

Fashioning Diversity: How Women in Aotearoa New Zealand Perceive Inclusive Advertising

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Abstract

This study explores how women aged 18 to 50 in Aotearoa New Zealand interpret inclusive marketing strategies used by fashion brands, and how these interpretations influence their sense of representation and consumer behaviour. In this study, inclusive marketing is defined as advertising that represents diverse body sizes, ethnicities and gender identities. Drawing on Hall's (1980) representation theory and postfeminist media discourse, the research focuses on how women negotiate meanings of inclusivity when engaging with marketing messages. Semi-structured interviews with 21 female participants reveal that participants are active interpreters who may support, resist or renegotiate brand messages based on their own background. Although participants acknowledge a gradual shift in advertising inclusivity, they also note the continued underrepresentation of diverse bodies, ages and ethnicities, emphasising that such lack of representation may perpetuate self-esteem issues. These findings highlight the need for more authentic, inclusive and diverse representation extending beyond product launches and sales periods. Consumers also play an active role by showing their support for inclusive brands and voicing their concerns about brands that misrepresent women. This study is the first to examine how women in Aotearoa engage with efforts toward inclusivity in advertising, as global conversations around this issue continue to grow. It extends theories of representation and consumer behaviour by framing women's meaning-making as a dynamic negotiation between media representation and self-concept. The study approaches inclusivity not as a marketing narrative by brands, but as a lived interpretive experience through which consumers co-create the meaning of diversity.

Keywords

Inclusive marketing, representation theory, fashion advertising, body image, consumer behaviour, Aotearoa New Zealand

Introduction

Advertising has long-lasting consequences that may operate beyond consumer awareness, establishing social norms and creating cognitive associations (Casale, 2024; Fennis & Stroebe, 2020; Schuster et al., 2016; Burchell et al., 2013). Brands have historically neglected the depiction of marginalised women, who fall outside Western beauty norms that glorify Eurocentric ideals of youth, whiteness and thinness, rooted in colonial and

capitalist traditions and reinforced through media (DeFino, 2020; Hoey, 2018; McCann, 2019). When included, marginalised women are often positioned as decorative figures in specific campaigns rather than central subjects. Consequently, several studies have urged scholars to understand the mis- and underrepresentation of marginalised women in advertising (Berg & Liljedal, 2023; Campbell et al., 2023; Rößner & Eisend, 2023; Eisend et al., 2022; Shinoda et al., 2020; Baumann & de Laat, 2012).

The fashion industry has started making more effort to reflect its diverse consumer base across different races, ethnicities, genders, sexualities, body types and abilities. While global brands increasingly champion inclusivity, how these representations are received in different cultural contexts should be examined, as meaning-making is highly context dependent. The impact of these inclusivity efforts remains underexplored in Aotearoa, where the population is projected to surpass six million by 2040, with international migration accounting for two thirds of this growth (Reid, 2025; Stats NZ, 2025). Yet little is known about how women in this bicultural society with increasing ethnic diversity re/interpret and respond to global narratives of inclusive advertising. This study primarily focuses on body types and ethnicity, the most salient concerns of the participants, in order to explore how inclusive advertising shapes consumer behaviour and social identities in an evolving cultural landscape.

To understand the evolving ideologies around women's representation and the changing narratives, the study seeks to understand if and how inclusive advertising affects women, shaping their choices and attitudes towards fashion products. While there is growing scholarly attention on diversity and inclusivity in advertising, much of it universalises Western ideals of diversity, overlooking how women negotiate, accept or resist these global ideals of diversity in their local cultural frameworks. Additionally, there has been limited attention given to how women themselves interpret and respond to these media representations. Accordingly, this study explores how women living in the unique sociocultural context of Aotearoa interpret inclusive advertising as an act of negotiated meaning-making, addressing the theoretical gap between global discourses of inclusivity and their local reception. It aims to extend Hall's (1997) theory of representation and postfeminist media scholarship to examine how inclusivity is locally reconfigured through interpretive practices.

Literature Review

Inclusive advertising

Marketers have been increasingly using inclusive advertising to target specific consumer groups, allowing them to increase reach (Qayyum et al., 2023) and engage with a diverse clientele (Licsandru & Cui, 2018). Societal shifts have led brands to adopt strategies that value diversity and inclusivity in commercials with plus-size models, LGBTQIA+ individuals, people of colour, and those with impairments (Norville & Viberg, 2022). Additionally, advertisers may include Indigenous people in their campaigns to signal inclusivity (Madima, 2024). In Aotearoa there has been progress in the representation of Māori and Pacific people in advertising, which is also sometimes criticised as tokenistic, such as the Department of Conservation's use of te reo Māori and the commercial appropriation of Māori culture, especially during Matariki (Venuto, 2022). Even with the best intentions, brands may need more cultural awareness to balance their morals and business goals.

Kantar's Global Monitor 2023 reported that 75% of people felt that brands should be socially responsible, and most consumers wanted companies to move towards greater inclusivity. An Adobe (2019) survey highlighted the impact of diversity and inclusion in advertising on Australian consumers' purchasing behaviour, revealing that 62% were more inclined to purchase from brands that featured diverse advertisements. Twenty-one percent of respondents also indicated they boycotted brands that did not embrace diversity. The Stuff NowNext survey (2022) highlighted that 86% of New Zealanders desired for everyone to feel they belong regardless of ethnicity, culture or religion. Regarding diversity representation in ads, most respondents agreed that it made a difference, sometimes making the ad feel more relevant depending on its delivery. Customers look to firms to actively promote marginalised communities, refrain from overrepresenting minority groups, and engage in sincere initiatives.

The Brand Inclusion Index (Kantar, 2024) serves as a resource to help brands along this journey, showcasing how consumers see their diversity and inclusion initiatives. In Aotearoa, The Inclusive Code (2025) has encouraged marketers and advertisers to rethink how they represent disability, aiming to build a genuinely inclusive industry. With its For Good mission, the Australian creative agency Fuller outlined ways to utilise marketing and communications as a tool for social change, specifically through inclusive marketing strategies that authentically portrayed marginalised communities, such as women, older people, people with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ (Richards, 2020).

Representing minorities is a step towards strengthening bonds with the audience by providing visibility and inclusion (Brüchert & Kaniki, 2021). Using diverse creative groups should ensure accurate representation (Yaghi, 2023), although it is essential to tread carefully. Brands' diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives must be genuine and timely to avoid backlash (Piaggio, 2023). Mardones and Ayala (2021) suggest moving beyond token involvement in fashion advertising and creating a culture of acceptance to contribute to a more inclusive reflection, positively influencing consumer perceptions and behaviours.

With inclusive advertising becoming a global moral and market requirement, tensions between authenticity and tokenism persist. Diverse representation in marketing campaigns may signal social progress, but these can be superficial if they do not meaningfully engage with the identities portrayed. Drawing on Hall's (1997) theory of representation, advertising does not simply reflect reality but actively constructs meanings about identity, diversity and inclusion. These meanings are not fixed, but are negotiated within broader power relations that determine which identities are visible and worthy. Therefore, inclusive advertising can be seen as a cultural site for producing and sharing cultural understandings of gender, beauty and

other diverse identities. The following section explores this ideological terrain through the lens of empowerment in the postfeminist mediascape.

Postfeminist mediascapes

Women are frequently a main target of marketing, responsible for making a sizeable share of purchases (DiSalvatore, 2010). The advertising industry sometimes relies on stereotypes to promote beauty ideals (more so historically), promoting unrealistic body images and standards, which may lead to low self-esteem, eating disorders and financial strain (DiSalvatore, 2010). These emotionally appealing images can provoke strong reactions, especially in younger women (Stanković et al., 2018). Combating such harmful preconceptions is crucial, as they can perpetuate gender inequality and destructive behaviour (Yaghi, 2023).

More recent representations of women support feminist principles by portraying them in more independent, active and empowering roles (Alkan, 2016). Modern advertising has used models with diverse body types, aiming to create connections with and cater to a broader demographic. This shift towards inclusive imagery aligns with social changes (Norville & Viberg, 2022). Because advertising not only reflects societal changes but also plays a role in shaping them, it bears a responsibility to promote inclusion and diversity (Poole, 2021).

In line with this, the fashion industry has also increasingly shifted towards inclusion and diversity in their brand communications. Some scholars have emphasised the need to understand the themes around gender, as well as their reception by the audience. For example, Alkan (2016) explores the ideological values in women-empowering campaigns, revealing the dynamics of modern advertising and capitalist ideologies, and recommends exploring the discourse generated by audiences in reaction to these campaigns. DiSalvatore (2010) suggests further research to understand gender representation in advertising and its impact on society, to promote a more inclusive and diverse mediascape. Norville and Viberg (2022) suggest investigating self-recognition responses to understand how inclusive and exclusive images impact young women. In response to these calls, this study explores the influence of inclusive advertising on women's fashion purchasing behaviour, drawing from Wiklund (2022) by examining the topic in a distinct geographical and cultural setting, providing valuable insights and considering unique factors within the Aotearoa context.

Some notable examples of inclusive representation from brands include Dove's Real Beauty and Show Us campaigns (2023), as well as Relive the L'Oréal Paris Runway Show during Paris Fashion Week (L'Oréal Paris, 2024), which promotes women's empowerment through authentic and diverse portrayals. Gap's Better in Denim (2025) campaign featured the globally diverse girl group KATSEYE, promoting inclusivity and female self-expression. This emerged shortly after American Eagle's ad with actor Sydney Sweeney, which drew criticism for promoting Eurocentric ideals and other controversial opinions, leading to a decline in store traffic (Murray, 2025). The themes of empowerment, freedom and choice resonate with consumers, but also may serve brands' economic interests (Alkan, 2016).

In Aotearoa, GirlGuiding New Zealand's Girls Who Look Like Us (2019) campaign promoted diversity and inclusion by featuring girls of different ethnic backgrounds, abilities and body types. The Power of the Suit (Hallensteins, 2019) challenged gendered clothing norms, while Prove Them Wrong (Stirling Sports, 2019) celebrated diverse identities and resilience against discrimination. These campaigns exemplify how postfeminist discourse has given rise to themes of empowerment in fashion marketing campaigns. Taken together, these campaigns suggest that inclusive advertising can foster social impact while supporting brand success at the same time. As Hall (1997) argues, meanings are actively constructed through advertising and decoded by audiences through their cultural

frameworks. Appadurai's (1996) concept of mediascapes complements this view by showing how advertising not only circulates globally but also influences local contexts like Aotearoa, where women may accept, resist or negotiate these Western ideals of diversity. This points to the need to examine not only what inclusivity looks like, but also how it is interpreted in different cultural contexts.

Body image and representation

Advertising influences perceptions of aesthetics and social norms (Stan-ković et al., 2018). Campaigns that promote body inclusivity have been shown to improve consumer wellbeing (Qayyum et al., 2023), whereas the promotion of unrealistic ideals can negatively affect women, leading to eating disorders, anxiety and body dysmorphia. Balancing aspirational and relatable representations is crucial when considering the emotional impact on viewers. In particular, the fashion industry has been a vehicle of normative social influence, often promoting unrealistic body ideals that may marginalise people who do not conform to them. While the impact of advertising on consumer behaviour (Kim & Yang, 2024; Khan, 2021; Lenin & Manivannan, 2022; Zayer et al., 2023; Rehman & Zeb, 2023; Lou & Tse, 2020; Baumann & de Laat, 2012; Ghose & Todri-Adamopoulos, 2016) and on the construction of social identities (Åkestam et al., 2021; Shao et al., 2023; Bourcier-Béquaert et al., 2021; Gutmann et al., 2022; Lopukhova, 2015; Sandhu, 2018) has been highlighted by existing research, the influence of representation on brand perception and engagement warrants further exploration.

The beauty industry, projected to generate approximately \$580 billion in retail sales by 2027 (McKinsey, 2023a), can endorse unrealistic beauty standards (Craddock et al., 2019). Brands that lack inclusivity can negatively influence consumers' perceptions; for example, Victoria's Secret's Perfect Body campaign, which excluded models of diverse body types and gender identities, sparked public backlash (Peterson, 2014). In contrast, the sales and customer loyalty of companies such as Aerie, which supports body positivity and offers a wide range of sizes, have soared (Dreska, 2023). Body dissatisfaction has been another public health concern. The global apparel market, valued at \$1.7 trillion (Statista Research Department, 2024), continues to influence perceptions of body image through model selection, size availability and advertising strategies.

Despite global conversations, the Vogue Australia Fashion Week 2025 size inclusivity report revealed that only 1.8% of looks were plus-size, 11% were mid-size, and a substantial 87.2% remained straight-size (Lai, 2025). In Aotearoa, Shaw (2022) noted that, while many New Zealanders wore sizes 14 to 16, the fashion industry failed to cater to larger sizes, exposing a gap between available clothing options and the population. Brands often have a restricted 'Pākehā perspective', which overlooks diverse body shapes and ethnic backgrounds of the population. Individuals face various barriers when looking for stylish, sustainable clothing in larger sizes (Tonti, 2024), which entails more than simply scaling up measurements and requires fundamental rethinking of garment construction to ensure proper fit across varied body forms. Aotearoa consumers are also more likely to purchase from brands offering gender-neutral fashion, yet they feel brands do not provide enough options (Afterpay, 2023).

Some designers are working to change this narrative by offering inclusive, sustainable options. Frances Lowe, an Aotearoa designer, shifted her brand Loclaire's focus to a made-to-order model, recognising the need for inclusivity in fashion and acknowledging the limitations of traditional manufacture in serving a significant portion of the population (Loclaire, 2019). Similarly, Caroline Marr's success with Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland-based The Carpenter's Daughter, a plus-size apparel boutique, demonstrates the commercial viability and social value of fashion that embraces size diversity. This shift is also reflected in the marketing practices of bigger national brands. In 2019, Aotearoa retailer Farmers launched a

body-positive lingerie campaign after facing backlash for a prior campaign that lacked diversity and relied heavily on Photoshop. The new campaign featured women of various ethnicities, ages and sizes to portray a more body-positive approach (Deguara, 2019), aligning with changing consumer expectations and a growing awareness of the importance of diversity in advertising.

This shift is evident through the promotion of inclusive brands in media outlets. For example, Aotearoa fashion professionals have shared their favourite inclusive brands in *Fashion Journal* (Zhou, 2023) and *Fashion Quarterly* (Mollina, 2024), highlighting labels such as Ruby, Lost and Led Astray, Havilah, Aurai Swimwear, and Florence & Fortitude. At New Zealand Fashion Week 2019, Meagan Kerr, a plus-size fashion blogger, noticed that although some local brands showcased plus-size models on the runway, these sizes were unavailable in stores. Some designers attributed the lack of plus-size options to a lack of skill or fear of alienating their existing customer base, while others, such as Meagan Tilby, founder of Ruby & Rain, argued that the underlying issue was often fatphobia (Brookes, 2021). These examples reflect both progress and challenges in the movement toward a more inclusive and representative fashion industry, highlighting a critical need for research – also emphasised by Viglia et al. (2023), Lee et al. (2024), and Suradkar and Chanana (2024) – that examines how diversity and inclusion in the fashion industry influence consumer perception and engagement with brands in the context of Aotearoa.

The literature and examples from fashion brands reveal a conceptual tension between global narratives of inclusivity and their local reception, resulting in mixed responses among consumers. As audiences engage with these diverse representations, meaning remains fluid and is co-created by audiences (Hall, 1997). This study conceptualises audiences as active agents with interpretive capacity, and addresses a notable gap in localised research that considers the unique cultural, social and demographic dynamics of Aotearoa's fashion landscape and consumer attitudes.

Methodology

This study has utilised an inductive approach to explore fashion-inclusive marketing within Aotearoa by giving a voice to women about their opinions on diversity, inclusivity, body image and the impact of social media. The interpretive and critical paradigms are highly relevant to this study as they emphasise the importance of subjective experiences, social constructions and power dynamics, examining women's interpretation of and response to fashion media (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). The interpretive paradigm emphasises individual variations, and studies social roles and implications (Nickerson, 2024), which is vital to be able to analyse participants' meaning-making based on their own background. Rooted in Marxist and postmodern thought, the critical paradigm examines power, inequality and social change, aiming to expose and transform oppressive practices across contexts such as media ownership, gender representation, consumerism and advertising (DeCarlo, 2018; Paynton & Hahn, 2021). This lens helps to examine power and representation in participants' narratives, as well as how representation and marginalisation work in advertising practices. Adopting these paradigms also informed methodological choices, i.e., semi-structured interviews to explore participants' context-based interpretation (interpretivism) and how they engage with power relations (critical analysis), to better understand the impact of inclusive marketing on consumer behaviour.

Design

This study employed an exploratory focus to understand and discover women's perceptions about inclusive marketing from fashion brands in Aotearoa. Qualitative research methods have helped gain an understanding

of consumer behaviours to provide a deeper understanding of consumer attitudes, preferences and behaviour (Alfaro-Ibáñez & Gallardo-Echenique, 2023; Pešić-Jenacković & Cogoljević, 2021; Levy, 2005). Since it is relatively unstructured and aims to explore perspectives (Bell et al., 2018), it offers a deep understanding of research subjects' purchasing habits, perspectives and market familiarity (Commerce Commission, 2021). This open-ended nature helps to build theoretical understandings and introduce new concepts, and allows researchers to delve into underlying ideas and efficiently unpack opinions (Choy, 2014). According to Bell et al. (2018), qualitative research is more aligned with feminist principles than quantitative research is, as it can give women a voice, reduce exploitation, avoid control, foster contextual knowledge and prioritise complex identities.

Similar to Craddock et al. (2019), who investigated viewpoints in the fashion, beauty and advertising sectors about body positivity, and Ünal et al. (2012), who explored factors influencing the purchasing behaviour of middle-aged Turkish women, we utilised qualitative semi-structured interviews. Given the complex attitudes surrounding inclusivity, diversity and representation, Salen (2014) argues that the qualitative interview approach seems most appropriate. Bell et al. (2018) also note that feminist researchers often prefer qualitative interviewing methods, because structured quantitative interviews and surveys are one-way processes lacking reciprocity, reinforcing power dynamics and seeking information from the researcher's perspective. In this study, semi-structured interviews facilitated in-depth examination while preserving coherence (Craddock et al., 2019); they permitted impromptu questions based on answers (Alfaro-Ibáñez & Gallardo-Echenique, 2023), and offered an examination of women's perspectives and experiences (Oyatoogun, 2023).

Sampling

The study employed purposive sampling to recruit women between 18 and 50. Age diversity was intentionally introduced through this purposeful, non-random process. The sample was divided into two age groups – 18 to 30 (Gen Z) and 31 to 50 (Xennials and Millennials) – to compare generational interpretations of inclusive campaigns and empowerment. This is deemed an interesting comparison considering generational differences in digital nativity, media socialisation and postfeminist uptake, which might all cause interpretive differences in decoding media messages. The sampling aligns with the principles of stratified purposive sampling, enabling us to explore differences in experiences and perspectives across age cohorts to surface differences in interpretation by life stage. Participants were recruited via university networks, personal contacts and referrals, and social media posts. All participants volunteered to join the study, provided informed consent and were assigned pseudonyms to protect anonymity. The final sample consisted of 21 participants: ten from the 18–30 age group (pseudonyms: NL, AdS, AnS, ArS, KD, SKm, JK, SSh, SR, SL) and 11 from the 31–50 age group (pseudonyms: JO, RL, SS, SG, CF, SV, AA, TK, VD, SB, KK). Although data saturation was observed at the 15th interview, six additional interviews were conducted to further refine and deepen thematic development.

Interview protocol

The interviews for this study were mainly done online via Zoom, except for three, which were conducted in person based on the participants' preferences and practicality. Interviews conducted via Zoom were recorded through the application's built-in recording feature. The interviews in person were recorded in a quiet room. A core set of prearranged questions served as the framework for the interviews, providing freedom for further exploration during the discussion. These core questions were developed from the literature on representation, postfeminist media and body image. To follow are a few opening questions that served as a starting point for the interviews:

- How do you feel about women's portrayal in fashion advertising?
- Have you noticed any changes in how fashion brands represent women in advertising over the years?
- What do you think fashion brands could do better regarding inclusion and representation in their advertising?

Semi-structured interviews achieved a balance between addressing essential topics and letting participants share their viewpoints. The interviewer remained flexible and allowed participants to elaborate on issues that were important or salient to them, such as their own experiences or examples meaningful to them. With the participants' consent, interviews were audio recorded. Reflexive notes were taken immediately after interviews to capture impressions, body language, tone, etc. The study employed verbatim transcription using Microsoft Word's transcription feature to ensure that crucial insights were recorded. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants were maintained during data collection. Participants could withdraw at any point.

This study has full ethical approval from the Unitec Research Ethics Committee, based on the guidelines for research involving human participants. Ethical considerations included informed consent, power dynamics and potential impacts on participants (Husband, 2020). Consent, privacy and comfort were prioritised throughout (Arifin, 2018; Hackett et al., 2016), with ongoing reflexivity and responsiveness to issues (Taquette & Da Matta Souza, 2022).

Data coding and analysis

This study utilised thematic analysis, focusing on categorising patterns, facilitating the discussion of results and identifying unforeseen elements (Nell, 2013; Alfaro-Ibáñez & Gallardo Echenique, 2023). Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019), which was chosen due to its compatibility with interpretivist inquiry. NVivo helped to manage the extensive data transcriptions, allowing for manual and automated organisation, and uncovering of latent meanings. The data was transcribed verbatim and not edited for grammaticality.

Initially, transcripts were read multiple times for familiarisation with the data, while initial patterns and impressions were noted. Then transcripts were coded in NVivo, creating codes from participants' responses. The next step included consolidating codes and then focused codes, which led the way to higher-order themes. Themes were grounded in participants' realities, coherent patterns, distinct themes and illustrative quotes (Craddock et al., 2019; Bell et al., 2018). It should be noted that thematic analysis itself is an interpretive act and a meaning-making process influenced by the authors' positionality. Researchers in this study took turns to analyse the codes and themes to minimise potential biases and enhance rigour. This intercoder discussion helped to decide which aspects of participants' talk were meaningful in relation to the research and theoretical lenses.

Key Findings

Changing representation of women

All participants noted a shift in fashion and beauty advertising towards more inclusive and diverse representations. They mentioned that advertisements in the past often portrayed unrealistic and unattainable beauty standards, such as thin, young, white women, as the ideal, whereas recent advertisements feature a diverse range of body types, races and genders, reflecting a societal shift.

"It's not like a zero-figure model industry anymore. So, I feel like everybody is accepted." (Participant JK)

Other participants reflected on childhood experiences when only slim, white Barbie dolls were available, compared to now, when dolls of various colours and sizes are available.

"Gone are the days that advertisements will just show like, Miss Universe type of bodies ... they go for different types of women, which is good, because those who will be buying from them will not only be the skinny people ... they go for various colours of women. So gone are the days that they just go for British women, you know, or white people, they also go for Asians." (Participant JO)

Participants highlighted advertisements promoting body positivity, and women's empowerment, which embraced confidence and open-mindedness while pushing beyond superficial beauty norms and traditional gender roles.

"In New Zealand, I've noticed that a lot of even in construction industries and in like generally the trades and stuff, I've seen a change where women are being represented. I mean, it's still a work in progress, but definitely I've seen more tradies than I would if I were, say, in India." (Participant SV)

The participants' statements demonstrate a recognition of a shift in advertising, which increasingly aligns with changing social values around diversity, women's representation and empowerment.

Mis- and underrepresentation of diverse women

Participants preferred fashion and beauty advertisements that featured diverse body shapes, sizes and skin tones. Despite recognising increased inclusivity and representation in fashion advertising, they noted that the majority of ads only showcased a narrow range of models, which could negatively impact those who did not see themselves represented. An additional consideration is that global narratives of diversity do not always align with, or resonate with, the cultural and social contexts of women.

Ethnicity

Participants mentioned a noticeable lack of ethnic diversity in fashion marketing campaigns, which perpetuated feelings of exclusion and affected self-esteem and sense of belonging. Images of diversity often failed to translate into meaningful representation within the participants' own local contexts.

"I don't quite think there's like Asian representation in there. Like, there's very, very little like, it'll probably be like one out of the hundreds of models that they choose." (Participant SL)

Another participant reflected on her upbringing in Japan, noting that the limited representation of darker skin-tones reinforced negative beauty beliefs. Advertising serves as a site of identity work, where women use images for self-recognition or -critique.

"If I saw people who look like me more, then ... I think if I saw that at a young age, I wouldn't have had negative thoughts about myself, and I would have accepted myself more." (Participant SSh)

The responses above reveal how a lack of ethnic representation made it difficult for the participants to see themselves reflected in beauty culture, supporting Hall's (1997) view that identities are produced within representation.

Self-esteem

Participants emphasised the importance of seeing a more realistic portrayal in advertisements, as it enhanced relatability. They valued adver-

tisements that reflected society and helped consumers feel represented. Another point was the difficulty of achieving the looks advertised. This discrepancy between advertised images and real-life results contributed to feelings of disappointment.

"For example, if I go and colour my hair, and I want my hair to be really looking soft, like a model and, you know, one of the magazines, it's not possible, because it's just a picture. And I will get that sort of hair from my hairstylist for a day or two. But once I go and wash my hair, it's going to be rough and, you know, ugly as well. So, it's not possible." (Participant SG)

As customers can internalise the beauty norms constructed through polished advertising images, unrealistic portrayals can lead to negative self-judgment and diminish self-esteem. Ultimately, representations not only depict beauty, but also actively shape how people understand and evaluate their own appearance.

Body size

Some Gen Z participants observed that while certain brands offered a range of clothing sizes, this diversity was not reflected in their advertising, leading to disconnection and feelings of exclusion. In the case of the Xennials and Millennials, some did not feel excluded if they found products that fitted their needs, even if it meant shopping in less conventional sections, such as children's clothing. However, others expressed frustration with the lack of petite sizes, highlighting the need for broader representation.

"I find it very difficult to get clothing in my size because I am on the petite side. I have to go to the kids' section. I feel that it is not being inclusive. There is no petite section, just like how there were no curvy sections earlier, but right now they have included curvy sections, but still, there is no petite section. So I still feel I am being misrepresented." (Participant SS)

Women's experiences may be affected by who is visible, valued and represented in the fashion industry. Some body sizes and types are presented as the norm, whereas others are marginalised or rendered invisible.

Age

There was also a sentiment that advertisements often focused on youth and beauty, neglecting the experiences and needs of older individuals.

"Like, not everyone is a 21-year-old or a 30-year-old who would want to buy a pretty dress. They might be like my mom, for example. She's 50, but she might want to buy something that I have purchased ... It's better to, like, already to showcase it, like by using real people." (Participant ArS)

Prioritisation of youth and overlooking older consumers limits the identities women can claim within fashion culture. This shows the importance of inclusive and authentic portrayals across age groups.

Impact of inclusive advertising on self-image

Gen Z has embraced inclusive advertising that promotes body positivity. They noticed a shift from previous years, when ads predominantly showcased 'picture-perfect' models, and this change has made them feel more accurately represented. Seeing diverse body types boosted participants' self-esteem and confidence, as they reported feeling more accepted and encouraged to purchase products. They valued these realistic portrayals and were likelier to be loyal to brands that genuinely prioritised inclusivity over those that used it as a marketing ploy.

"I would follow Khloe Kardashian, just because I think with her

brand that she just came out with, she has broken all those kinds of stereotypes. Because, as a person of a different shape or body size, I think that personally, I was feeling left out. And with the advertising she has done, I think I have purchased a pair of jeans from her for sure.” (Participant ANS)

Xennials and Millennials valued inclusivity but maintained a balanced perspective, appreciating the representation of diverse body types but emphasising that inclusivity should not promote unhealthy lifestyles. Although they felt positively influenced by inclusive advertisements, they remained sceptical of the motivations behind them, criticising brands that may have used inclusivity as a mere marketing tool. This shows a sophisticated awareness of performative inclusivity and a critical literacy of marketing images.

“Body image, being comfortable and confident with who you are, that’s fine. But when it portrays a negative trend, like, for example, the plus-size models. They are saying that it’s OK to be obese, which I don’t think it is. It’s unhealthy, and that’s not right. It’s OK to be comfortable ... I feel like if you’re truly concerned about someone’s health and general wellbeing, you will encourage them to live a healthy life.” (Participant SV)

Participants from both age groups of the study emphasised the empowering potential of inclusive advertising, although 31–50-year-olds also brought up the health implications of these portrayals.

Filtered realities

There seemed to be a complex relationship between digital editing and participants’ perceptions. Both Xennials and Millennials expressed concerns about the use of editing and its impact on beauty standards. They felt pressured to conform to unrealistic ideals, which led to negative self-perceptions and resorting to extreme measures to meet these standards. Despite this, they still found edited images useful for fashion inspiration if the body shape was like their own. This suggests that the relationship with edited content could be either aspirational or detrimental, pointing to a tension between empowerment and deception. Millennial Participant SS noted:

“Even if it’s photoshopped, I don’t mind, because if that’s a similar body shape as mine, I would still add them for some inspiration for styles. So, I don’t mind them being photoshopped or not.”

Some Gen Z participants emphasised the negative impact of edited images on self-esteem and body image. They preferred authentic and unedited photos in advertising, highlighting the importance of relatability in brand messaging. The influence of social media on perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards was a common theme, and the pressure to conform to these standards could lead to a range of adverse outcomes, including body dysmorphia and low self-worth.

There was a clear distinction between personal use, such as the use of effects and filters, and deceptive advertising, with participants advocating for transparency in brand communications. The issue of false advertising was also highlighted, and it was showcased that transparency was necessary to build trust and manage expectations.

“I’m an adult and I’ve got two boys, so I know that people do edit, but the new young generation like my kid, he’s only 11 years old. When he is using Instagram and he sees OK, you just eat a protein bar, and you get these muscles, and you can build up your body, and you look like this. He thinks that it’s all real, but we know it’s not real. So, you just must keep an eye on the younger ones.” (Participant SB)

Although some edited content was acknowledged as potentially inspirational (as seen in Participant SS’s comment above), participants reported

that advertising shouldn’t promote false ideals, especially to young and impressionable audiences. This scepticism can be read as a critical decoding position (Hall, 1997) where participants can identify commercial motives behind such inclusive imagery. Ultimately, participants thought that greater transparency and authenticity were needed in advertising, which were seen as signifiers of representational sincerity. Women in this sample, situated in the Aotearoa context, negotiate inclusion by aligning it with moral integrity rather than visual representation alone.

Brand influences

Participants referred to several global brand advertisements that influenced their opinions and purchase decisions, reflecting the dominance of international campaigns. Regarding beauty brands, participants appreciated Mecca for showcasing women with acne and pigmentation, which made them feel included and motivated to purchase products. Rare Beauty, Fenty Beauty, Maybelline, MAC Cosmetics and MILK were noted for their inclusive shade ranges. Dove was frequently mentioned for its campaigns celebrating natural beauty and promoting a more inclusive and realistic portrayal of women. The feminine hygiene brand Always received positive feedback for its Like a Girl campaign, which challenged stereotypical portrayals of girls. Aotearoa retailer Farmers was recognised for positively showcasing women enjoying professionalism and moving beyond traditional gender-specific clothing.

The Australian brand Country Road was mentioned for working with First Nations collaborators. H&M was appreciated for featuring diverse models and bold colour choices in plus-size clothing. However, Zara was criticised for not being as inclusive in its representation. Khloe Kardashian’s brand, Good American, was commended for promoting body positivity and diversity. In contrast, Victoria’s Secret was criticised for historically promoting an unrealistic body standard with its use of size-zero models. Athleisure brands such as Nike and Gymshark were also mentioned for their realistic portrayal of fitness apparel, which resonated well with consumers striving to improve their fitness and body image. Nike’s use of plus-size mannequins in their showrooms was highlighted as an effective way of promoting inclusivity and body positivity.

These examples, illustrated by participants, show the varied impact of inclusive advertising on consumers, highlighting the importance of authenticity and diversity. At the same time, the fact that only a small number of local examples was mentioned not only suggests that global narratives remain more visible across borders and can influence consumers in diverse contexts, but also highlights a gap between global and local advertising behaviour in Aotearoa. These findings suggest that the circulation of global advertising images shapes local consumer minds, meaning that even in Aotearoa, participants draw on international campaigns when thinking about inclusivity and representation. Their meanings are locally reconfigured, as participants interpreted inclusivity through cultural identity and moral expectations of sincerity, thereby turning global media messages into culturally situated judgments.

Smart shoppers and everyday resistance

The consensus amongst participants was that consumers played an essential role in shaping brand strategies. They voiced their preferences, supported diverse brands, and held companies accountable. It has also become easier for consumers to interact with brands in the digital age. Social media has amplified consumer voices, leading to unethical brands facing boycotts and public backlash.

Participants also mistrusted brands that had fluctuating messages and were perceived as insincere. They had difficulty believing in brand claims if they failed to reflect these values consistently in their advertisements. This scepticism drove some participants to conduct thorough research

before purchasing. They highlighted the importance of supporting genuinely inclusive brands rather than merely using these concepts for publicity.

"Personally, I do a lot of research before making any kind of purchase, because I have a really difficult time trusting brands. Just because they keep switching as per the society and as per the trends, and really difficult to actually believe them when they say that we support all women, and we support all different beauty standards, and then suddenly, their ads basically won't say what they are trying to say."
(Participant JK)

This critical position shows awareness about commodification of empowerment messages and images. Again, authenticity and sincerity are central to how participants interpret representations, as they distinguish between symbolic and genuine inclusivity. In Hall's (1997) terms, they are actively negotiating preferred readings offered by brands, rejecting market-driven performances of diversity.

Consumers wield significant power in shaping brand strategies, with brands beginning to diversify due to consumer demands. Participants asserted agency by holding brands accountable, leveraging social media and ultimately being co-creators of power. Brands that listen to their customers and align their actions with consumer values are more likely to succeed in today's competitive market.

"Any brand that wants to go on a higher scale and have a big business has to treat the customers as the king. And they can only do that when they listen to what the customers or the people have to say."
(Participant SKm)

Participants in this sample did not perceive consumers as passive recipients of advertising, but as active agents who shape brand strategies and often hold them accountable. In line with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, the women in this Aotearoa-based sample positioned themselves as negotiators of brand meanings, challenging superficial inclusivity and demanding consistent, authentic representations.

Suggestions for brands, from women

Participants suggested that brands should regularly collect feedback and stay updated with consumer needs and preferences. There was also a recommendation of testing advertisements with women consumers to gauge reactions and make necessary adjustments before launching campaigns.

"I think they should include women in the conversation. Umm, before they make the decisions, like include them in the decision making. I feel many times it's the men who make the decisions. Many women are not invited to the table, and therefore, they don't really have a voice."
(Participant VD)

Participants felt more drawn to brands that challenged stereotypes and promoted diversity and inclusivity. Authentic representation was seen as crucial to building a loyal customer base.

"We are the buyers, so we should be made seen, I mean, we should be, you know, the important ones where they, you know, respect our ideas as well." (Participant AnS)

Many agreed that brands, while not obligated to do so, were responsible for helping challenge stereotypes and celebrate individuality.

"They are 100% responsible for promoting diversity and inclusivity in their advertising. I mean, they're not ethically responsible for it, but it does help in challenging different stereotypes, celebrating individuality and it also helps in reaching like broader audiences."
(Participant ArS)

Participants emphasised the importance of honest advertising, showcasing products using authentic, unedited images to build trust and improve consumer self-esteem and body image. The need for consistent inclusivity in all advertisements was stressed, as this showed genuine commitment and avoided the impression of tokenism. Highlighting contributions to social causes was seen as another way to enhance brand image, while attracting socially conscious consumers.

"These fashion companies spend a lot of money on marketing and advertising. If they could channelise that money into other ways of maybe helping the underprivileged, I think that that would go a long way and help a lot of people." (Participant CL)

Brands could also learn from influencers representing various body types and styles by monitoring their audience engagement to develop better strategies.

"Like, there are brown-girl-friendly influencers, petite-sized influencers, then the curvy women, the tall women and all of that ... I feel that brands can learn how they are styling it and then see their engagement and see how people respond to that, and then can make strategies ... I feel that influencers can help brands change."
(Participant SS)

Participants believed that honest representation, inclusivity, and regular consumer engagement were crucial for building trust and fostering positive relationships.

"Real women, real bodies. I would say that would probably be the most helpful thing, not just like a Barbie-doll-looking thing. Like, different shapes, different sizes, different colours, different ethnicities, and adding them into an environment that helps them. I guess the young girls can look up to them and be like, oh, yeah, that's what I look like."
(Participant SL)

Overall, participants recommended that brands actively include women in decision making, embrace inclusive and authentic representation, and commit to social responsibility. These suggestions show their active engagement with brand messages, as they drew on their own interpretations to describe what inclusive, non-tokenistic branding should look like.

Discussion

This study's findings indicate that inclusive marketing strategies utilised by fashion brands showcase modern advertising's influence on consumer behaviour and purchase decisions, and have broader implications for marketing practices in the industry. This is supported by the notable shift in fashion and beauty advertising towards more inclusive and diverse representations to align with social changes, with participants acknowledging the gradual transition from unrealistic beauty standards to advertisements that celebrate a variety of body types, races and genders. This change reflects that the industry has increasingly recognised the need to authentically represent its target audience. Brands must be genuine and timely in their initiatives, as noted by Piaggio (2023) and supported by results from this study.

As DiSalvatore (2010) and Stanković et al. (2018) discuss, this study also found that inclusive marketing strategies impact self-esteem and body image, and foster a sense of connection and empowerment, although these effects are not automatic or uniform. Using Hall's (1997) framework, the ways participants responded to campaigns can be seen as active negotiations of meaning. In other words, participants are meaning-makers who negotiate representation on their own terms. Their interpretations reveal how advertising constructs, challenges or reinforces cultural understandings of gender, body image and diversity. In this study, inclusivity is dis-

cussed as a dynamic process of meaning negotiation, which participants interpret through culturally situated frameworks, rather than a fixed attribute of advertising content.

Despite progress, there are still notable gaps in representation, with participants highlighting the underrepresentation of certain ethnic groups, particularly Asians, the lack of diverse body types, people with disabilities and older individuals, which perpetuates feelings of exclusion. The portrayal of women in advertisements varies significantly based on cultural and regional contexts, potentially leading to misrepresentation and dissatisfaction. Such representational shortcomings caused participants to resist tokenistic portrayals, enacting oppositional readings (Hall, 1980) that challenge dominant brand messages. Brands should curate campaigns to be culturally sensitive and inclusive, and localise marketing strategies to resonate with audiences. Similar to Stanković et al. (2018), we argue that advertising has a moral duty to represent women authentically and consider the emotional impact on viewers' opinions of themselves and brand relationship. This is reflected in participants' readings, which show how global narratives of diversity are interpreted within local contexts and how power is resignified through consumer interpretation.

Consumers also have the power to influence brands and media, especially with the rise of social media. They redefine representation within capitalist mediascapes by destabilising top-down media messages and resisting dominant meanings. Brands that respond to consumer demands are more likely to earn trust and loyalty. According to McKinsey & Co. (2023a), Gen Z, who will represent a quarter of the world's population by 2030, is challenging traditional standards and influencing trends in the beauty industry through social media, an assertion supported by our findings. Like Peterson (2014), a few participants mentioned Victoria's Secret's decline due to its refusal of diverse representation, and how Gen Z demanded gender-inclusive products and valued diversity.

Participants were more likely to be drawn towards or purchase from brands that showed authenticity and had diverse portrayals of women, which corresponded with Qayyum et al.'s findings (2023) showing that exposure to inclusive advertising positively impacted consumer wellbeing, and increased brand engagement and purchase intention. Rewarding inclusive brands and boycotting non-inclusive or inauthentic representations points to their agency as consumers and redefines brand-consumer relationships. This shows that representational power is distributed, where audiences and brands both have control over meaning. With rising incomes and the predicted closing of the gender pay gap in about three decades, companies should continue creating uplifting messages targeting women (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016). Brands must embrace authenticity to connect with consumers today, who prefer unfiltered aesthetics and value authentic self-expression. This research also matches the results of Drake (2017), which showed that most women in their study had purchased a product because of a favourable portrayal of women; 'femvertising' elicited a stronger emotional response, due to the empowering messaging resonating with them.

This research found strong evidence to support that inclusive and diverse representation positively impacts brand perception, increases brand loyalty, improves reputation and has a broader reach (StopPress Team, 2021; The Creative Store New Zealand, 2022). Furthermore, some participants described fashion influencers as relatable and authentic; therefore, brands must broaden their representation and collaborate with influencers for more authentic and impactful messaging. In addition to empowered and progressive images of women, there was also an expectation among participants to see positive, inclusive representations of other marginalised groups (Middleton & Turnbull, 2021). Transparency was found to be an essential factor, as it helps build and maintain trust. Based on the findings, this study encourages brands to learn from and listen to their consumers to develop more inclusive marketing campaigns (Richards,

2020). Brands need to be mindful and engage with diverse communities respectfully (Deloitte, 2022). This would allow for a more authentic representation of diverse identities, challenge stereotypes and reduce biases.

Our findings advance theoretical understanding of inclusivity in advertising by conceptualising it as a cultural negotiation between global representational ideals and local interpretive contexts. This perspective situates consumers not as a passive audience to be convinced but as active agents who co-produce and reshape the meanings of diversity in marketing campaigns.

Conclusion

Theoretical contribution

This study advances theoretical understanding of inclusive advertising by integrating representation theory, social identity theory and postfeminist media perspectives. It demonstrates that women are not passive recipients of brand messages, but active interpreters who negotiate meanings of inclusivity based on their background. In doing so, the research extends Hall's (1997) theory of representation by illustrating the culturally contingent ways inclusivity is perceived in Aotearoa. Participants often engaged in negotiated meanings, e.g., accepting, questioning or resisting global inclusivity discourses, depending on their cultural positioning. Interestingly enough, their decoding was not only ideological but also ethical, with inclusivity being perceived as a moral claim. This insight nuances Hall's representation framework by treating audiences as ethical decoders rather than just ideological negotiators.

The findings also contribute to theory by showing how inclusive or exclusive portrayals in advertising can strengthen or weaken identification with consumer groups, particularly among ethnically diverse audiences. Furthermore, the study enriches postfeminist theory by exposing generational differences (Gen Z vs Millennials and Xennials) in embracing some practices of inclusivity as empowerment or critiquing them as tokenism. Participants recognised narratives of empowerment as both liberating but also commodified – i.e., instrumentalised for marketing purposes – which shows a reflexive position. They actively interrogated empowerment in distinguishing authentic inclusion from tokenistic inclusion. This shows how discourses of empowerment are localised and generationally negotiated within Aotearoa. Conceptually, the themes of authenticity versus tokenism, filtered realities in digitally edited advertising and consumers as active co-creators of brand meaning contribute novel insights to the literature on femvertising and diversity in advertising. This context-specific study from Aotearoa, a society shaped by biculturalism and rapid demographic change, also highlights how global narratives of inclusivity interact with local cultural dynamics, thereby broadening the geographical and theoretical scope of inclusive marketing scholarship. Together, these insights show that audiences act as localised moral decoders, through which global discourses of inclusivity are reinterpreted within specific cultural and generational contexts.

Managerial contribution

The findings of this study offer several important principles for managers, derived from the data, particularly within the fashion and advertising industries. First, the results highlight that inclusivity cannot be treated as a one-off campaign or seasonal gesture. Women in this study consistently distinguished between brands that authentically embedded diversity across their communications and those that relied on tokenistic or temporary representation. This suggests that managers should approach inclusivity as a strategic, long-term, moral commitment rather than as a tactical marketing initiative. Women actively evaluate brands for authenticity and

consistency. To build trust, managers should ensure that inclusive values are mirrored across all brand touchpoints, from advertising imagery to product availability (e.g., size ranges, culturally sensitive design) and even hiring practices. Failing to deliver on these promises risks consumer scepticism and reputational damage, especially in the digital sphere where inconsistencies are quickly exposed and shared. Second, the findings reinforce the importance of localised strategies. While global campaigns influence Aotearoa consumers, participants also highlighted a gap between international inclusivity narratives and the realities of Aotearoa's unique cultural and demographic context. Managers should therefore adapt global brand messages to reflect the ethnic diversity, body shapes and cultural values specific to Aotearoa, rather than relying on imported imagery. This localisation fosters stronger consumer identification and brand loyalty. Third, the study underscores the active role of consumers as co-creators of meaning. Women use social media and digital platforms to hold brands accountable, demand change and reward inclusive practices. Managers should embrace this dynamic by engaging directly with consumers, incorporating feedback loops and involving diverse groups of women in campaign development. This participatory approach not only strengthens authenticity but also helps anticipate potential backlash. Finally, the study suggests that inclusivity can be leveraged as a source of competitive advantage. Brands that consistently represent diverse women in authentic and empowering ways are more likely to achieve greater consumer loyalty, stronger reputations and long-term profitability. By moving beyond tokenism to meaningful representation, managers can create campaigns that resonate emotionally with women while also contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study focused on adapting a qualitative mono-method through in-depth interviews (Bell et al., 2018), with an Aotearoa participant pool. Our small, purposive sample allowed for depth rather than breadth, which is consistent with interpretive inquiry. Considering the study's interpretive and context-dependent focus, our findings reflect the specific cultural and generational perspectives of women in Aotearoa and cannot be generalised. The researchers' positionality also shaped data interpretation, although intercoder discussions were used to minimise this limitation. Future research could expand this scope to include a more diverse demographic, considering factors such as socioeconomic status, educational background and geographic location. In addition, examining other identity intersections, such as gender diversity, disability or indigeneity, could offer a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive marketing across marginalised communities. While this study focused on fashion, future research could explore other industries, such as beauty, healthcare or workplace inclusivity. Additionally, this topic could be examined to compare and contrast different countries and cultural contexts, which would further illuminate the ways that interpretations of inclusivity differ.

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