

# From Angels to #Real Women: Comparing the Diversity of Models in Two Lingerie Brands

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## Abstract

*Diversity has been a constant issue in the fashion industry and is becoming more prominent with the use of brand advertising on Instagram. Most often, models used by brands are white and thin. However, recently, there has been a push for more diversity and companies have increased the number of models of color and the number of plus-sized models used. This study analyzed the diversity, both in race and size, on the Instagram accounts of two lingerie brands, Aerie and Victoria's Secret, from July 9 to October 31, 2019. Using content analysis, the study found that Aerie had more diversity on its Instagram posts than Victoria's Secret. However, white, small-sized models were still the most commonly posted overall, indicating that racial and size diversity still needs to be improved in the fashion industry. The study furthers the understanding of how brands are portraying themselves through advertising on social media and provides practical implications for how brands can connect better with their consumers.*

## I. Introduction

Skinny, tall and white. This is the look that comes to mind for most when they think about a typical fashion model. The current state of the modeling industry lacks diversity, and this is an issue because it influences what women believe they should look like. There is a disconnect between what women really look like and the models being used by fashion brands (Agerup, 2011). This difference can cause women who do not fit the stereotypical look to feel badly about their bodies and can even lead to eating disorders (Dittmar & Howard, 2004).

This study looked at diversity in the modeling industry, specifically with lingerie brands, in order to note the diversity of race and size. Throughout history, models have generally been portrayed in a stereotypical way, which can cause consumers to feel disconnected from the brands using these unrealistic models. There have been many studies about models in the fashion industry in terms of print media and advertisements, finding that models are predominately young, white and underweight (Freitas, Jordan & Hughes, 2017). This study will add to scholarship on models in the fashion industry by looking at advertising and brand presence on social media.

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**Keywords:** content analysis, self-image congruence theory, fashion, diversity, Instagram  
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## II. Literature Review

To investigate and gain a better understanding of the diversity of models today, the researcher examined literature on the diversity of race and size in the fashion industry, studies on Instagram and social media marketing strategies, and scholarship on the self-image congruence theory.

### *Diversity in the Fashion Industry*

Studies show that there is a narrow representation of body images in media and that models are predominately young, white and underweight (Freitas et al., 2017). A study of three 1980s popular magazines – *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour* and *Vogue* – found that black models appeared in 2.4% of the images, Asian models were only in 0.5% of the images and no Hispanic models were present (Jackson & Ervine, 1991). A similar study of the same magazines in the early 2000s found that 91% of the photographs still featured white models (Millard & Grant, 2006). These studies showed that even though the presence of models of color has increased, the increase is small.

In addition, the majority of models at events such as New York Fashion Week are white (Sauers, 2013). This “implies that beauty is exclusive to white models” (Adodo, 2016, p. 7). Adodo also found that when models of color were on the runway, they tended to have different hairstyles than their white counterparts, were lacking accessories, and wore darker makeup (Adodo, 2016). The reasoning behind this could be, “women of color are often stereotyped as ‘exotic,’” (Reaves et al., 2004, p. 142).

The fashion and beauty industries have also been criticized for an overemphasis on thin models (Freitas et al., 2017), who are often used to connote health, fitness, and fertility (Kiire, 2017), in addition to beauty and sexual attractiveness (Reaves et al., 2004). It is assumed that by using thin models and even digitally altering models to look thin, consumers will think that the models are more attractive because they look fit, “healthy” and sexual. One study found that participants who viewed advertisements that used thin models believed that the image had been digitally modified. Digitally modifying models creates an unrealistic and unattainable image that consumers strive for, leading to a negative impact on women’s body satisfaction (Lewis et al., 2019). Another study noted that female participants were significantly happier with their bodies once they viewed the original image of the model and compared it to the digitally manipulated image (Reaves et al., 2004). However, the current standards of beauty, which emphasizes thinness, are accepted by most women (Tiggerman, 2003). Although the most common model-look these days is unrealistically thin, this thinness is tolerated by most because they have been conditioned to believe it is the norm.

Researchers have found that, “women who viewed fashion magazines preferred to weigh less, were less satisfied with their bodies, were more frustrated about their weight, were more preoccupied with the desire to be thin, and were more afraid of getting fat than were their peers who viewed news magazines” (Turner et al., 1997, p. 603). Another study found that body image was viewed as significantly more negative after viewing thin media images than after viewing images of average and plus-sized models (Groesz et al., 2002). Even though most women have accepted that extreme thinness in models is not representative of reality, it still causes women to feel insecure about their bodies.

Some countries have made efforts to improve body image diversity in the media and fashion industry. Israel and France are attempting to regulate the minimum body size of models, and Australia has created the Australian Industry Code of Conduct on Body Image. This code was developed to instill good-practice principles for the advertising, fashion and media industries in hopes of creating diversity in body size, using healthy weight models. (Freitas et al., 2017). Israel, France and Australia have also passed laws that require advertisements to include disclaimers when an image has been digitally altered (Lewis et al., 2019).

### *Instagram and Marketing Strategies*

It is now a must for brands to have a presence on social media platforms. Brands can use social media to improve brand recognition and loyalty (Smith, 2019). More specifically, Instagram is a place where users can share photos and videos, and can engage with followers by “liking” and “commenting” on other’s posts (Rouse et al., n.d.). Instagram has 1 billion monthly active users, more than 500 million of them active daily. These users share an average of 95 million photos and videos per day (West, 2019). On Instagram, brands and companies have regular engagement with 4% of their total followers (Read, 2018).

Recent research shows that marketing budgets are being increasingly directed toward social

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media (Latiff & Safiee, 2015). One study explained this shift through several factors: declining response rates towards conventional marketing efforts such as banners and direct mailers, technology developments leading to social media attractiveness, demographic shifts to younger individuals, customer preference, and low cost (Gillin, 2007). One study noted that, “customers’ motivation to purchase is strongly related to their desire to express ideal selves through the consumption of brand personalities attached to certain products ... On Instagram, customers have more power to not only consume the products of brands but share their experiences with others” (Chang, 2014, p. 20-21).

For a brand to have a good Instagram marketing strategy, research suggests that an account should post one to two times per day, and that top-performing brands post an average of 1.5 times a day (Rupert, 2019; Arens, 2019). Photos on Instagram must be high-quality images that are engaging; many of them include a call to action (Standberry, 2019). The use of hashtags is a way for brands to gain more traction on Instagram, and the associated comments are a way to keep followers engaged (Gyant, 2018; Standberry, 2019). Additionally, partnering with an influencer is becoming much more common and is a way to reach a larger audience (Wishpond, 2019).

There are specific strategies brands can use to promote products, connect with customers and reach a new target audience. One way is to run contests and giveaways, which is an incentive for followers to engage with the brand and a way to increase sales. Brands should post product photos and, in captions, emphasize the price, availability, and unique selling point. Brands should also show their product in action and share customer testimonials, stories and reviews (Wishpond, 2019). All of these practices can drive the company’s success.

### ***The Self-Image Congruence Theory***

The self-image congruence theory is relevant in examining how diversity through brands affects consumers. The theory refers to “the match between consumers’ self-concept (actual self, ideal self, etc.) and the user image (or ‘personality’) of a given product, brand, store, etc.” (Kressmann et al., 2006, p. 955). In simpler terms, this theory is, “a match between the personality of a brand and those of its consumer” (Agerup, 2011, p. 494). When consumers see a match between their own self-images or personalities and the image of a brand, they are able to reach different forms of satisfaction and avoid certain dissatisfactions, which leads to consumers having a positive attitude towards the brand and a stronger likelihood of buying from that brand (Sirgy, 1982).

The self-image congruence theory has direct relevance to this study. Research shows that there is a disconnect between the models used for fashion brands compared to what women really look like (Agerup, 2011). This difference can cause women who do not fit the stereotypical model-look to feel badly about their bodies (Dittmar & Howard, 2004). However, if there is a strong connection between brand image and self-image, the theory suggests that there is a better chance that consumers will buy from that brand.

While a significant amount of studies examine the diversity of models in the fashion industry through print media and advertisements, few studies have examined the diversity of models on social media platforms. This study will look at the Instagram accounts of two lingerie brands in order to get a better idea about the diversity of the models that are being posted.

#### **Research Questions**

RQ1: How have Aerie and Victoria’s Secret used models of different races?

RQ2: How have the two brands used models of different sizes?

RQ3: Are there any differences between the two brands’ social media in terms of diversity?

### **III. Methods**

The study examined the Instagram accounts of Aerie and Victoria’s Secret. Lingerie brands were chosen instead of clothing brands because the minimal clothing made it easier to note the diversity of the models. Aerie was chosen, in part, because the brand is on the rise, reporting a 32% increase in sales in 2018 (Hanbury & Tyler, 2018). Victoria’s Secret was chosen because it is the most famous and largest lingerie

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retailer in the United States (Hanbury, 2019).

In addition, Aerie has engaged in a number of high-profile diversity initiatives. In 2015, Aerie partnered with the National Eating Disorders Association in order to focus on body positivity and help reduce the prevalence of and stigma around eating disorders, noting that unrealistic and digitally manipulated images can play a role in the rise of eating disorders (Women's Wellness, 2019). The previous year, the company unveiled the #AerieREAL hashtag, with the tagline, "Power. Positivity. No retouching." More recently, Aerie launched an additional movement to this campaign featuring, "57 women of various shapes, colors, disabilities, and sizes embracing their inner beauty" (Penrose, 2018, para. 4). This campaign has gained traction and allows consumers to post Instagram pictures and videos with the caption #AerieREAL.

Victoria's Secret is part of L Brands, Inc., which is an American fashion retailer. The company's motto is, "Brands That Inspire. Empower. Indulge." The brand also seeks to "help customers feel sexy, bold and powerful" (About Us, 2019, para. 3). Victoria's Secret is famous for its annual fashion show with models who are referred to as "angels." While many viewers enjoy the annual event, critics say that, "the brand fails spectacularly at celebrating body diversity. Instead, it objectifies women and their ethnicities in order to sell merchandise, and champions a stick-thin yet selectively curvy body type so difficult to obtain that even the models train and diet for weeks in advance to achieve the look" (Webster, 2017, para. 6). The shows have also been criticized for a lack of racial diversity, although models of color made up nearly half of the 2017 event (Jennings, 2018). The brand has made recent efforts to include models of more sizes in order to address a sales slump, featuring a size-14 model in a collaboration with Bluebella (Reda, 2019).

For this study, fifty Instagram posts from each brand (100 posts total) were randomly selected from July 9, 2019, to October 31, 2019. All posts for each brand were counted chronologically and assigned a number. Then, a random number generator was used to select the 50 posts for analysis. If a model was not included in the photo (such as a photo just showing the product) that post was skipped and the next most recent photo with a model was used. If more than three models were included in the photo, the photo was skipped to avoid confusion when coding.

The selected posts were then analyzed for race and size. There are various methods for coding of race, but this research draws from a 2017 study that defined five categories - black, Asian, white, other person of color, and indistinguishable. "Individuals were assigned Black if they had medium or dark-coloured skin, a natural/afro hair, and/or a braided or dreadlock style" (Reddy-Best et al., 2017, p. 67). Individuals were assigned white if they, "had fair or light coloured skin and smaller facial features. Asian was assigned if the individual had narrow-shaped eyes and straight darker hair" (Reddy-Best et al., 2017, p. 67). An individual was assigned to the "other person of color" category if it was hard to definitively determine the race of the person but some of their physical characteristics matched a person of color. Additionally, Latino, Native American, and Pacific Islander were included in the "other person of color" category. The researcher did not use the indistinguishable category because coding the race of the model was an important part of the study. If the race could not be determined, the photo was skipped.

To determine body size, past research has used the Stunkard Figure Rating Scale "of nine silhouette figures increasing in size from 1 (very thin) to 9 (very obese)" (Freitas et al., 2017, p. 252-253). However, nine options, with only very small differences between adjacent options, would be too challenging when analyzing models. Instead, this research draws from a study by Aagerup (2011), who investigated how the weight of ideal users affects the perception of mass-market fashion brands using three size categories. In this study, the categories will be coded as small, medium, or large. A full description of all coding categories can be found in the Appendix.

## IV. Findings

For Aerie, the 50 posts included 63 total models. For Victoria's Secret, 54 total models appeared in the sampled posts. For Aerie, 55.5% of models were white (n=35), compared to just over 61% for Victoria's Secret (n=33). However, as seen in Table 1, Aerie had a much higher percentage of black and Asian models, while Victoria's Secret had a higher proportion of "other person of color."

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**Table 1. Race by Brand**

Brand	Black	White	Asian	Other POC	Total
<b>Aerie</b>	14.3% (9)	55.5% (35)	15.9% (10)	14.3% (9)	100% (63)
<b>Victoria's Secret</b>	7.4% (4)	61.1% (33)	5.6% (3)	25.9% (14)	100% (54)

In terms of size, 88.9% of Victoria's Secret models were small (n=48), compared to 63.5% of Aerie models (n=40). Aerie had much larger proportions of medium and large models than did Victoria's Secret (Table 2).

**Table 2. Size by Brand**

Brand	Small	Medium	Large	Total
<b>Aerie</b>	63.5% (40)	19.0% (12)	17.5% (11)	100% (63)
<b>Victoria's Secret</b>	88.9% (48)	7.4% (4)	3.7% (2)	100% (54)

## V. Discussion

It is clear that white models are most commonly posted to Instagram by these brands. A 2016 report by the U.S. Census Bureau notes that 61.2% of the female population is white, suggesting that Aerie may slightly underrepresent this demographic, while white representation by Victoria's Secret is largely aligned with the population. Conversely, blacks represent 13.7% of the total female population, suggesting that Aerie's representation on Instagram largely reflects that demographic, while Victoria's Secret may underrepresent this category (Women of Color in the US, 2018). It is important to note that while the census data can be a helpful guide, brands may not want to simply match their use of models to these statistics, but instead, they may want to strive to make all races feel equally represented. This study aligns with past research showing that models are predominately white.

In terms of size, both Aerie (63.5%) and Victoria's Secret (88.9%) had predominantly small models. However, Aerie was much more likely than Victoria's Secret to feature medium-sized models (19.0% vs. 7.4%) or large-sized models (17.5% vs. 3.7%). It is clear that Aerie displays much more diverse body types. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the measured average weight for adults ages 20 and over is 170.5 pounds (Fryar et al., 2018). According to a women's size guide based on weight and height from a popular online personal style service, if a woman weighs 170 pounds, she will be a large no matter the height (Stitch Fix, n.d.). Therefore, the average female is wearing large-sized clothes, meaning that both Aerie and Victoria's Secret are bypassing what logically could be the target audience for their Instagram pages.

Overall, Aerie is more diverse both in terms of race and size compared to Victoria's Secret. This aligns with Aerie's mission for fairness and equality and the #AerieREAL campaign, with the tagline, "Power. Positivity. No retouching." Aerie's diversity, when related to the self-image congruence theory, determines that Aerie's message and mission connect well with their brand image, ultimately connecting them better to their customers.

These findings suggest that Victoria's Secret would be well served to increase the diversity in its models, mostly in terms of size, but additionally in terms of race. Both these brands need to make sure that they are portraying diversity in the models that are selling their product because the power of the media today makes Instagram incredibly influential, especially to customers. The more diverse the models are in terms of both race and size, the more comfortable and accepting all women will be of themselves.

## VI. Conclusion

This study looked into the diversity issue in the modeling industry in terms of race and size. It contributed to the communications field by looking at Instagram advertising and brand presence on social media, which is a relatively new addition to marketing strategies. These findings showed that both Aerie and Victoria's Secret have room for improvement regarding the diversity of their models. This push for diversity is important so that consumers can relate better to brands and feel more comfortable about how they look when they see models that look like them, instead of unrealistic images, which in turn, could drive greater brand loyalty and increased sales.

It is important to note that age was not accounted for in this study. An estimated 75% of 18-to-24 year olds use Instagram, and the group is the largest age demographic on the application (Chen, 2020). Studies that have found an association between body dissatisfaction and mental health problems have focused on younger female populations, meaning that older women may not necessarily have the same ideas about their self-image (Haines & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006). Future studies could analyze whether content targeting older women have similar results.

This study also is limited by sample selection and sample size. The researcher only chose to look at two different brands, which is not representative of all lingerie brands. In addition, the study only examined 100 posts. Having other researchers code the data and creating an intercoder reliability test would have been helpful to confirm the reliability of the coding instrument. Lastly, the researcher only reported frequencies and percentages and did not look at correlations or statistical relationships among the variables. For future research, it would be beneficial to do statistical analysis, specifically a T-test, to determine if there is a statistically significant relationship between the race and size of brands' models.

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## Appendix 1: Coding categories

Category	Definition	Exemplary photo	Coding rules
<b>Brand name</b>	1= Aerie 2= Victoria's Secret	-	1 or 2
<b>Race</b>	Different groups of humans with different physical characteristics.		
<b>Black</b>	Medium or dark-colored skin, natural/afro hair, and/or a braided or dreadlock style and large facial features.		0- Not Black 1- Black
<b>Asian</b>	Narrow-shaped eyes and straight darker hair.		0- Not Asian 1- Asian

<p><b>White</b></p>	<p>Fair or light colored skin and smaller facial features.</p>		<p>0- Not White 1- White</p>
<p><b>Other person of color</b></p>	<p>If some of their physical characteristics matched a person of color. Latino, Native American, and Pacific Islander.</p>		<p>0- Not other person of color 1- Other person of color</p>
<p><b>Size</b></p> <p>The physical measurements of the body, in this case, weight.</p>			
<p><b>Small</b></p>	<p>A “1” on the Figure 2 scale. Between the sizes of 0 and 4. Little fat on body, fit.</p>		<p>0- Not small 1- Small</p>
<p><b>Medium</b></p>	<p>A “2” on the Figure 2 scale. Between the sizes of 6 and 10. More fat on body, curvy.</p>		<p>0- Not medium 1- Medium</p>
<p><b>Large</b></p>	<p>A “3” on the Figure 2 scale. The size 12 or larger. Overweight.</p>		<p>0- Not large 1- Large</p>