

# ***How Do Companies' Marketing Strategies Affect Consumers' Appearance Anxiety & Confidence and Promote Purchasing Behaviors?***

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**Abstract:** This work analyzed how marketing strategies for businesses impacted consumers' levels of anxiety or confidence, encouraging purchasing behaviors. By conducting research on consumers who are experiencing social appearance anxiety (SAA) and analyzing two cases studies (Fenty's Body Confidence-Oriented Marketing Strategy and Brandy Melville's Controversial Appearance-Anxiety Marketing Strategy), our study concludes that social appearance anxiety-oriented marketing strategies have negative consequences on both consumers and companies. For the consumers, SAA can lead to mental/physical damage. For the businesses, the use of SAA can result in a loss of reputation. Finally, this report offers several recommendations for businesses' marketing campaigns, and these recommendations can improve profits in the long run without harming consumers or risking their standing in the market.

**Keywords:** social appearance anxiety & confidence, compulsive buying disorder

## **1. Introduction**

Now appearance anxiety has become a worldwide problem (authors et al., Disordered eating: Influence of body image, sociocultural attitudes, appearance anxiety and depression - a focus on college males and a gender comparison). People are surrounded by advertisements and are more or less influenced by when they see in them. Some companies promote a single aesthetic of white and thin for profit. This controversial single aesthetic brings thought to society and makes body image anxiety a heated topic. Our research paper discusses the current trend of the market, as well as how Companies' Appearance Confidence-Oriented Marketing Strategies can Promote Customers' Purchasing Behavior.

This report is divided into the following five parts. In the background and trend of the current market section, which introduces the current situation in the market and also some specific definitions in our paper. Then the section on negative effects of appearance and body image anxiety on consumers and brands includes psychological and physical consequences.

Then, this report applies two case analyses to analyze. Fenty Savage promotes selling by creating body positivity by generating feelings of sexiness, beauty, and empowerment towards their body, inclusivity, as well as the uniqueness of the performance. For Brandy Melville, their marketing slogan “one size fits all” was criticized, and their advertisement was controversial and was accused of creating appearance anxiety. Finally, this report gives four recommendations referring to encourage people to post pictures without photoshop to reduce appearance anxiety, explanations of negative consequences caused by appearance anxiety, standards the company should employ when choosing models, and consistency of brand value and product design

According to the definition, appearance anxiety refers to excessive attention to one's appearance, unconscious demeaning of one's appearance, imagination, and severe lack of self-confidence [1]. As one type of anxiety disorder, appearance anxiety can lead to a person's low self-esteem and dissatisfaction with themselves, exerting negative effects on people's both mental and physical health.

With the development of technology, social media has become an inseparable and important part of our daily lives. While enjoying easy and convenient access to information and advertisement, social values could also be affected by the advertisement spread by social media. In recent years, appearance anxiety has become more and more serious. When it comes to the fashion or beauty industry, the single aesthetic with the excessive pursuit of “white, young and skinny” generate appearance anxiety in society [2]. When such aesthetic or social values install in customers' ideologies, they tend to overly pursue the advertised “perfect” appearance and then transmit more anxiety to others.

In the fashion and beauty market, some companies even applied marketing strategies to connect imperfect appearance with negative evaluations such as "low ability," "lazy," "poor," or connect "hardworking", "success" and other positive evaluations to outstanding appearance. This phenomenon subliminally creates appearance anxiety in consumers who are exposed to such advertising campaigns [3]. This phenomenon also may intensify consumers' anxiety, misleading them to consume blindly and impulsively or adversely affecting their physical psychology. In addition, the spread of appearance anxiety is fueled by false advertising and excessive publicity, driven by profit. Consumers lose their ability to judge, making it possible for these companies to take advantage [4].

Though the development of social media and the on-purpose marketing campaigns or values lead to severe appearance anxiety in society, the values of diversity, inclusiveness, and respect also become more and more popular. Comments on the Internet have a wider discussion and criticism for companies that spread body or appearance anxiety. And the call for promoting body and appearance confidence and respect for diversity is becoming more mainstream for companies marketing strategies [5].

## 2. Literature Review

According to previous research, Social Appearance Anxiety (SAA) is defined as people paying overmuch attention to their physical appearance. Evidence has shown that SAA has various complications, including compulsive buying disorder and depression, which are common complications generated by SAA. We also found evidence proving that the advertisement tends to create SAA, likely to lead to the complications above, which can damage their mental and physical health. Therefore, we have concluded that expressing SAA is not a suitable strategy for businesses to make profits.

Same as SAA, body positivity is a popular term and concept associated with body size or body type. Body positivity aims to challenge dominant appearance ideals, foster acceptance and respect of all bodies regardless of shape, size, and features, and focus on appreciating the functionality and health of the body rather than solely focus on its appearance. And because women are one of the groups with a high prevalence of body image anxiety, body positivity is also more often associated with female body image. When the existing "White, Thin, and Young" female aesthetic collided with "Body Positivity", advertising and capital saw the profit they could make in this game. The

advertisements offer a superficial look into the body positivity movement and into feminist values; in fact, it offers up a much more postfeminist view, in which women are powerful through their ability to choose products [6]. While the question of whether feminism should be used to promote women to make purchases remains a fraught topic, there is no denying that body positivity can be a whole new path to advocacy.

### **3. Negative Effects Resulted from Appearance Anxiety Marketing**

This section analyzes the adverse effects of SAA on consumers' mental health from a psychological perspective. A near equal percentage of men and women met the criteria for compulsive buying disorder (CBD), which exacerbates SAA [7, 8]. However, in recent years, marketing departments have exploited SAA in their strategies to promote their products. For example, the Brandy Melville Company is a clothing manufacturer that only designs extremely small-sized clothing. For their customers to wear their products, their body types must be practically emaciated. It is highly likely that most of these customers suffer from some form of appearance anxiety, resulting in a distorted sense of their own bodies.

The forthcoming sections show how advertisements on various social media platforms potentially make people feel anxious about their appearance. Advertisements that focus on appearance-related problems may encourage consumers with anxiety toward purchasing decisions. The next sections provide evidence that some advertising strategies may negatively impact consumer finances and mental health. Therefore, the legitimacy of deliberately using consumers' mindsets for appearance anxiety-oriented marketing strategies is controversial.

#### **3.1. Negative Buying Behavior**

Consumers who are in a chronic state of anxiety can lead to negative purchasing behavior. The research discovered that people with SAA are more likely to pay too much attention to Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE); it refers to apprehension about others' negative evaluations. And Contingent Self-Esteem (CSE); it refers to one's self-esteem based on the approval of others or on social comparisons. FNE and CSE correlate highly with compulsive buying disorder (CBD) [10]. This disorder refers to consumers experiencing an unstoppable, chronic, and repeated impulse to go shopping and spend money.

Losing control of this activity can have crucial consequences for consumers, such as financial burdens [10]. For instance, consumers with compulsive buying behavior are likely to be in debt or inability to pay. The CBD generated by SAA makes them [WU2] pile up unmanageable debts and excess consumption. Even though sometimes they can pay off part of them, the negative cycles resulting from CBD eventually will make them deeply trapped in consumer traps [9].

#### **3.2. Mental Health**

Appearance anxiety-oriented marketing strategies also can exert negative impacts on consumers' mental states, including negative emotions and severe mental disorders. For consumers' physical health, having SAA can result in distorted judgment of their body and therefore lead to some eating disorders, which can incur some damage to themselves.

Research results found that there may be a link between SAA and disordered eating since SAA is associated with greater levels of body dissatisfaction, social anxiety, perfectionism, anorexia nervosa, and bulimia nervosa." [11]. In the eating disorder field proposed that social evaluation of appearance leads to symptoms such as disordered eating in those individuals who emphasize their physical appearance [12]. Since people are afraid of receiving negative evaluations from others about their general physical appearance, they are likely to form an incorrect judgment about their body and therefore

get anorexia nervosa. It is an eating disorder characterized by abnormally low body weight, an intense fear of gaining weight, and a distorted perception of weight [13]. And it is a potentially life-threatening disorder with one of the highest mortality rates of mental disorders. Individuals with anorexia nervosa usually do not believe they are ill and keep trying to lose weight even if the amount of energy they take is not able to support their bodies [14]. For instance, the campaign of Brandy-Melville, a famous brand in Italy, and have stated that their clothes are only for people with a good figure. In order to be able to wear their clothes, some consumers might obsess with losing weight and therefore damage their physical health.

Meanwhile, the advertisements that imply SAA can lead to severe mental problems for consumers. For example, conducting marketing campaigns with only skinny models or promoting the 'skinny-oriented' single aesthetic in society can deliver the idea or the social values that people need to insistently pay attention to their appearance and follow the above aesthetic to make themselves more attractive. Once the ideas or the values are installed in consumers' ideology through the above marketing strategies, they eventually will feel fatigued and exhausted because they put too much energy into their appearance and worry about that. Previous research suggests fatigue is the most common syndrome in people with anxiety. Fatigue can also lead to (makes them hard to concentrate and work and even leads to sleep problems) [15]. Another syndrome is depression, which is one of the most common mental disorders in patients with SAA. Previous studies suggest a significant correlation between SAA and depression. The data in this study shows that as SAA increases, depression, anxiety, and stress levels also increase [16].

Another example is related to CBD, which can largely influence consumers' emotions before/after purchasing. Negative emotions (anxiety, boredom, self-critical thoughts, anger) were the most commonly cited before compulsive buying disorder [17]. Consumers with CBD must suffer negative emotions until they make purchases, even though they do not need those products. During the shopping, many patients state that they have experienced intense excitement briefly. Nevertheless, a sense of letdown and disappointment usually followed after they made purchases. In a word, the mood of consumers with CBD might be infatuated several times a day, significantly suffering them [18].

In conclusion, based on the studies and evidence above, the negative impacts of SAA are well supported. Creating SAA could exert negative effects on consumers' financial situations and physical and psychological health. Moreover, it will even lead to severe mental disorders. Indeed, creating SAA can make profits for businesses, helping them to attract more consumers who are willing to put effort into their appearance. However, this strategy is not suitable for long-term profits and development. It is controversial to adopt an appearance anxiety-oriented marketing strategy in terms of the above problems. Furthermore, if consumers realize that companies are trying to use SAA to wash their minds, their brand loyalty is likely to decrease and even have a bad image of those companies. Under this situation, it is tough for businesses to make profits since their reputation got ruined. Therefore, to make a long-term profit, businesses should consider other tactics for their long-term profit instead of creating SAA intentionally.

## **4. Case Study-Based Marketing Strategy Analysis**

### **4.1. Case Study 1: Fenty's Body Confidence-oriented Marketing Strategy**

This paragraph describes how Rihanna's lingerie brand uses "Body Positivity" as their marketing strategy to stand out in an industry that used to drive customers to spend by creating body anxiety.

When talking about women's lingerie, what comes to mind is more "Victoria's Secret" and "Bikini" with slim waists and shapely figures. However, only defining a certain type of body as sexy for marketing purposes is biased since it is suspected of discriminating against diversity.

Rihanna, the founder of Savage Fenty said [19]: "We want to make people look good and feel

good. We want you to feel sexy and have fun doing it.” This is also the core philosophy of the Savage Fenty brand. Rihanna's fashion show includes women of all shapes, colors, and sizes, and pregnant women who cannot be seen in a regular lingerie fashion show are among the models. Grammy Award-winning, plus-size pop singer Lizzo is also one of the faces of Savage Fenty. Even Vogue's official website compared Savage Fenty to Victoria's Secret in one of their articles and supported Rihanna's foresight in ushering in a new era of lingerie shows [20]. This is not an official statement, but it is easy to see how fashion users are attracted to the brand that has "Body Positivity" as its core concept. But unfortunately, not many brands are currently using “Body Positivity” as a marketing strategy, which is a hint that this could be a new business opportunity in the future.

According to Hakeem Fenty's marketing concept allows it to be more welcomed than other brands by consumers and society in 3 different dimensions [21]:

1. Feelings of sexiness, beauty, and empowerment
2. Inclusivity
3. Uniqueness of the performance

First of all, Fenty encourages women to confront the strengths and weaknesses of their bodies, their need to use their appearance for personal expression, and to stop viewing female needs toward sex and sexuality as shameful. When women see models of their size confidently displaying themselves on stage and in front of the camera, they will feel the brand's tolerance and affirmation of their flaws. This expression of body confidence and the values conveyed in the marketing concept make consumers more confident and bring appreciation for the brand. Such positive emotional feedback could encourage customers to conduct purchase behavior more than just a one-time purchase. In addition, such feelings could also exert a positive effect on consumers' loyalty to the brand.

Besides, Savage Fenty's marketing strategy also reflects a high degree of inclusiveness. Inclusivity refers to all characteristics that represent people who are often excluded from society and it is a key concept in the body positivity movement [21]. SF's show showcased a variety of models: “Trans inclusion, queer models, disabled models, plus sized models and models in every hue were represented in this show”. Such marketing strategy also received various positive comments on the social media platforms. “Victoria's Secret brand itself has waned in recent years, as customers have begun to favor bralettes and body inclusiveness over push-up bras and washboard abs” [22]. According to CNBC, Victoria's Secret sales have been shrinking every year. “Revenue in 2020 totaled \$5.4 billion, compared with \$7.5 billion in 2019, and \$8.1 billion in 2018” [23]. Such feedback are undoubtedly the greatest support for the health-based fashion concept and the brand with "body positive" and “diversity” as its core marketing concept. It also shows the rising willingness of consumers to the products from brand and pay for their brand value.

Finally, because SF uses a wide variety of models, its fashion shows become very watchable. The models are no longer public figures on the SF stage, they become part of the show. Everyone seems to have defaulted to the fact that most of the time, the modeling industry is a very demanding industry. One often hears about models dieting for work. They have to quit the industry because of their age. Savage Fenty chooses to break this consensus and create a more diverse aesthetic opportunity for the audience. By allowing the models to act as living souls and perform as “aesthetic objects” [24], the Savage Fenty runway show was challenging the traditional objectification of runway models. This certainly makes SF's stage and fashion show scene more attractive and distinguishes SF's fashion show from others. Thus, using models of all sizes not only does not make a brand look unprofessional. On the contrary, such respect for diversity makes the show unique, which can also impress the audiences and motivate them to buy the product due to SF's uniqueness and dynamism.

In summary, Savage Fenty is a great example of how "body positivity" can drive consumer buying behavior. This psychological identity comes not only from women but also from men. By addressing ‘body shame’, positively promoting the value of body positivity, and encouraging customers to

embrace their imperfections, consumers can feel the benefits beyond the brand's products themselves. With such a brand value, buyers are more likely to become regular consumers and have more than just a one-time purchasing experience. In terms of long-term benefits, using psychological cues similar to positive encouragement to prompt consumers to consume can also have a more positive impact on long-term psychosocial health impacts than creating "appearance anxiety" to make consumers engage in irrational consumption behaviors.

#### 4.2. Case 2: Brandy Melville's Controversial Appearance-anxiety Marketing Strategy

This section analyzes a controversial marketing case about the appearance anxiety of Brandy Melville (BM). BM is a European clothing and accessories company targeting young women with items priced between \$20-\$50 each, which have become a popular craze in recent years, it was listed as one of the most popular clothing brands for pre-teen and teenage girls alike (Cohen & Lauren Cohen Lauren is a freshman at Penn State studying digital and print journalism. When she's not writing) [25].

BM applied controversial marketing promotion, which aims at advertising the idea of 'one size fits most. However, their clothing mainly targets x-small or small sizes [26]. "One size fits the most" was actually a misconception. The majority of items are labeled as "one size," "XS," or "small," with a few bottoms being the exception. The "one size" of the brand normally fits waists between 24 and 25 inches and is equivalent to a size zero. The normal American woman's size, however, has long been listed as a size 14 [27]. A flexible or open garment for women may be advertised as one size fits all, but it is usually a medium size (able to expand) rather than fitting small or extra-large (XL) sizes. Such a promotional slogan, in fact, conveys the subliminal message that the clothing is only intended for girls who were in small or extra small sizes and stimulated appearance anxiety in society. By offering only one size, the business purposefully excludes more girls from purchasing the items and generates young girls' appearance anxiety since they cannot fit in the "normal size" of the brand. Therefore, BM has received a great deal of criticism, such as body shaming and body discrimination, which made its marketing strategies become controversial.

By promoting a single-aesthetic value, BM's advertisement applies a controversial approach to marketing their products, which may even lead to negative effects on their customers. For example, BM creates advertising choosing models that are "tall and slender with unrealistic beauty standards" [26]. And the advertisements they posted on Instagram are these young girls wearing BM and hanging outside like on the streets or having a tea party together daily. All the images reveal a sophisticated yet relaxing atmosphere. When their target consumers---young teenagers, see this ad, they may dream of becoming the models in the ad and enjoy the sophisticated life it depicts. And when they find that their body and appearance do not match the advertisement, they will try to adopt unhealthy eating habits, such as unhealthy dieting, which may lead to eating disorders. (National Eating Disorder Association). The generated appearance anxiety could also lead to emotional purchasing.

BM also received criticism for discriminating against other body types. Their promoted single aesthetic causes appearance anxiety, especially among teenagers, which exerts negative effects on society.

Is BM making profits in the short run? In fact, yes. According to pomanda, their profit has a steady increasing trend although there may be fluctuation in between. Their profit reached its climax in December 2020. But is this marketing strategy going to work in the long run? No. BM's marketing strategy is setting a standard for beauty: young, thin, pretty whiteness. But beauty should never be defined through any standard. The brand is making profits in the short run by creating appearance anxiety, but this action actually ruins the brand's reputation. When typing out Brandy Melville on Google, you will find out most of the results are negative and attacking. There were criticized as "racism and fat shaming" [28], body shaming [29], and "racism and body shaming" [30]. If the brand continues to use this marketing strategy, eventually it may be backfired. Customers feel resentment

toward this brand recently, but if they continue their biased and disrespectful marketing strategy, they may finally be totally rejected by the market and lose all of their consumers.

## 5. Recommendation

Promote authenticity by inviting consumers to send their selfies without Photoshop on social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, Twitter) with coupons of particular brands. Sending selfies without Ps can promote the idea that people need to be who they are—assisting them to accept their body figure and grow confidence instead of living on the Internet and feeling anxiety. By sending their selfies, consumers will realize the particular brand is inclusive and form a better attitude toward it, which can help brands to gain a good reputation. In addition, sending coupons can encourage more consumers to participate in the activities and make purchases, increasing companies' total revenue.

Take corporate social responsibility, reducing the implication of social appearance anxiety. From a moral perspective, businesses should publicize diversity and inclusion in their business campaigns and advertisements and explain the negative effect of appearance anxiety on humans. Preventing consumers receive damage from appearance anxiety can help companies receive admiration and support from consumers.

Choose models of all shapes, ages, and colors to show their confidence and charisma in appearance on stage. The model group includes LBTQ+ groups, pregnant women, and people with physical disabilities. Models are also encouraged to interact with the audience on stage. Such fashion shows can be more attractive to the audience because the personal characteristics of the models become part of the show. At the same time, models of different body types can deepen the audience's memory of a specific piece of clothing or a certain design, which can help them make a quicker decision when it comes to spending money.

Align the brand designs with the values it promotes behind it. If the brand's positioning is "Fits All" then it should design clothes of different sizes, in addition, if a brand only makes clothes of size 0~2 then it should tell the public "our clothes are only suitable for slim people". This can better target customers and also help customers to find a more suitable style and positioning for themselves. More importantly, it reduces the potential negative feedback from appearance anxiety and psychological disorders, which can build a better reputation for the brand.

## 6. Conclusion

This report analyzes how companies' marketing strategies affect consumers' appearance anxiety, and confidence. Section two applies evidence to prove how appearance anxiety-oriented strategies could negatively affect consumers' physical and mental health from a psychological perspective. Then, by analyzing the two case studies: the success of Rihanna's Fenty, which applies appearance confidence-oriented marketing strategies, and Brandy Melville's controversial appearance anxiety-oriented marketing strategies, this report shows that marketing strategies that aim to solve people's appearance anxiety and allow consumers to gain self-confidence are the long-term solution to brand profitability. Finally, this report proposes four recommendations to help companies better address the issue of appearance confidence to conduct further marketing campaigns.

## Acknowledgment

Bingheng Wu, Zhengkun Yu and Yiting Chen contributed equally to this work and should be considered co-first authors.

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