

**An Inspiration to Skinny Girls and an Aspiration to Bigger Girls: The Ethics Surrounding
Brandy Melville**

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By

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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Introduction:

Brandy Melville is an Italian fast-fashion clothing company known for its popularity among young women and girls. The brand is identified by its “California Girl” aesthetic, and the fact that it makes all of its clothing in only one size, a womens extra small/small. In fact, its models are usually known to all be 5’7”-5’9” with a waist size of 23-25 inches. Although Brandy Melville has reached indescribable levels of fame and popularity throughout its 50 years of history, it has also received substantial backlash from those who do not agree with its ethics and morals. Millions of young women and girls have shared their own stories of how much the brand has harmed their confidence and self-esteem, especially because of the fact no matter how much negative feedback it gets, it will never acknowledge any of it. Analyzing Brandy Melville and its inevitable controversy will help understand why it gets the hate that it does, and how other companies can learn from its mistakes to create spaces that do not alienate those who do not fit its perfect mold of a user. In what follows, I show how Brandy Melville and its exclusion of young women and girls who do not match the same height and weight as its models is not just due to the fact that it designs and manufactures clothing in one size, but because of its other design choices it makes on a daily basis based on its biases towards a specific kind of user. These include the brand’s marketing strategies through its website and social media accounts and how it presents them to the public eye. I do this by drawing on the science, technology, and society (STS) framework of User Configuration, which analyzes how designers embed ideas, assumptions, and/or biases into their designs, limiting their users’ experience with them. I will collect my evidence by studying Brandy Melville's website, social media accounts, and scholarly articles that analyze its design choices.

Literature Review:

Ever since the emergence of Brandy Melville and its controversy, several scholars have analyzed it as a whole. While their analyses highlight how the brand's controversy is mainly targeted towards the fact that it sells clothing in only one size, they do not consider the other design choices that influence the specific kind of user it intends to attract and repel. This oversight limits a fuller understanding of how Brandy Melville configures its users through a broader set of marketing strategies.

For example, in one scholarly article, Cecilia Roller goes into depth about Brandy Melville, and how its clothes are an inspiration to skinny girls and an aspiration to bigger girls due to its one-size-fits-all policy. She even shares a small anecdote about how she bought a pair of pants for her little sister for Christmas, and although she was excited to gift them to her, they ultimately ended up being too small for her waist. This completely destroyed Roller's little sister's confidence and self-esteem, and even made her even resentful of Brandy Melville and what it stands for. She goes on to talk about how the brand's limited selection of sizes is what ultimately dictates who wears its clothing. Roller also mentions how never in Brandy Melville's 50 years of business has its leaders ever cared about the amount of criticism they get for only making clothing in one size, as it ultimately benefits them when it comes to manufacturing clothes (Roller 2023). Manufacturing clothing in one size is clearly going to be cheaper, quicker, and easier than manufacturing clothing in an array of sizes as the company does not need to worry about fabric differences and such.

Similarly, in another scholarly article, Sarah VanSlette and Damion Waymer analyze Brandy Melville's exclusive marketing approach. They explain how because the brand's clothes are all tailored to fit one standard of women, it uses it to promote this idea of exclusivity, which has ultimately led to its increase in sales and overall popularity. Even one of the store owners

VanSlette and Waymer interviewed talked about how unapologetic they were about Brandy Melville's sizing policy because it gained them the traction we see and experience today (VanSlette et al., 2016).

Although both scholarly articles are valid in the fact that Brandy Melville's controversy is heavily tied to its sizing policy, they both overlook other major design choices, such as its website and social media accounts. In my upcoming analysis, I will advance scholarly discourse on the brand by focusing more in depth on how it is presented to its users, and how extremely calculated it is. By doing so, I aim to show how Brandy Melville's curated digital presence works to subtly shape who, and who does not, belong in its consumer base.

Conceptual Framework:

My analysis of Brandy Melville and how it ultimately ostracizes young women and girls who do not fit into its perfect mold of a user draws on the ethical framework of User Configuration. This framework allows me to examine the kinds of design choices the brand makes to attract and benefit from a specific kind of user based on how it presents itself to the public eye. User Configuration, developed by British sociologist Steven Woolgar, uses this metaphor of machines as text and designers as authors. It is the authors that control how the text is presented to the reader, a.k.a. the user, and exactly what limitations are in place because of it. Woolgar expands on this metaphor and goes into depth about how engineers/designers embed ideas, assumptions, and/or biases they have about their users into the technologies they create and maintain, whether consciously or unconsciously. As a result, users' interactions with technologies are oftentimes constrained by design choices made by engineers/designers. This makes it so that a defined set of actions can (and can't) be performed by specific kinds of users in specific kinds of settings (Woolgar, 1990). Woolgar also mentions how the configured user may

not perfectly match the actual user, which indicates that the design is not “user friendly”. This is exactly the reason why processes such as product testing are taken in place before anything within a company is deployed, as it can help reveal whether or not the configured user actually corresponds to the potential actual user (Akrich, 1992).

In what follows, I will draw on the ethical framework of User Configuration to explain why Brandy Melville and its negative impact on specific groups of young women and girls is not just about how it only sells clothing in one size, but how its other design choices present itself favorably to an extremely specific kind of user in an extremely calculated manner. By referencing User Configuration, I will be able to show these different kinds of design choices the brand makes when it comes to targeting this specific kind of user, such as its website and social media accounts. These design choices clearly reflect Brandy Melville’s personal biases, and how it most likely will never get rid of them despite the amount of criticism it gets. My analysis will also mention how based on User Configuration, the brand’s controversy and backlash can be tied to the fact that its configured user does not match its actual user in most cases.

Analysis I: Brandy Melville’s Website and Instagram



Figure 1. Brandy Melville's Website

Brandy Melville's website and social media accounts alone prove exactly what kind of user the brand is entirely built around, deliberately appealing to a narrow demographic while alienating anyone outside of that demographic. The brand's online presence is not just a

reflection of its aesthetic or how cute or pretty its clothes are, but an extremely detailed technological script that configures its users in a way that aligns with its biases. Figure 1 shows Brandy Melville's website the second it is opened. As one can see, there is an array of highly curated models, each displaying a piece of clothing with its name—often a girl's name from an actual Brandy Melville store employee—and its price. Based on Figure 1, all of the models are young, skinny, and petite girls. Their body types are essentially identical to each other, reinforcing this singular ideal Brandy Melville is known for promoting. It is also apparent how the models are all White, reflecting a Eurocentric beauty standard that further narrows the scope of who the brand envisions as its everyday customer. This design choice Brandy Melville makes is not arbitrary; rather, it reinforces the kind of biases it has, and how it intends for its users to match its models, otherwise its clothes would not fit them at all. According to Woolgar's concept of User Configuration, designers embed specific kinds of ideas, assumptions, and/or biases into their designs, limiting the interpretive flexibility of their users (Woolgar, 1993). In this case, Brandy Melville's design choices script a specific kind of user—one that is thin, petite, and overwhelmingly White. By exclusively featuring models who fit in this mold the brand has created, it configures its users into two categories: those who are already part of this exclusive in-group and those who are not.

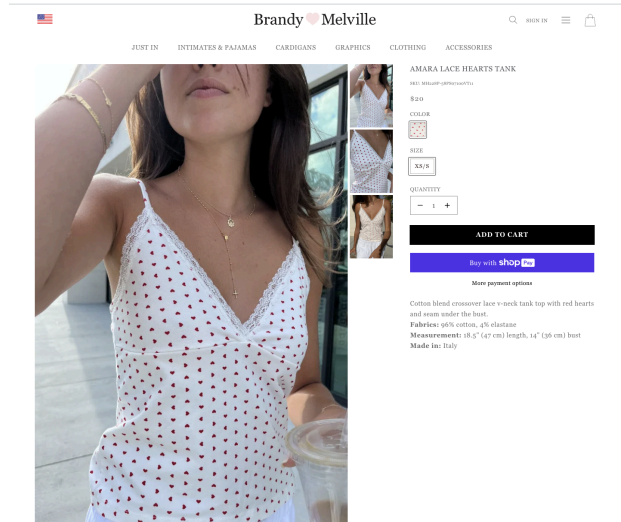


Figure 2. Brandy Melville's Product Information

Going from Figure 1 to Figure 2, Figure 2 displays what one sees on Brandy Melville's website when they click on a piece of clothing. Based on Figure 2, one can notice how there is an extreme lack of product information. Unlike many other major clothing brands that provide detailed size charts, fabric information, sometimes even model information, Brandy Melville only offers the absolute bare minimum. This deliberate omission of key information of the brand's clothing to help its users make sound decisions suggests it assumes its users are already familiar with its usual aesthetic and sizing information. This heavily reinforces the idea that Brandy Melville's "ideal" customer does not need additional guidance—she simply already fits the mold.

In addition, aside from having an extreme lack of product information, there is also no place for customers to submit reviews so that other customers can get a sense of how the piece of clothing fits and feels. This model is usually extremely apparent in all different types of retailers, as it helps people make informed purchasing decisions that benefits both the company and the customers (Huang et al., 2015). Reviews are most likely blocked to prevent Brandy Melville from being criticised for its design choices on its own website. Through the lens of User

Configuration, these criticisms would come from the actual user who does not match the configured user, which would happen in most cases as only a small percentage of women in America really fit the brand's standard of physical appearance. For example, if it is assumed that the average Brandy Melville model is underweight as they are usually 5'7"-5'9" with a waist size of 23-25 inches (Hao, 2021), according to the National Center for Health Statistics, only 2% of women in America are underweight (Fryer et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the absence of reviews is a form of digital gatekeeping, ensuring that the brand's carefully curated image remains unchallenged by those affected by it and its ethics and morals. In addition, by preemptively silencing all kinds of negative feedback, Brandy Melville not only protects itself from all criticism, but also maintains this illusion of effortless perfection, where every one of its users just happens to seamlessly embody its "aesthetic", otherwise known as its standard of physical appearance.



Figure 3. Brandy Melville's Instagram

Moving on to Brandy Melville's social media accounts, specifically its Instagram, it still maintains the same image it is keen on keeping and maintaining. The brand's rise to popularity is largely credited to its Instagram, where its "California Girl" aesthetic first gained traction among young women and girls. Based on Figure 3, Brandy Melville still displays an array of models that conform to its beauty standards, however, in a much more candid nature. They can be seen sharing a croissant at a cute cafe or taking a stroll around the city. Upon clicking on a random Instagram post, I was struck by a label at the bottom of the comments section that read "Comments on this post have been limited", as seen in Figure 4. Brandy Melville not only does not allow reviews, but it limits comments on every single one of its Instagram posts. Clearly, this goes back to the brand's design choices to maintain its image and ethics and morals by remaining

undisturbed by those affected negatively by it, which would be the actual user who does not fit the configured user.

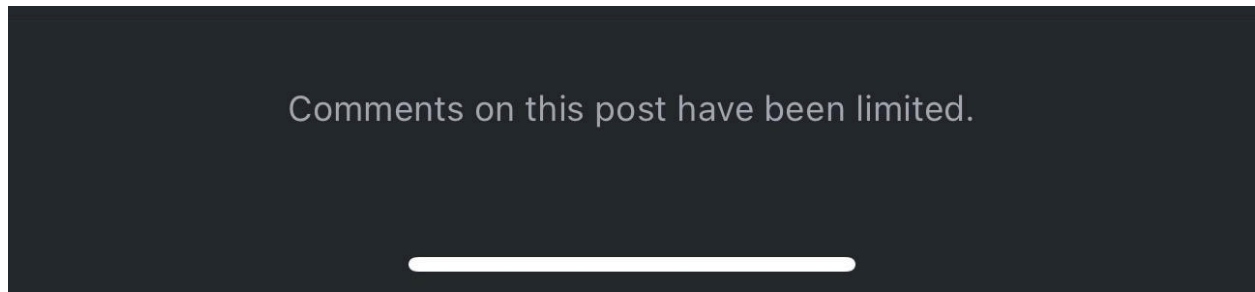


Figure 4. Comment Warning Under Every Post on Brandy Melville's Instagram

Scrolling through Brandy Melville's Instagram more, I noticed the amount of singers it posts wearing its clothes. This strategic use of celebrities is a common marketing strategy among all different types of retailers, as it strengthens the brands exclusivity by associating it with figures who already have a substantial amount of social capital. However, one thing I noticed was how Brandy Melville followed the same theme with their models with their singers. The brand only tends to pick singers who are again, young, thin, and petite. Some might argue that this is simply a standard marketing strategy used to appeal to a wide audience. But if that were true, why does Brandy Melville never include singers who do not fit its clearly defined beauty standard? This view clearly fails to consider how the brand consistently chooses singers who, like its models, only fit in a womens extra small/small. These design choices clearly, and loudly, further cements Brandy Melville's aspirational yet exclusionary identity among its users.

Based on Brandy Melville's website and social media accounts design choices, it is apparent how it not only reinforces its biases towards a specific kind of user, but also silences anyone that does not match it perfectly. The brand's online presence is an overall heavily throughout technological script that sets major limitations on its users whether they like it or not. Whether through maintaining a uniform image in its models, restricting feedback, or curating

influencer partnerships, Brandy Melville ensures that it remains accessible to some and inaccessible to many, making its exclusivity a key component of its continued success and controversy.

Analysis II: Brandy Melville's Dark Past on the Internet

Brandy Melville has even gone as far as embedding its biases in its design choices in other countries where the women are still known to be thin, petite, and pale in skin. Xinrui Wu, Yuhan Za, and Cathy Li wrote a scholarly article on how the brand expanded its market into China by employing a number of global marketing strategies, making it heavily sought after in Chinese markets. They mention how Chinese women tend to identify with Brandy Melville's ideal body type. For example, they state in their first section, "According to Lei Zhang in 2018, nowadays in China, more and more people associate beauty with being underweight. Among Chinese young women, beauty is defined as "creamy white skin, big wide eyes, and stickthin figures" [6]. As a result, Brandy Melville's ideal body concept matches the opinion of the Chinese mainstream." (Wu et al., 2021) This alignment between Brandy Melville's beauty standards and China's beauty standards suggests that its expansion is not just about selling clothing, but it is also about exploiting existing body expectations to create this demand that makes young women and girls in need of its clothing in order to be validated by society. In addition, Wu, Za, and Li go on to mention how the brand takes advantage of Weibo, China's version of Instagram, in the same way it does in America. Brandy Melville uses the exact same strategies of displaying its clothes in only models who fit its ideal body type, and even goes as far as hiring Chinese celebrities who also fit its ideal body type to wear its clothes on their own Weibo accounts. For example, they state in their second section:

On social media, Ouyang Nana is portrayed to be a very fashionable star, and the fact that she is an actress also implies that her visual appearance is wellmaintained and outstanding. Because Ouyang Nana has a reputation for being beautiful, young, and fashionable, consumers will trust her fashion taste and buy the clothing that she promotes. Consumers tend to believe those who are more professional and knowledgeable. Sometimes, finding the right celebrity to promote a company's brand can save the brand. (Wu et al., 2021)

This quote clearly displays Brandy Melville's design choices to reinforce its biases towards its configured user by promoting only celebrities who align with those biases, like Ouyang Nana. What stands out here is how the quote emphasizes the need for appearance when it comes to trust—consumers are known to trust fashion advice from someone who is not only a celebrity, but someone who is considered “beautiful” to the public eye. This quote shows how Brandy Melville's choices when it comes to picking and choosing which celebrity to display its clothes are not about popularity, but about crafting an image that fits its narrow ideal. In this way, the brand configures its user not just through sizing or models, but by repeatedly showcasing only one kind of beauty as trustworthy.

In another scholarly article, Vera Hoelsher, Anabel Gutierrez, and Gillian Hadfield run through the history of Brandy Melville, and its transition from being a success to a scandal. They also go over the brand's Instagram, and how it was once a pioneer in online marketing as it displayed its models in a way that was desirable. According to one of the girls Hoelsher, Gutierrez, and Hadfield interviewed who worked at a Brandy Melville store, her and her friends would look up these models and be completely consumed with what they ate, drank, and wore. However, once people started to notice how the brand would turn down women who did not fit

its beauty standard to preserve its image, an uprising began online. According to Hoelsher, Gutierrez, and Hadfield, this led to Brandy Melville losing a million followers and getting sued twice. Even after this, the brand still did not comment on any allegations. This kind of silencing is an extension of Brandy Melville's way of configuring its user to remain thin, petite, and pale in skin, as it maintains a carefully controlled image by limiting, or completely removing, all external discourse (Hoelsher et al., 2025).

This same kind of silencing can be seen in another scholarly article written by Emma Haskal. According to Haskal, there is a reason why Brandy Melville decided to limit comments on all of its Instagram posts. In May of 2020, after the murder of George Floyd, most major corporations released public statements to show their solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and everything it stands for. However, Brandy Melville chose to stay silent during that time, which ended up getting thousands of comments on its Instagram calling for a change within its ethics and morals. For example, Haskal states one user wrote, "being racist isn't edgy or cute Brandy Melville." (Haskal, 2020) After weeks of backlash, Brandy Melville ended up disabling its comments on all of its Instagram posts for good, and again, never commented on anything.

These design decisions are a direct reflection of User Configuration in action. Brandy Melville's designers—both in a literal sense and metaphorical sense—exercise control over who gets to experience their designs in the most unlimited manner possible. By limiting comments, reviews, etc., the brand enforces a kind of technological script that ensures a specific kind of user—those who align with its biases—are welcomed. Anyone outside of that and anyone who has the courage to say something about Brandy Melville's lack of inclusivity are systematically erased.

As a whole, Brandy Melville and its exclusion of young women and girls who do not match its models in terms of physical appearance can be blamed not just through its one-size-fits-all policy, but also through its website and social media accounts. Although the brand's one-size-fits-all policy is what ultimately determines who gets to wear its clothes, it is also through its online presence where it really gets to reinforce the kind of image it wants to portray, and what kind of customers it wants to keep and get rid of. As mentioned before, Brandy Melville takes several measures to do this, such as only displaying models on both its website and Instagram that have the same body type and sometimes even skin color. In addition, the brand provides limited product information, insinuating that all of its customers are already aware and accepting of its overall ethics and morals. Brandy Melville does this all while silencing all kinds of negative feedback, both online and offline, and never acknowledging any of their actions that have affected people one way or another.

Conclusion:

Through the lens of User Configuration, I was able to analyze the design choices made by Brandy Melville, and how they each embed this idea of its configured user being young, thin, and petite. It is not just because of the fact that the brand makes its clothes in one size, but also how it presents itself to the public eye that allows the designers to embed their own biases in their designs. Brandy Melville does this by leveraging its website and social media accounts, while silencing all kinds of negative feedback from the actual user who does not match the configured user. These kinds of analyses are beneficial to review as they shed light on the kind of design choices designers make that can potentially alienate an entire group of people, whether consciously or unconsciously. It is important to be aware of one's design choices because based

on Brandy Melville alone, it can ultimately lead to a company's success or a company's downfall.

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