐	Ms	☒	Mrs	☐	Mr	☐	Mx	☐
First and last names	Sarah Freestone											

Co-supervisor Details (if applicable)												
Title	Prof	☐	Dr	☐	Ms	☒	Mrs	☐	Mr	☐	Mx	☐
First and last names	Carolanda du Toit											

Explaining your research process						
Philosophical paradigm	Positivism	☒	Interpretivism	☐	Constructivism	☐
	Realism	☐	Objectivism	☐	Pragmatism	☐
	Functionalist	☐	Subjectivism	☐	Humanist	☐
	Other:					
Research design:	Interview	☐	Questionnaire (self administered)	☒	Focus group	☐
	Ethnography/ Observation	☐	Artefact analysis/website/ social media analysis	☐	Action Research	☐
	Case Study	☐	Design Research (Practice based)	☐		☐
	Other (if so, state)	☐				
Brief explanation of the population and number of participants/items	Accessible population is female H&M customers from South Africa who are between the ages 21 and 35. The intended sample size is 50.					
Target group sampling methods/artefact	Purposive	☒	Random	☐	Snowball	☐
	Convenient	☒	Stratified	☐	Census	...
	Explain selection process		Purposive due to set characteristics reflected in population parameters and convenient point of			

(No under 18's or vulnerable groups allowed)		collection through the use of the researcher's social media platforms (e.g Instagram and WhatsApp).
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Ethics		
Documentation submitted with proposal	Gatekeeper's letter (institutional consent)	☐
	Completed Annexure E if you conduct research on IIE sites/students/staff	☐
	Instrument(s) (interview schedule or questionnaire)	☒
	Participant or respondent consent form	☐
	Audio-visual consent form (if applicable)	☐

Campus ethics committee recommendation	
Proposal has been reviewed by the supervisor and necessary ethics considerations have been included. ☐ Accepted as is and provide letter ☐ Accepted with provisions: Nature of provision: e.g. Instrument is not sufficient / included and need to be signed off by the supervisor ☐ Major issues: Student should not continue with fieldwork. Actions to be taken: Click or tap here to enter text.	
Supervisor signature	
	Click or tap to enter a date.
Co-supervisor/Campus ethics panel member signature	
	Click or tap to enter a date.

Annexure C: Ethical Clearance Letter



Date: 08/07/2022

Student name: **THEMBALETHU
KHUMALO** Student number:



Campus: **DURBAN**

Re: Approval of RESE8419 Proposal and Ethics Clearance

HONOURS ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER

Your research proposal and the ethical implications of your proposed research topic were reviewed by your supervisor and the campus research panel, a subcommittee of The Independent Institute of Education's Research and Postgraduate Studies Committee.

Your research proposal posed no significant ethical concerns and your supporting documents and instruments are in order to proceed. We hereby provide you with permission to proceed with your research.

In the event of you deciding to change your research methodology in any way, kindly consult your supervisor to ensure all ethical considerations are adhered to and pose no risk to any participant or party involved. A revised ethical clearance letter will be issued.

We wish you all the best with your research!

GENERAL CONDITIONS TO BE FULFILLED IN RELATION TO RESEARCH

Permission is granted to proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met and may be withdrawn should any of these conditions be flouted.

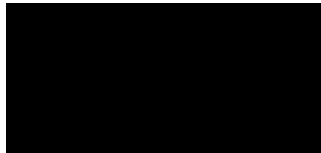
Please note: The panel has not considered the merits, accuracy or ethical soundness of the research. The only merits examined are the use of The IIE as a sample.

Permission is granted subject to the following conditions:

1. The researcher(s) will need to obtain informed consent in writing from all of the participants in his/ her sample if the study is not anonymous.
2. The researcher(s) may only use the data collected for research purposes and in no other way.
3. Photographs of human subjects may only be taken if relevant to the research, informed consent was obtained, and even with informed consent, the photographs may not be published on any online platforms.
4. The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.
5. No names or identifying information of participants may be used within the research and the research must be voluntary.
6. Please make it clear that the information will not be used punitively in any way and participants may in no way be counselled/advised based on this.

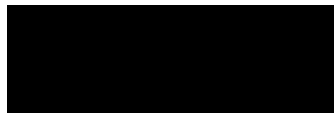
Supervisor name: Sarah

Freestone



Signature:

Campus Postgraduate Coordinator (CPC) name: Carolanda du Toit



Signature: