Brandy Melville's "Ideal Body": A Technological Politics Analysis of Brandy Melville's One-size-fits-all Model

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Ashar Kamal

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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

Advisor

Benjamin Laugelli, Department of Engineering and Society

Introduction

Brandy Melville is a popular international Italian clothing company directed to teenage girls for its cute and simplistic clothes (Davids, 2021). The company employs a unique one-size-fits-all model, meaning all its clothing comes in one-size, and nontraditional marketing strategy, based solely on social media, which have contributed to its rapid increase in popularity among teenagers. Brandy Melville's one-size-fits-all model has been controversial because its clothing fits a specific group of people who look like the company's skinny and conventionally pretty models (Macedo, 2021). The negative psychological and physical impact that Brandy Melville's one-size model has on individuals who do not fit the company's target body type has been widely studied, but this understanding fails to take into account the broader societal impact that the company's one-size model has and how Brandy Melville intentionally privileges some groups while marginalizing others. If we continue to think that Brandy Melville's one-size-fits-all model is only harming individuals on a micro scale, we will overlook the impact this model is having on perpetuating the fallacy that the "ideal" body type for teenage girls is slim and above average height.

Using the case of Brandy Melville's one-size-fits-all model, I will utilize the framework of technological politics to analyze the company's advertising and physical clothing to explain how its model exhibits intentional "politics" by expressing the company's idea of an "ideal" body type and intentionally empowering groups that conform to this body type while marginalizing and harming groups that do not. Technological politics states that particular ideas can be embedded into technology and that technological designs can express relations of power and privilege among groups of people by empowering and advantaging some, while marginalizing or

harming others (Winner, 1980). Through the lens of technological politics, I will assess Brandy Melville's advertisements, consumer testimonials, statistics related to body shaming, and its one-size-fits-all clothing.

Background

The Italian clothing store, Brandy Melville, entered the American market in 2009, prepared to compete against already established American brands such as Abercrombie and Fitch, American Eagle, and Forever 21. In order to compete with these brands Brandy Melville adopted a nontraditional marketing strategy and unique product line of one-size-fits-all clothing, that have greatly contributed to its rapid increase in popularity among teens (VanSlette & Waymer, 2016). As seen in Figure 1, this strategy means all clothing Brandy Melville offers in one-size. This widespread brand has reached millions of teenage girls through its advertising with its Instagram alone having more than 3 million followers.

Figure 1. Examples of Brandy Melville's one-size clothing from the company's website ("Brandy Melville," 2023).

Literature Review

Several scholarly sources have investigated the positive and negative impacts of Brandy Melville's one-size-fits-all model. These works typically focus on how this model has resulted in

the company gaining popularity and the harm that it has had on individuals, but do not adequately consider how it exemplifies and marginalizes certain groups and the broader societal impacts that have resulted through this division.

In the article, "Exclusive and Aspirational: Teen Retailer Brandy Melville Uses the Country Club Approach to Brand Promotion," authors Sarah VanSlette and Damion Waymer (2016) discuss the popularity of Brandy Melville. Unlike the flashy signage and elaborate marketing of its competitors, Brandy Melville boutiques feature discreet signage and the brand does not advertise other than on social media. VanSlete and Waymer assert that Brandy Melville's success can be attributed to the exclusivity of the brand's petite sizing, making the brand aspirational for those who want to fit into its clothes. In order to better explain this, the authors use the metaphor of a country club where members value the status they achieve by claiming membership to an exclusive club and others aspire to one day join the club (VanSlette & Waymer, 2016). Individuals who do not fit into Brandy Melville's one-size-fits-all model exhibit a form of brand rejection. This rejection actually strengthens the desire of those rejected to affiliate with the brand which enhances its reputation and as seen with Brandy Melville, results in the company's success.

Although the existence of this "exclusive club" of individuals who fit into Brandy Melville's one-size-fits-all model has resulted in success for them, it is unjust to ignore the potential harm that this model has brought to teenage girls who do not fit into it. In "The Influence of Small One-size Clothes on the Female - With Brandy Melville as an Example," author Ruohan Hao (2021) investigates the physical and psychological harm that Brandy Melville's one-size-fits-all model has on individuals. Hao states that one-size does not fit all sizes and the clothing is instead marketed to fit a specific group of people illustrated by the

company's models that are often seen on its social media. Many of the company's models have thin bodies and there are no diverse body types of any kind (Hao, 2021). Often, when girls cannot fit in one-size clothing they think they are abnormal and unfeminine because of their inability to fit in clothing that is supposed to fit everyone (Hao, 2021). This can result in major physical harm because some girls may adopt unreasonable and irregular ways to lose weight to wear these one-size clothes and look like the models that are advertised. In addition to physical harm, individuals who do not fit into Brandy Melville's clothing may feel psychological harm due to them not having the so-called "ideal body" (Hao, 2021). These clothes are very likely to damage a girl's self-confidence and result in more insecurities for teenagers.

The first source authored by VanSlette and Waymer explains how Brandy Melville's unique one-size-fits-all clothing has resulted in it gaining popularity, while Hao highlights the harm this clothing has on individuals. While it is necessary to understand these factors, I will utilize the framework of technological politics to analyze and identify the groups that Brandy Melville's one-size-fits-all model exemplifies and marginalizes, as well as how this model has created broader societal impacts through this division in order to gain a deeper understanding of the issue.

Conceptual Framework

In order to undertake my analysis of Brandy Melville's one-size-fits-all model, I will use technological politics which allows me to determine how this technology exhibits "politics" and privileges girls who conform to Brandy Melville's target body type while marginalizing girls who do not. Technological politics is a theory that states that technological artifacts embody politics because particular political ideas, needs, and interests are embedded into them. In the

framework of technological politics, "politics" are defined as the arrangement of power and authority governed by humans (Winner, 1980). Technological designs can express relations of power and privilege among groups of people by empowering and advantaging some, while marginalizing or harming others. Intentionality is a key idea in technological politics as this bias can be an intended or an unintended consequence of design depending on whether a technology's "politics" are an intentional result of design choices that reflect explicit bias or if they are an unintentional effect that express implicit bias (Winner, 1980).

Using the framework of technological politics, I will analyze whether Brandy Melville's one-size-fits-all model expresses Brandy Melville's idea of an "ideal" body type and empowers groups that conform to this body type while marginalizing groups that do not. I will also determine whether the technology's politics are the result of explicit or implicit bias. To undertake this analysis, I will utilize evidence from Brandy Melville's advertisements, consumer testimonials, statistics related to body shaming, and the company's one-size-fits-all clothing.

Analysis

In order to better understand the problem Brandy Melville is perpetuating, it is crucial to understand the company's purpose behind the one-size-fits-all model. This business model is supposed to encompass products that are designed to fit a person of any size ("*One-Size-Fits-All*," 2023). The one-size-fits-all model has been commonly used in bracing options such as knee braces and ankle braces, because it allows the manufacturer to mass produce the product, thus reducing the cost and hassle of manufacturing. Brandy Melville has employed this model on clothing and states that it makes the purchasing process of its clothing easier since consumers do not need to worry about considering their size (Xu, 2023). These

factors allow Brandy Melville to keep its prices cheap compared to competitors, making the brand attractive to teenagers. The problem with this business model and its implementation at Brandy Melville is that it does not align with reality. The diverse body types among the general population make it impossible for any one product to conform to everyone. When companies create this kind of clothing, they are essentially forcing their "ideal" body type on consumers who want to wear their clothing (Sabre, 2019). Using technological politics, I will analyze Brandy Melville's advertising and physical clothing to show how its one-size-fits-all model expresses the company's "ideal" body type, thus intentionally empowering groups that conform to its image and marginalizing those that do not.

Brandy Girls Advertising

Figure 2. Examples of Brandy Girls on the Brandy Melville Instagram ("Brandymelvilleusa," 2023).

The advertising for Brandy Melville's one-size-fits-all model materializes visuals of its "ideal" body type and intentionally empowers those that fit these descriptions while marginalizing anyone who does not. According to former employees, store workers are tasked

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with finding shoppers that exemplify the brand look to become Brandy Girls or models for the store's famous Instagram account (Figure 2). One former employee explained, "You ask customers if you can take a picture for product research then ask for their Instagram account to send to owners and see if these girls are worthy enough to hire. Pay is ONLY based on looks, girls will be paid anywhere between 9.50-14 if they are pretty enough" (VanSlette & Waymer, 2016). This suggests that Brandy Melville only employs girls that fit the image of the company's "ideal" body type, thus intentionally empowering girls who conform to the brand's look. Additionally, these Brandy Girls often become famous on Instagram because of their affiliation with the brand. This marketing technique makes the brand appealing for anyone who hopes to be a Brandy Girl. By elevating the status of these models, they are seen as celebrities, thus the teenage girls that see this advertising want to be like them.

The issue that arises, however, is the disconnect between what a Brandy Girl means and the population Brandy Melville targets. The age group that the company targets is teenagers of the ages 14-18. One would expect that Brandy Melville would advertise people representative of this population, but according to a CDC report from 2012, the typical measurements for a 16 year old girl in the US, the company's mean age of customer, is 5' 3" with a 31" waist (McDowell et al., 2008). However, nearly all of the Brandy Girl models advertised on the company's website are between 5' 7"-5' 9" with waists no larger than 25" (Hao, 2021). These differences are significant and suggest that Brandy Melville is glorifying a specific body image that is not representative of the majority of U.S. teenage girls.

The marginalizing effects this has on those who are "left out" of this group are extensive. During an interview, customer Sarah Behanu told the Register Forum, "The appearance that they were advertising just made me judge myself more and made me want to fit in more" (Macedo,

2021). Note her word choices of "judge myself" and "fit in." By constantly seeing advertisements depicting the same body type, teenage girls think they too should strive to look like that, so that they may possibly enjoy the fame of being a Brandy Girl. While teenage girls with similar body types to these Brandy Girls feel empowered, girls with other body types feel as though they need to conform to this so-called "ideal" body type and if not they are flawed or unfeminine.

While this advertising technique of depicting Brandy Girls in one-size-fits-all clothing results in great harm for individuals, the effect it is having on social ideology may be more detrimental in the long term (Hao, 2021). In a survey published by the National Institute on Media and the Family, the study reports that 53% of 14-year-old American girls are "unhappy with their bodies," and this number rises to 78% among 17-year-old girls ("*Teen Health and the Media*," 2021). Brandy Melville's target audience is teenage girls between the ages of 14 and 18, so it is directly contributing to this problem by advertising Brandy Girls who lack diversity in body type as "ideal." In pop culture today, smaller sizes are linked to attractiveness and perfection whereas larger sizes are linked to fatness and poor self control (Hao, 2021). This social ideology is being perpetuated by Brandy Melville, as it depicts an "ideal" but unrealistic body for teenagers and then watches them strive for it, resulting in body discrimination and girls being ashamed of their bodies.

One-size-fits-all Clothing

The clothing for Brandy Melville's one-size-fits-all model physically expresses the company's "ideal" body type, intentionally empowering those that can fit, while marginalizing those that cannot. While not everybody possesses the physique of a Brandy Melville model, many girls are led to believe that by purchasing the company's clothes they can still be like these

models. One customer said, "Being able to fit into Brandy Melville's clothing makes me feel accomplished and more confident" (Villalpando, 2020). Note her word choice of "accomplished" and "more confident." This choice of wording insinuates that customers feel a sense of validation when they can fit into these clothes. However, this sense of validation and empowerment is not felt by all demographics of teenage girls. These "overlooked" girls are the ones who do not physically match what it takes to fit into the Brandy Girl mold. According to a comparison of measurements from Brandy Melville's website to traditional sizes, the company's clothing collection is designed to fit sizes 0-4 (Prahl, 2019). This is exceptionally unequitable given that 68% of American women wear size 14 or above (George-Parkin, 2018). This suggests that the majority of American women cannot even fit into Brandy Melville's clothing and that a large portion of the population is excluded from being able to wear this clothing.

One Brandy Melville customer who cannot fit into the company's pants said that, "I don't really fit Brandy Melville's spectrum. I'm a little bit of an outlier. That does make me feel insecure in a way" (Villalpando, 2020). Her word choices make it evident that she feels like she is being excluded and does not fit the mold of this branding. Despite this clothing being designed for a specific subset of the population, many teenagers believe that they should be able to fit into these one-size-fits-all clothes and often lose self confidence and doubt their body shape if they cannot. In addition to psychological harm, some girls may force themselves into these small clothes using unhealthy weight control behaviors. According to a survey, more than 50% of teenage girls use unhealthy weight control methods such as skipping meals, fasting, smoking cigarettes, throwing up, taking laxatives, and over-exercising (Center, 2018). Brandy Melville is directly contributing to this problem by creating clothing for a certain body type, forcing teenage

girls to try to conform to it. While girls who have this body type feel special because they are able to fit into this clothing, girls who are not are left feeling inadequate.

Brandy Melville's one-size-fits-all model of clothing discriminates against individuals with larger bodies because the company's clothing is tailored to individuals with smaller bodies. Some advocates of Brandy Melville argue that it is common for brands to have special sections dedicated for plus-size clothing. For example, Forever 21 stores have designated areas for all "Plus + Curve" options with sizes ranging from "0X" to "3X", but it is uncommon for brands to have sections dedicated to slim bodies like Brandy Melville (Prahl, 2019). While this may be true, this view fails to consider how Brandy Melville does not market its clothes specifically for slim bodies and rather states its clothes are sized to fit everyone. In referring to the company's clothing, Brandy Melville executive Jessy Longo said, "We can satisfy almost everybody" (Prahl, 2019). To say that this clothing is for "almost everybody" means that the company is not claiming to target the specific subset of slim individuals. However, as seen in the company's one-size clothing translating to sizes 0-4, its clothing sizes physically target slim girls. This disconnect and dishonesty from Brandy Melville creates a harmful message in empowering girls who can fit in its clothing, while marginalizing girls who cannot.

Intentionality

Brandy Melville's one-size-fits-all model exhibits "politics" that reflect explicit bias that privileges girls that conform to the company's "ideal" body type and marginalizes those that do not. In an interview, former Brandy Melville Senior Vice President Luca Rotondo said she was told by CEO Stephen Marsan to only hire girls who fit his specification and that, "If she was black, if she was fat … he did not want them in the store" (Moynihan, 2021). Rotondo also reported multiple girls were fired for their physical appearance and race (Moynihan, 2021). This

suggests that Brandy Melville's leadership explicitly discriminated against certain individuals and body types. These biases were included into the design choices of the company's one-size-fits-all model in order to only privilege its desired "ideal" body type.

The intentionality of Brandy Melville's bias in its one-size-fits-all model can be further concluded by considering the company's desire to make its brand exclusive by catering to a select group of people who fit into the company's clothing. Research has shown that high rejection rates for organizations can boost organizational identification for members and increase the desire for affiliation among non-members (VanSlette & Waymer, 2016). This suggests that Brandy Mellville's one-size-fits-all model purposely caters to slim girls of its "ideal" body type in order to induce a form of brand rejection in girls who do not fit this type, which in turn enhances the brand's reputation and popularity. This explicit bias is embedded into Brandy Melville's one-size-fits-all model and results in the privileging of groups that conform to this body type while marginalizing groups that do not.

Conclusion

Through the lens of technological politics, I have argued that Brandy Melville's one-size-fits-all model reflects the company's idea of an "ideal" body type and intentionally empowers groups that conform to this body type while marginalizing groups that do not. By exclusively advertising girls who fit the company's "ideal" body type, a belief that its clothes physically reinforce, the company is perpetuating fallacies in social ideology of the "ideal" body type for teenage girls and discriminating against individuals who do not fit this body type. The harmful ideas that Brandy Melville is pushing through its one-size-fits-all model is having a

large negative impact on teenage girls, who are already very self-conscious, and society as a whole.

It is crucial for engineers to understand the effects of the one-size-fits-all model and the design factors that lead to its discrimination against certain groups. This understanding will help engineers address these problems and create equitable devices that can be used by all demographics and groups.

Word Count: 3165

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