

Real People = Real Bodies

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Body positivity is no longer a niche topic—when US consumers are shown real people, they expect to see a variety of body sizes, shapes, and types, too. A sign of the changing times? Victoria's Secret, long the pinnacle of a tall, white, thin standard of beauty for women, is struggling to stay afloat,¹ while newer lingerie brands offering a broader spectrum of sizing, such as Skims,² are already worth billions. Millennial-centric fashion brands like ASOS, Everlane, and Lululemon are beginning to feature more body-diverse models on their websites. Mainstream standards of beauty are shifting, and our fresh wave of Visual GPS data reveals that consumers are more likely to purchase from a brand that aligns with their values. Body diversity should be included, no matter the topic at hand.

And inclusion of all types of bodies goes beyond just size. Our Visual GPS research found that 1 in 5 US consumers experience bias based on their body size or type, and while the primary reason given was being perceived as “too heavy,” respondents also cited being called “too curvy,” “too shapeless,” “too short,” or even “too skinny.” What’s more, those who experience body bias also experience a high amount of bias based on other identity factors such as ability, gender identity, sexual orientation, race/origin, and age, suggesting that inclusion of all bodies is not a standalone topic—it is intrinsic to the authentic inclusion of most underrepresented identities.

Already, there is ample evidence that advertising campaigns showcasing real-life depictions of bodies, whether male or female identifying, are positively received by audiences. Some examples include Aerie and Dove's now-classic campaigns; more recently, Marketcast Real Time Analytics found, an image featuring a brawn³ male model on Savage x Fenty's Instagram garnered 118% more engagement than the account's average post. At Getty Images, customer searches for “dieting” have declined, while searches for “body positivity,” “self love,” and “plus size” are rising in its stead, right alongside “real people” and “real life.” For brands looking to show real people in their visual communications, here are some tips for authentically including people with bodies of all shapes, sizes, and types.

Consider how gender identity may affect body image

Our Visual GPS research confirms that women are more likely to experience body bias than men (24% vs. 15%), but that doesn't mean they're alone. Women are more likely to experience judgement for being “too heavy” or not having the right body “shape,” while men are more likely to be judged for being “too skinny” or “too weak.” Further, transgender and gender non-conforming people experience more body bias than cis-gendered people for factors like being “too muscular” and “too tall.”

Women have a long history of grappling with a fashion industry which favors the slim, men may feel overshadowed by celebrity hunks, and transgender and nonbinary people may feel compared to traditional, binary expressions of gender. When representing people of various gender identities, consider which stereotypes they may have experienced, and actively seek to break through them.

Be aware of how other aspects of identity, including disability, shape how bodies look

Depending on your identity, your experiences with body bias may differ. Of those who experience body bias, 1 in 3 experience another type of bias, and the top reasons are one's ability, race or origin, and age. This suggests that when people are experiencing body bias, this bias is closely related to other aspects of their identity, as well.

The modern body-positivity movement began with online activists, and they continue to move it forward.⁴ The "ideal" of a white, thin, able-bodied young woman was created by a white, patriarchal culture; therefore, it's crucial to remember that true body positivity must be intersectional. There is still a ways to go in terms of truly including all types of bodies in body-positive ad campaigns—for example, people with disabilities are still often left out. That's why it's especially important to feature people of all body types, including people with disabilities, in order to be authentically inclusive of all identities.

Show people with all body types in everyday life

When we tested visuals with consumers as part our latest Visual GPS research, we found that authentic visuals of joyful people with larger body types in everyday life stand out more to American consumers than images of curvy women in more stereotypical or one-dimensional depictions, focused on topics like diet or exercise. However, when we looked at our top-selling visuals from 2020, less than 1% featured individuals who wear plus-sizes, and around half of those showed one-dimensional visual stories about weight loss.

While physical fitness and healthy eating are activities that people of all sizes enjoy, the over-index of this type of visual reinforces the harmful narrative that people with larger bodies should be focused on the way they look. Including individuals with all sizes and types of bodies in everyday scenarios—appearing comfortable in their own skin—will go a long way towards breaking stereotypes and resonating positively with consumers.

Sources

[1] [NBC](#)

[2] [New York Times](#)

[3] [Hypebeast](#)

[4] [Medium](#)