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The Impact of User Weight on Brands and Business Practices in Mass Market Fashion

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Abstract: Overweight people claim to be mistreated by the fashion industry. If they were, it would be in line with branding theory supporting the idea of rejecting fat consumers to improve user imagery for fashion brands. However, fashion companies do not confess to such practices.

To shed some light on the subject, I have conducted two studies.

The first attempts to illustrate what effect, if any, user imagery has on fashion brands. It is an experiment designed to show how the weight of users affects consumers' perceptions of mass market fashion brands. The findings show that consumers' impressions of mass market fashion brands are significantly affected by the weight of its users. The effect of male user imagery is ambiguous. For women's fashion on the other hand, slender users are to be preferred.

In the second study I examine what effects these effects have on assortments. I compare the sizes of mass market clothes to the body sizes of the population. No evidence of discrimination of overweight or obese consumers was found -quite the contrary.

The reasons for these unexpected findings may be explained by the requirements a brand must fulfil to make management of the customer base for user imagery purposes viable. The brand must be sensitive to user imagery; a requirement that mass market fashion fulfils. However, it must also be feasible for a company to exclude customers, and while garment sizes can be restricted to achieve this, the high volume sales strategy of mass market fashion apparently cannot.

Keywords: brands, brand personality, user imagery, assortments, fashion, fashion retailing

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Introduction

Who wears what matters

On a spring day in 1979, Jenny, the most popular girl in third grade, came to school wearing a new pair of shoes. They were blue suede loafers and quite different to the trainers most students wore to school. Before this, school clothes had not been a major consideration for the children. You wore what your parents bought you, and as long as it was practical you tended not to think about it. The blue suede loafers were a sign of things to come. Apparel was on its way to becoming important. Jenny's class mates congratulated her on her new shoes. The shoes were different just like Jenny was different; cooler, prettier, and more popular.

Once the loafers had become associated to popularity it was just a matter of time before other girls would get similar shoes. The second girl to show up for school wearing blue suede loafers was Berta. Given all the acclaim Jenny had received for her fashion innovation Berta was probably hoping the new shoes would make her look cool too. However, as a slightly overweight and socially maladroit girl, she found herself at the other end of the popularity spectrum, and the reaction to her choice of shoes was not a good one. There were no pats on her back, no compliments, and someone even told her that her new shoes were ugly. The class mate who said that seemed offended that ugly Berta would dare put on pretty Jenny-shoes. Myself, I remember wondering what this turn of events meant. When only Jenny wore the shoes, it was obvious they were pretty girl-shoes. But when Berta took to wearing them that was obviously not all they were. Could they be pretty-girl shoes and ugly-girl shoes at the same time? I was confused. I eventually came to the conclusion that they were just shoes that anyone could wear. They did not tell me anything about the wearer. My uncertainty regarding the meaning of the shoes seemed to be a common reaction, because no other girls decided to get suede loafers that spring.

A few years later, I became enamoured with a sweater. It was during the eighties, the golden age of big, distinctly patterned sweaters as worn by comedian Bill Cosby. These Cosby-sweaters were expensive and I had to wait for my birthday to get one. It was however worth the wait. Once I put it on I thought it was spectacular. Geometric shapes in bright colours stood out from a white base. You could see me coming from a hundred yards away. Unfortunately, a podgy middle-aged teacher at my school had apparently fallen in love with the same sweater, and unlike me, he was a one-sweater man. Everyday he roamed the corridors, wearing the Sweater. The first time I saw him my heart sank. It took about a week until my friends started calling me by the teacher's name whenever I wore the sweater, and about two weeks until I stopped wearing it. This was to become an unfortunate pattern in my life. In high school, I purchased a green and pink striped shirt which at the time seemed stylish to me. All was well until a fellow student bought an identical shirt and took to wearing it every day. Whenever I was wearing mine, it looked like we were in a club together. Exit colourful shirt. Later, in my early twenties, I sprang for an expensive light yellow suit, only to find that Sweden's public service TV channel had issued similar suits to every sports reporter on the payroll. My ostentatious fashion choice gave me a lot of attention, although not the kind I had wished for. My plan had been for women to compliment my daring choice of colour and interpret it as a sign of self confidence. I had not planned on guys asking me about the score of whatever game was on as a way of making women laugh at me. My disinterest in sports only heightened the sense of irony.

It now strikes me how natural the link between apparel and the people wearing it has been to me. In third grade, it never occurred to me to look at the blue suede loafers and evaluate their appeal on an aesthetic or practical level. I just wanted to understand what the new shoes meant, and the key to understanding this was the person wearing them. Later in life, I could not ignore the imagery of a teacher, a fellow student, or the sports reporters on TV, and just appreciate the clothes. I started to associate the clothes to the users as I perceived them, and the meaning they once carried changed. I could no longer show who I was by wearing my Cosby-sweater. Instead of good taste in clothes I suddenly expressed that I had something in common with a fifty year-old teacher. But why did I care so much?

McCracken (1986) would argue it is because we consume goods to express ourselves. Products or brands are imbued with meaning from the culturally constituted world. As consumers we absorb and personalize this meaning via rituals to express who we are or who we want to be. In the case of the blue suede loafers, the shoes were inundated with coolness from their connotation to the most popular girl in class. Berta bought the shoes to absorb and personalize this meaning and to express who she wanted to be; a cool person. As demonstrated by this particular incident, just because we consume to express ourselves it does not mean we succeed. However, we keep trying. Clothing is one of the most expressive product categories in existence (McCracken 1988, p. 57). It is a high involvement product category which is used to express the self through identification with brand traits (Ratchford 1987).

After Berta jumped on the blue suede shoes bandwagon the loafers never caught on with the other girls in class. Despite the endorsement of Jenny, the most popular girl in class, the risk of resembling Berta was apparently enough to make the girls stay away from the shoes. This is remarkable, because Jenny's popularity was much more pronounced than Berta's unpopularity. The explanation could be that fashion consumers are more motivated to avoid being associated with negative images than to be associated to positive ones (Banister and Hogg 2004). This is because in addition to an ideal self to which they aspire, consumers also have an undesired self. The undesired self encompasses everything consumers do not want to be (Bosnjak and Rudolph 2008). The dominant implicit standard that individuals use to assess their well-being is how distant they are from subjectively being like their most negative self-image (Ogilvie 1987). If we try to express ourselves through identification with brand traits as Ratchford (1987) posits, all influences on these traits is of great importance to the brand owner. One such influence is our perception of who typically uses a brand, also known as user imagery. Personality traits are directly transferred to a brand through the people that are associated with it (McCracken 1989), for instance the type of person who uses the brand (Keller 2000). Kressman et al (2006) show that the personality of the brand is strongly related to the personality of the perceived users. In other words, if consumers have a clear picture of what kind of person would use a specific brand, we also perceive the brand to display the same traits.

Although users displaying positive traits (Jenny) make it easier to establish the desired brand personality, it is logic that the wrong kind of users (Berta) would blemish a brand's personality; positively charged brand traits let consumers express themselves as they desire, negative ones push them away. A negative brand personality resulting from associations to unattractive user types would therefore hurt a fashion brand.

Previous studies

Marketing scholars study consumption, and if the perception of who is using a particular product is enough to motivate another person to buy it, or conversely, to abstain from buying it, it should be of interest to the field. The effect of personalities that appear in advertising, and/or are celebrities endorsing a brand have received considerable attention. Such studies are normally experiments in which the celebrity or model is the independent variable. Studies of this kind have among other things shown that consumer attitudes towards brands are affected by the attractiveness of the perceived user (Baker and Churchill Jr. 1977), his or her perceived sexiness

(Steadman 1969), as well as his or her gender (Kanungo and Pang 1973). Curiously, there has been little study of the genuine users' effect on brand perception. What has been published on the subject consists of anecdotes that illustrate how it can affect a brand or a company, for example Schroeder's (2006) account of how the association to the low-brow group of people called Chavs almost killed the Burberry brand, or how New York hipsters saved the Hush Puppy brand (Gladwell 2000).

A reason for neglecting typical user imagery as research subject may be the inherent difficulties when it comes to acting on the findings. In other words, the relevance of the research would be limited since real-world applications would be scarce. It is problematic to deny specific consumers the possibility to partake in an offering because they are so unattractive that they would hurt the image just through their association to a brand. Even if a negative effect of user imagery on brand image were determined, few companies would be able act on it. It is after all illegal to discriminate against certain groups of people. Say for instance that black people were determined to exert a negative influence on the perception of a particular product category. The finding would be useless to the brand owner since he or she would not be allowed to refuse blacks as customers. What is more, the impact of typical user imagery may be irrelevant, that is, if it became publicly known that a company was openly turning away potential customers, this in itself would harm the perception of its brand. Few industries would allow for this.

That our perception of a brand is actually shaped by who typically uses it seems intuitive, but it has yet to be validated. This is where this dissertation comes in; I wanted to find some evidence that typical user imagery actually works. To do so, I needed to study a product category that is susceptible to user imagery. Fashion seemed appropriate. However, there was another piece to the puzzle. I also had to define a typical user type that I had reason to believe would have an impact on fashion brands. The user type had to be clearly defined, that is, it had to be obvious what type of users different consumers were. I also wanted there to be a practical relevance to my choice so the results of my studies could actually make a difference. I realised overweight and obese users of fashion fulfilled all these criteria.

Overweight and obesity

The population can be divided into groups, depending on their BMI. They are as follows:

Table 1
BMI CLASSES

Class	BMI range	Explanation
BMI 1	<25	Under weight & normal weight
BMI 2	25-29.9	Overweight
BMI 3	Equal to 30 or above	Obese

Source: (WHO 1997)

Obesity is strongly associated with several major health risk factors, like diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, asthma, and arthritis (Mokdad, Ford et al. 2003). Abdominal obesity is directly associated with sexual dysfunction in several cross-sectional and prospective observational studies (Khoo, Piantadosi et al. 2010). Most seriously, obesity appears to lessen life expectancy markedly, especially among younger adults (Fontaine, Redden et al. 2003). For overweight rather than obese people, the immediate health risks are more closely associated to body shape than overweight. If a person has a large waist circumference, health risks similar to those facing the obese can occur. If the weight is more evenly distributed, the risks go down (Janssen, Katzmarzyk et al. 2002).

Given the health hazards associated to it, it is no wonder overweight and obesity is generally considered a bad thing. However, in addition to a shorter life span, overweight and obesity makes life harder for the afflicted. Even if they manage to avoid living their lives hampered by illness and restricted by physical limitations, the social connotations to overweight may stand in the way of happiness. Fat people are less content with themselves (Rodin, Silberstein et al. 1984). They also face discrimination. Employers are unwilling to hire overweight workers (Roe and Eickwort 1976), and fat peoples' experience of discrimination in the workplace is more pronounced than it is for thin people (Rothblum, Brand et al. 1990). When compared with persons of normal weight, obese individuals have fewer friends (Harris and Smith 1983) and are seen as less popular by others (Harris, Harris et al. 1982).

In addition to these problems, many people seem to agree that overweight people have a hard time when it comes to clothes. Opinions to that effect are found in the blogging community, in mainstream media as well as in the establishment. The prevailing notion is that companies do not provide clothes to overweight and obese people because that would hurt the companies' image. It is therefore said to be much harder for heavy consumers to find garments that fit them than it is for normal and underweight consumers. The logic is impeccable, and you could find support for such business practices in branding literature. For most people, overweight is a negative trait, and it would make sense for businesses to distance themselves from negative traits. Unsurprisingly, the fashion companies claim not to discriminate against overweight consumers. For instance, a representative of H&M explains that the company uses international lists of body measurements to guide what sizes to manufacture, and in what quantities, and adds "It is extremely important not to exclude any customers because of their size" (Gripenberg 2004).

Apparently there are two clear sides to this argument. The most commonly expressed opinion is however that companies act in their own self-interest; that they claim not to engage in reprehensible business practices but that they actually do so. Whenever I find strong opinions that are held by a majority, I get intrigued. This is especially true when the points of view are expressed as self evident truths, rather than opinions. What is more, when there is no corroborating evidence presented as the "facts" are laid out, I get the urge to have a look for myself.

In this case, I realised I first had to find out if there is any harm for a fashion brand in having overweight and obese consumers. In other words, before looking at whether discrimination occurs or not, it would make sense to investigate if there are any reasons it would. It is reasonable to assume that overweight and obese people could have a negative effect on a brand. Many studies show that heavy people are seen as unattractive (Wooley and Wooley 1979), and morally inferior (Keys 1955). Overweight is considered a negative characteristic, and should therefore not be related to fashion brands. This is also evident in fashion marketing communications. Almost all fashion models are thin, and if we interpret the industry's advertising from a user imagery perspective, overweight users should be detrimental to a fashion brand. Finding out if this is the case is the focus of the first study.

If overweight and obese users were detrimental to fashion brands, companies would have reason not to serve them in the way they do other market segments. There is a kind of symbolic racism attached to fat people (Crandall 1994) and in the same way as blacks in the US have less choice in fashion than motivated by their relative purchase power (Lee 2005) it is reasonable to assume that overweight and obese consumers would face reduced choice. I therefore felt it would be interesting to see if fat fashion consumers have relatively fewer garments to choose from than thin consumers. This is the focus of the second study.

The results of these studies provide new insights into an issue of social concern, but also for the first time provide some quantified empirical evidence on the theory of typical user imagery.

Fashion

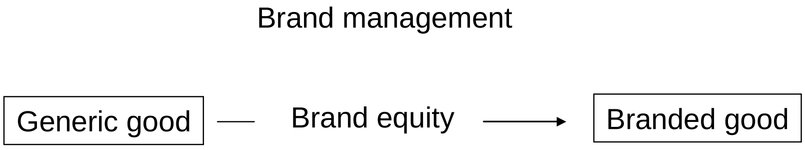
I chose the fashion industry as setting for the studies that make up this licentiate dissertation, not because I am interested in fashion as a subject, but because fashion provides conditions under which I believe typical user imagery should have an effect. Nevertheless, to study these mechanisms it is important to understand how fashion works.

Like most areas of research fashion can be regarded as different things depending on the theoretical background of the scholar. Fashion has been studied as anthropology, linguistics, sociology, psychology, etc. Only recently has the marketing world noticed this area of research. Within the marketing discipline there are different takes on fashion; most approaches that can be found within marketing can be found in fashion marketing, from the positivist mainstream quantitative perspective to the most hermeneutical qualitative branch. Fashion can be regarded as networks, institutions, or cultural phenomena. My personal interest is how fashion works on consumers. Why we are influenced to like a garment at one point in time, in one place, in one context, and then suddenly stop. I adopt a social constructivist perspective to make sense of this. I believe that the meaning of fashion is created and that this is the key to its power. However, fashion is not the only product category that displays such traits. Luxury products, specialty products, as well as shopping products (Kotler, Armstrong et al. 2008, p. 502), all share these characteristics. What then is so special about fashion?

Fashion is not easily defined. Like luxury products it is feminine (Berry 1994, p. 14), and it allows for higher prices than motivated by the utility value of the products (Twitchell 2002, p. 73). Like all symbolic products it is used by the consumer to imitate others or to differentiate him or herself from others (Levy 1959; Ratchford 1987; McCracken 1988). However, a central notion of fashion is its elusive nature. Fashion does not just tend to change; to be fashion, it must change (Kawamura 2007, p. 23). A luxury product can become a classic, remain unchanged, and keep on selling forever; fashion cannot. This unique property of fashion constitutes a double edged sword. The ever changing character of fashion drives sales. Consumers do not wear out their clothes before replacing them with new ones; they buy new clothes when new garments are necessary for them to feel up-to-date. This mechanism provides the fashion industry with a quicker turnover rate than it would otherwise enjoy. On the other hand, the changing nature of fashion makes the industry vulnerable. A garment that has been popular may suddenly cease to be so. This was the case for men’s hats. Once a staple of every man’s wardrobe, hats are now rare, which of course has been disastrous to hat makers everywhere. Changing tastes also pose a challenge when it comes to designing new collections. If you hit the mark, the rewards are plentiful. However, if you design and manufacture a collection that nobody wants it can be a severe blow to a fashion company’s bottom line. Because new collections must be presented several times a year, fashion is a high risk-high reward venture by nature. These are all characteristics of fashion, but what then is fashion really?

According to Brenninkmeyer (1962: 6) fashion can be seen as the point where the material product in the form of clothes meets the immaterial aspect of what looks good at a given point in time. Clothes constitute the raw material from which fashion is created. Fashion is expressed through clothes (Kawamura 2007, p. 18). In other words, there is the physical good that is a garment. This enriched by symbolic and immaterial values and the end result is fashion. If this sounds familiar to marketing scholars, it is probably because a similar process is covered in most basic marketing courses; that of brand equity creation. A generic good acquires brand equity through the process of brand management resulting in a branded good that is more valuable than the original product.

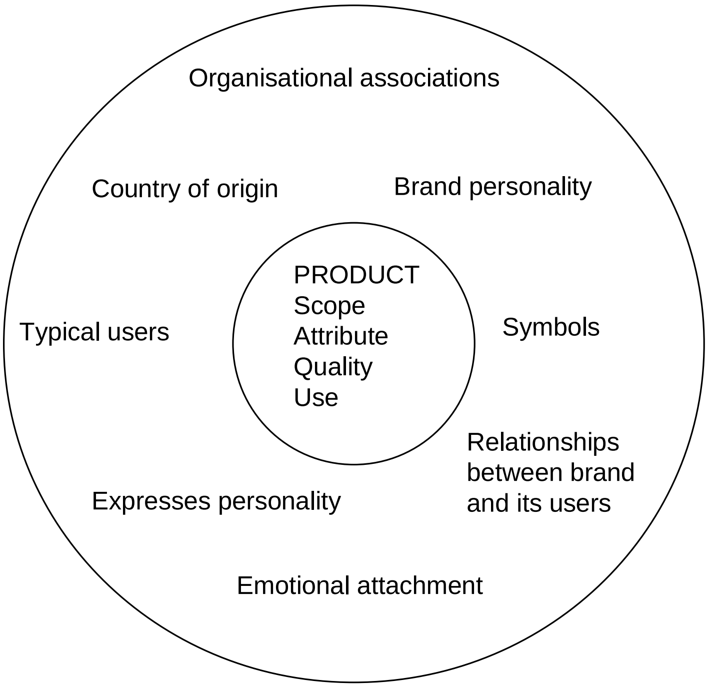
Figure 1
BRAND EQUITY CREATION


Brand management
Generic good
Brand equity
Branded good

Source: (Modified from Melin 1999, p. 123)

Hauge (2007, p. 13) posits that the immaterial values that are added to clothes to make them fashion are aesthetic values and brand values. Aesthetics is everything related to how fashion looks and feels. Hauges (2007, p. 17) definition of brands is as entities that connect emotionally to the consumer, create loyalty, and provide him or her with the possibility to discern between different offerings through logos, slogans and marketing messages. I find this line of thinking appealing, although I would argue that the two sets of values both fit within the brand construct. Aaker (1996) has presented a widely accepted definition of what a brand is (as illustrated by the figure below).

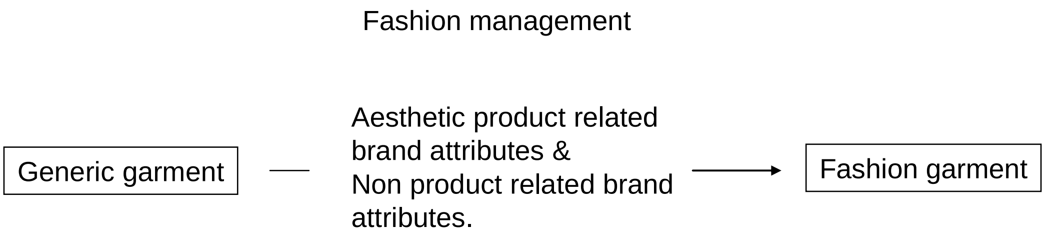
Figure 2
A BRAND IS MORE THAN A PRODUCT


Organisational associations
Country of origin
Brand personality
PRODUCT
Scope
Attribute
Quality
Use
Typical users
Symbols
Relationships between brand and its users
Expresses personality
Emotional attachment

Source: (Aaker 1996, p. 74)

As we see, Aaker's definition encompasses the physical aspects of the product, and thereby the aesthetic attributes, as well as the non-product related brand aspects which are what Hauge refers to as brand values. Thus, the fashion creation process as described in fashion studies is really identical to the brand creation process as described in marketing. I will from here on refer to the two types of values as aesthetic product related brand attributes and non product related brand attributes. The creation of fashion is illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 3
FASHION CREATION


Fashion management
Generic garment
Aesthetic product related brand attributes & Non product related brand attributes.
Fashion garment

In brand management, different attributes are important for different types of products. For instance, for technically advanced products that cost a lot of money (like a car), product related attributes are relatively speaking more important than they are for cheap spur-of-the-moment consumer products (like a candy bar). This knowledge informs companies about how to market different types of products (Kotler, Armstrong et al. 2008, p. 503).

If we accept that fashion creation is similar to brand equity creation, it is likely that it would work similarly. If different aspects of a brand have different importance for different offerings, it is reasonable that the same is true for different types of fashion. But what are the different types of fashion?

Different kinds of fashion

Fashion can span many levels, from haute couture to mass produced fashion. In-between falls prêt-a-porter, or ready-to-wear (Waddell 2004). Within this spectrum it is possible to make finer distinctions, as described by Nellis (2010):

- Budget or mass market - The low end of the apparel spectrum. Mass market apparel is sometimes a knockoff of higher priced designer items (which are then sold at popular prices to the masses, hence the name "mass market.")
- Discount or Off-price - Could be any price originally, but is retailing for less now
- Moderate - Dresses, sportswear, career wear and nationally advertised apparel brands are all in the moderate range
- Private label - Designed specifically for a store, often offering the latest looks for less than a name brand.
- Contemporary - More of a fashion-forward look, than just a specific price point. This classification is often aimed at women in their '20s and early '30s who are looking for trendy apparel, but at an affordable (at least compared to designer) price

- Better - The fabrics and styling are also of better quality than lower-priced items. Sportswear, coordinates, and dresses may all appear in better lines
- Secondary lines - This classification is sometimes used by designers to offer much lower priced items than the designer category. Also called bridge, see below
- Bridge - A "bridge" between better and designer, this category is often for career separates and dresses in finer fabrics
- Designer - True designer collections often sell for more than $1000 an item. The fabrics, cut, detail and trim are usually superior to other ready-to-wear items. Some examples of designer labels are Gucci, Prada, Versace, and Marc Jacobs
- Haute Couture - Made-to-measure apparel or couture costs tens of thousands of dollars and only a handful of clients can afford it

It is obvious that these classifications become more likely to overlap the more classes are introduced. For instance, one could argue that a brand like H&M could fit the budget/mass market class, but also the moderate, and the private label classes. However, this overview illustrates the point that fashion is differentiated and that there are many potential price points and fashion points on the spectrum. It is therefore reasonable to assume that there are many different motivations why consumers buy fashion, which in turn would mean that it is likely that different aspects of the brand may be important for different types of fashion.

If consumers were not concerned at all with the symbolic properties of fashion, they could buy generic clothes that just fulfilled their functional needs, and then wear them out before replacing them. Since few people do this, it is probable that fashion consumers of all types use what they wear to communicate who they are or what they want to be. However, it is possible that this is done through different means.

If the symbolic aspects that transform clothes into fashion are either aesthetic product related attributes or non-product related brand attributes, I would contend that the creation of mass market fashion is contingent on the former to a greater extent than are the more exclusive classes of fashion. This is not to say that high fashion can get by without offering the aesthetic experience, quite the contrary. It is very important for all fashion to look and feel right. For high fashion it is not enough though. Consumers pay a premium to acquire a garment with an attractive logo, and there must be a reason for this.

First of all, it is important to realise that not all logos are created equal. However, mass market retailers also brand their clothes. The difference is that their names and logotypes do not work the same way as those of more exclusive fashion do. Rather, they can be considered ornaments; details added to the garments in order to enhance their appearance. For instance, one of the retailers in my studies, KappAhl, markets its line of men's jeans under the Redwood label. The jeans have a visibly marked Redwood patch on the lining above the wearer's right buttock. This is the normal place for jeans' patches ever since Levis' 501 model (arguably the original denim pant). However, in advertising, the Redwood brand is not emphasised. On the company's web site, the Redwood brand is not even identified. You have to enlarge the product photos and read the name off the patch to even know the brand of the jeans (KappAhl web site 2010). The brand that is communicated to the consumer is the corporate brand, KappAhl. The Redwood name seems to exist only because the jeans would look weird without a patch.

For high fashion the logos have a different function. Unlike mass market fashion, on the more exclusive levels of fashion, the visible logotype is of the brand that is relevant to the target consumer (Twitchell 2002, p. 92). It is the brand that is promoted by the owner, and its personality is what informs the consumer about its meaning. If a consumer buys a garment from

Kenzo, it is because he or she is attracted to Kenzo's brand personality, not that of its parent corporation LVMH. Further, the logotypes allow the consumer to identify the brand. Therefore consumers can use this type of fashion to show the surrounding world that they wear a particular brand. The brand's meaning rubs off on the consumer and its job is done. If you wear a shirt sporting an embroidered polo player, your peers will probably know it is a Ralph Lauren shirt and therefore interpret its aesthetics according to their perception of that brand. They will have learned that Ralph Lauren stands for American East Coast old money elegance (McDowell 2002, p. 57) through product design of other Ralph Lauren garments, through advertising, or perhaps through word-of-mouth. Thus, the meaning transfer of exclusive fashion does encompass aesthetics; it just does not have to rely solely on it. Even a plain garment such as a white shirt will enjoy the connotations to everything the brand stands for in the minds of consumers because the consumers can identify the brand. The same garment, if sold by a mass market retailer on the other hand, would not have this advantage. For mass market fashion, the aesthetics is all there is. A consumer gains nothing by showing off a mass market fashion brand, but by putting together an outfit that looks a particular way that consumer can still communicate symbolically. Mass market fashion leaves out many of the non-product related brand aspects of the clothes, but it does communicate something about the wearer's sense of style.

To sum up, if we accept the widely spread notion that clothes constitute a kind of language that permits the wearers to express themselves (McCracken 1988, p. 62), both mass market fashion and high end fashion works. However, high fashion allows for a more comprehensive expression because it lets the wearer communicate both through product-related aesthetics and through non-product related brand attributes. Mass market fashion on the other hand is limited to the aesthetics, and hence high end fashion could be considered a richer language.

The Swedish market

As in every country, different levels of fashion exist. Swedish fashion is catering to different market segments, but perhaps not all that can be found internationally. The very exclusive fashion industry is more or less absent from the Swedish market. It is concentrated to the fashion centres of the world like Paris, New York, Milan, etc (Sundberg 2006, p. 29). The main segments that exist in any significant way are brand- and marketing dominated fashion companies that normally create jeans, street, and casual wear. This group comprises brands like Filippa K, Acne, J. Lindeberg, etc. The other, and overwhelmingly largest category, is the chain retailers. They dominate both domestic and international sales (Hauge 2007, p. 30). These chain retailers are the focus of this dissertation.

The Swedish fashion market has a turnover of approx. SEK 64 billion, of which nine billion is shoes and two billion accessories, leaving 53 billion for clothes (Sundberg 2006, p. 12). The companies whose assortments are investigated here account for almost SEK 13 billion of this market (Holmén and Nilsson 2007, p. 7), or approx. 30% (GfK 2007). In other words, they make up a significant part of the Swedish fashion market. It is therefore possible to make inferences about the choice Swedish consumers face based on the result of Study II.

There has, since the mid-nineties, been a downwards shift in the Swedish fashion market. The number of shops has gone down, and especially the small independent ones; the market is consolidating. A greater part of the total sales volume now goes through the big chains, at the expense of smaller retailers. This has also lead to lower prices over the same period (Sundberg 2006, p. 13). These chains are vertically integrated, that is, they control everything from design and production, through market communications and retailing. They all market their own in-house brands.

Swedish fashion as a whole is not really driving global tastes. This is especially true for the big chains. They do not lead trends, but they adapt quickly to them (Hauge 2007, p. 26). This should come as a surprise to no one. The combination of low prices and large volumes prohibit a high level of innovation. The clothes are made to appeal to a broad spectrum of consumers, and cutting edge styling would therefore be counter productive. During an interview I conducted with two KappAhl board members, the following was said:

Owner: …it is very important that we seem modern to our customers. That is central to us.
Purchase director: Mhm. That doesn't mean we should latch on to every trend though.
Owner: Not the weird ones.
Purchase director: No.

October 10, 2007

This seems to be key to the success of mass market fashion companies; to seem modern to *their* customers. Not to fashionistas. Not to the affluent. Not to discerning consumers who have opinions about brands. This makes sense because it is not to mass market retailers that the fashion conscious public turns to learn about new styles anyway. For the people who really care about new fashion, the big chain retailers are simply not authorities when it comes to formulate what is hot and what is not.

The logic behind assortment building

In an earlier stage of my career I spent two years doing category management as an employee of Procter & Gamble, a large fast moving consumer goods company and a driving force behind this movement. Category management is a moniker that covers more than just assortments. It also covers product introduction, product display, logistics, etc. It is really about taking a holistic view of each product category and treating it like a strategic business unit. However, when introducing category management as a way of working, the easiest way to get a big profit boost is normally through assortment optimization. This is low hanging fruit, and therefore what I spent most of my time doing. The logic behind the process is roughly the following: If the goal is to make as much money as possible, the assortment should mirror the demands of the target consumer group as closely as possible. For instance, if fifty percent of the target consumers for fashion are female, fifty percent of the garments offered should fit females. If ten percent of shoe consumers are size 36, ten percent of the shoe assortment should be size 36. This logic assures that the costs related to carrying each stock-keeping-unit (SKU) is proportionate to the demand for the product. It also minimizes the risk of out-of-stock situations (which equal lost sales) as well as redundant stock (which equals lowered profits because the items have to be discarded or at least sold at a reduced price).

However, not all product categories exist to maximize profit, at least not in the short term. They can be image makers; a form of communication of how the retailer wants to be perceived. A department store may allow more SKUs of cosmetics than sales would dictate in order to show that it is a full assortment retailer that will fulfil every need. Categories can also be loss leaders, designed to drive traffic but not make money. Diapers are a classic example of this. Stores accept losses on each packet of diapers to attract the desirable family with kids demographic. What they lose on diapers they make up for on high profit/low price sensitive categories like confectionary. It is swings and roundabouts. Although it is possible to find many different roles for product categories to play, the default goal is to make money, which is achieved through a combination of margin and rate of turnover. In other words, it is possible to deviate from the rule of assortments mirroring demand, but if so, it should happen for a good reason.

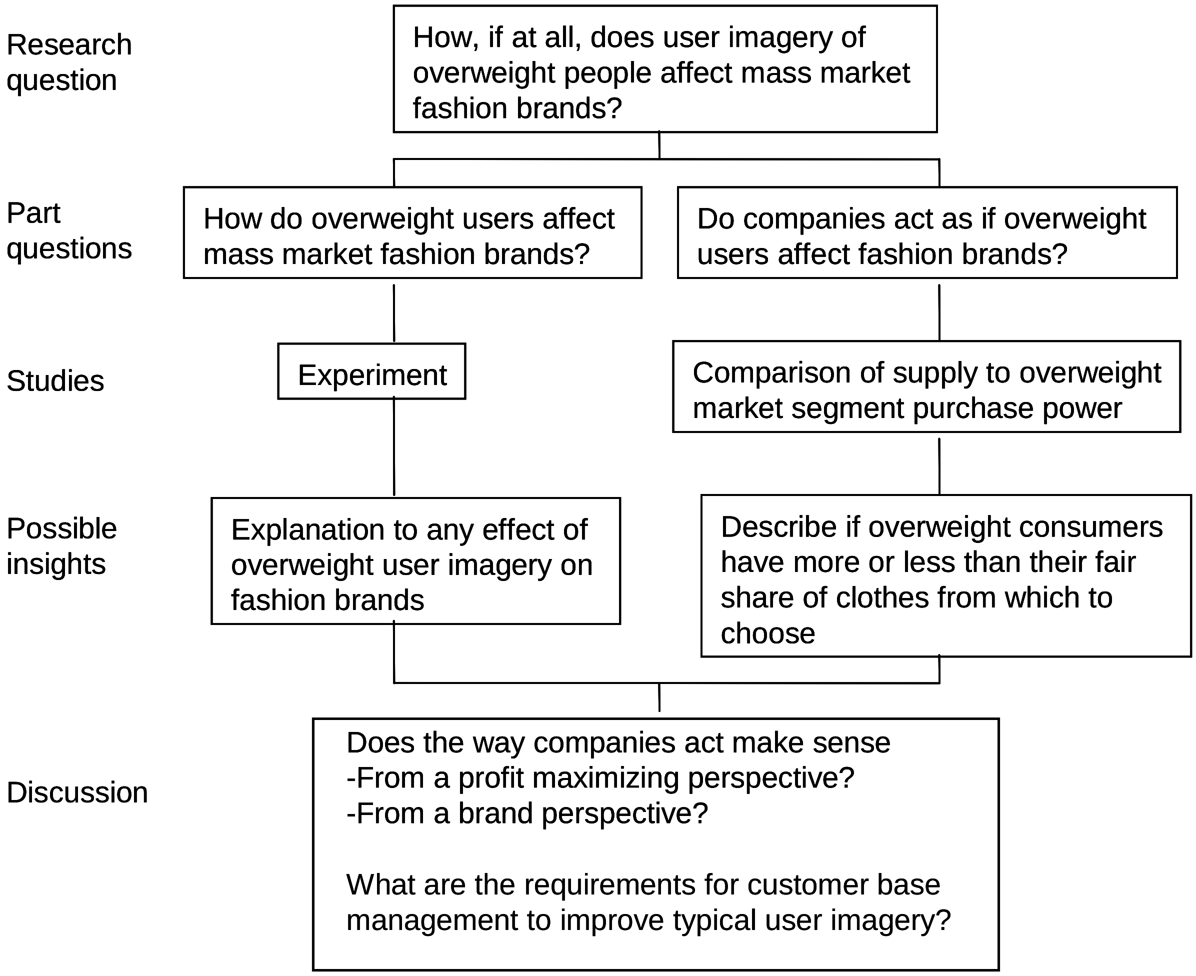
This section is included to provide a background for Study II in which I compare the garments that are offered in-store to the population that is supposed to buy them. For the study's results to matter, it is necessary that the reader understands and accepts the assumption that companies that want to maximize profit put together their assortments to mirror demand.

Purpose and research process

The purpose of this licentiate dissertation is to gain new insights into how user imagery affects brand perception with consumers and what companies do about it. User imagery is an area of brand theory that has been discussed in the literature, but that has never been validated through quantitative measures; I attempt to do so here. What is more, as I have chosen to examine user imagery effects of different body types on mass market fashion, the results should be of interest to those that care about the situation of overweight and obese people in society, as well as to those interested in fashion retailing.

Below is a figure to illustrate the structure of this dissertation.

Figure 4
THE RESEARCH PROCESS


Research question
How, if at all, does user imagery of overweight people affect mass market fashion brands?
Part questions
How do overweight users affect mass market fashion brands?
Do companies act as if overweight users affect fashion brands?
Studies
Experiment
Comparison of supply to overweight market segment purchase power
Possible insights
Explanation to any effect of overweight user imagery on fashion brands
Describe if overweight consumers have more or less than their fair share of clothes from which to choose
Discussion
Does the way companies act make sense
-From a profit maximizing perspective?
-From a brand perspective?
What are the requirements for customer base management to improve typical user imagery?

Definitions

Because the constructs that make up the theoretical foundation for this dissertation have been used in a less than stringent way in previous research, I provide the definitions that I use below.

- *Self-image congruence* occurs when a consumer feels that the human characteristics that can be associated to a brand mirrors his or her own actual or aspired to personality
- *Brand meaning* is what a brand means to a consumer as expressed via age, gender, social class, lifestyle and personality
- *Brand personality* is defined as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand
- *Ideal users* are persons that use a brand in return for some form of compensation
- *Typical users* are the users of a brand that use a brand but that do not receive compensation
- *Discrimination* in this context is defined as an under-representation of garments for specific groups that is not motivated by traditional cost-benefit rationale
- *SKU* = stock keeping unit. The number of SKUs equal the number of article numbers times the number of units in-store per article number

In the next chapter I attempt to make sense of these constructs and how they relate to one another.

Theoretical framework

Self-Image Congruence

"We like people who are like us, and find them far more persuasive than others" (Wiseman 2009, p. 62). This is evident when we choose friends, but also when we elect officials (Caprara, Vecchione et al. 2007) or decide whether to say yes to a proposal (Garner 2005). It seems a universal trait to seek out other persons that resemble oneself. However, this mechanism is not limited to interaction with other humans; it is also evident in the consumption of brands.

Utilitarian products that are bought to fulfil a functional need will be preferred if there is a match between the need and the impression the consumer gets of the practical functionality of the product. Such a match is referred to as functional congruity and is created through communication of function (Johar and Sirgy 1991). On the other hand, brands that are bought primarily because they appeal to consumers' values do so through symbols (Levy 1959). The common mechanism is that when consumers achieve either of these forms of congruity they reach different forms of satisfaction or avoid different kinds of dissatisfaction, which in turn results in positive attitudes or persuasion to buy a brand (Sirgy 1982; Johar and Sirgy 1991).

Self-image congruence refers to the match between consumers' self-concept and the personality of a given offering. When achieved, it has been proven to increase consumer preference for stores (Sirgy and Samli 1985), influence purchase behaviour (Malhotra 1981), and improve brand loyalty (Kressman, Sirgy et al. 2006). The consumer's self-image and brand personality may not always be in agreement (Keller 2003, p. 86), but as Keller (2003, p. 99) states: "In those categories in which user and usage imagery are important to consumer decisions, however, brand personality and user imagery are more likely to be related. Thus, consumers often choose and use brands that have a personality that is consistent with their own self-concept, although in some cases the match may be based on the consumer's desired self-image rather than their actual image".

Shank & Langmeyer (1994) claim that the relationship between personality and consumer behaviour is weak. However, they refer to a relationship between human personality measured by a Meyers-Briggs personality test and what appears to be an arbitrary product personality scale of 25 items. In other words, they do not compare apples to apples, and what is more, although the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator is a validated tool, their 25 item bi-polar adjective graphic rating scale is not. Other studies do show a relationship between personality and consumer behaviour. Kressman et al (2006) for instance measure actual and ideal self-congruity (how well the consumers feel a brand's personality matches who they are or who they would like to be). They juxtapose this to brand loyalty. Thus, we learn that brand personality exercises an important influence over consumer behaviour. We also learn that there is a strong connection between brand personality and the personality of the perceived users.

Brands

Brand meaning

Brand meaning is what a brand means to a consumer (Levy 1959). Product related features like scope, attributes, quality, and uses certainly influence how we perceive a brand. A fashion brand is however more than a functional product. It also includes many other parameters that shape the way we experience it. Country of origin, organizational associations, symbols, brand-customer relationships, emotional benefits, self-expressive benefits, brand personality, and user imagery are such non-product related agents (Aaker 1996, p. 74) . These are more symbolic in nature, and say more about how the brand makes you feel than what it does for you.

Consumer goods are inundated with meaning from the culturally constituted world. The meanings that are transferred from that world to a brand are connotations of age, gender, social class, lifestyle, and personality (McCracken 1989) and it takes place via advertising or product design (McCracken 1986). In other words, when companies design and advertise products, they draw on the meanings that are created in the culturally constituted world, and as these pass from culture to products, the products themselves take on new meaning. For instance, the Marlboro cigarette brand has through consistent advertising using the cultural icon of the cowboy taken on a rugged and outdoorsy personality.

Once meaning has passed from culture to object, it continues from product to consumer. Consumers absorb and personalize this meaning via rituals to express who they are or who they want to be. Thus, a smoker, who through culture has learned to attach positive feelings to the freedom of the American cowboy, will choose Marlboro cigarettes provided that the brand owner has succeeded in transferring that meaning from culture to the Marlboro brand. It becomes obvious that consumers seek not only utility from goods, but also meaning which they use to construct who they are and the world they live in (Belk 1988). In other words, people consume brands to show who they are, and evidence shows that the practice works (Fennis and Pruyn 2006).

In addition to signals transmitted by the brand owner, as described by McCracken (1986), brand meaning is developed in the mind of the consumer through social discourse (Twitchell 2002, p. 34). Social discourse includes public speech and print (ibid), word-of-mouth (Keller 2003, p. 71), typical and ideal user imagery (Aaker 1996, p. 74) and brand reflexivity (Schroeder 2006). Brand reflexivity refers to the impact on a brand by other brands. For instance, if a new and exciting brand is launched, the meaning of an existing brand can be altered in the minds of consumers. In comparison to the new brand the older one can seem stodgy even though the brand itself is unchanged. In this way, consumers look to the meanings created in both marketing and social environments to assist with this individual meaning construction (Brioschi 2006). The meaning of a brand is not finalized until it is perceived by consumers that are active and negotiating (Schroeder 2006). Neither managers nor consumers completely control branding processes – cultural codes contribute to, and constrain, how brands work to produce meaning (Schroeder 2005).

The different ways brand meaning is created could be structured as forms of communication. This communication can be broken down into three categories; primary; secondary; and tertiary (Balmer 2003, p. 310). Primary communication refers to the first hand experience an offering presents to the consumer. This includes McCracken's (1986) product design, but also pricing, distribution, promotion, how company staff acts, how corporate policies are perceived, etc. Secondary communication pertains to communication that is controlled by the company, for instance advertising, promotions, and PR. That is, what we normally refer to as marketing communications. Tertiary communication relates to the uncontrolled forms of communication in society that helps create brand meaning. Balmer & Gray specifically mentions word-of-mouth, but this type of communication would span all social discourse mentioned above.

The creation of brand meaning may be personal for each consumer, but because it is created in society it is collective in origin. The influence of primary, secondary, and tertiary communication is a result of the aggregate of attitudes that exist in a society and how they are expressed. This total brand communication forms the basis for the creation of meaning, and each consumer takes it in and negotiates what a brand is in a way that makes sense to him or her. Thus, it matters what everyone thinks, not just the target consumer, because he or she will form an opinion based on the totality. For instance, for a garment to appear fashionable to the target consumer, it must also be attractive to other people who may never buy it. If only the actual buyers appreciated it, its meaning would change from generally acknowledged fashion symbol to inside secret for a select few. Both meanings are possible, but they are very different.

Brand personality

Although philosophers have pondered the concept during millennia, modern research of personality naturally stems from the field of psychology. There are many definitions of personality. However, most analysts agree that it is tied to the concept of consistent responses to the world of stimuli surrounding the individual (Kassarjian 1971). Most of the major theories for describing the human personality have been adopted by marketing scholars who with varying degrees of success have tried to prove that a person's personality influences his or her behaviour as a consumer (Kassarjian 1971). Such theories include those of biological, psychoanalytic, learning, phenomenological, and cognitive perspectives (Wilderdom 2005). Another influential theory in the field of psychology is the trait and factor theory (Kassarjian 1971). According to this theory the human personality can be described by five dimensions, known as the Big Five. These five dimensions explain 93% of all personality traits (Aaker 1996, p. 143). Such a general five-factor model has become a standard classification scheme for both human traits as well as brand traits (Aaker 1997).

Personality has been a main brand focus since 1970 (Kapferer 1994, p. 44). Keller (2003, p. 94) describes brand personality as how consumers feel about a brand rather than what they feel the brand is or does. Kapferer (1994, p. 43) describes brand personality as a character of whom we as consumers form an opinion by the way the character speaks of products or services. The most common definition is of brand personality as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker 1997). It comprises the strict brand equivalents of human personality as expressed in trait theory, but also some other characteristics like age, gender, social class, and lifestyle (Azoulay and Kapferer 2003). It thus mirrors the comprehensive brand meaning construct as put forth by McCracken (1986) as reviewed below.

Brand personality is not only personality but meaning too

When reviewing the literature on brands and how they are perceived by consumers, it is apparent that there is no consensus regarding what the constructs entail.

The definition of brand personality used in this study overlaps with the components of brand meaning. According to some scholars (e g Azoulay and Kapferer 2003), brand personality should be the brand equivalent to the strict psychological definition of human personality. However, the Aaker Big Five approach also touches on other intangible aspects of the brand such as for instance class and ability, thereby widening the construct, making brand personality and brand meaning synonyms for all practical intents. Below is a figure demonstrating how the McCracken brand meaning construct can be said to relate to the facets of the Aaker brand personality construct.

Table 2
BRAND MEANING Vs. BRAND PERSONALITY

McCracken Brand Meaning Dimension	Aaker Brand Personality Facet
Age	Reliable
Gender	Outdoorsy
Social class	Tough
Lifestyle	Upper-class
Personality	Successful
	Up-to-date
	Down-to earth
	Wholesome
	Charming
	Cheerful
	Intelligent
	Daring
	Spirited
	Imaginative
	Honest

Sources: (McCracken 1986; Aaker 1997)

The brand meaning dimensions cannot be allocated straight to corresponding brand personality facets. However, it is reasonable to assume that the brand personality facets cover the brand meaning dimensions as a whole. In this way, the shortcomings of the Big Five construct are blessings in disguise. Its failure to stringently adhere to the way human personality is measured makes it more suitable to catch all dimensions of brand meaning and thus make the equation of the two constructs valid.

Is brand personality a valid construct?

In practice, brand personality is used to differentiate products, to drive consumer preference and usage, and as a common denominator that can be used to market a brand across cultures. However, there is some controversy regarding its definition. The concept originated from practitioners who felt the concept of unique selling proposition (USP) was too limited to describe the intangible facets of a brand (Azoulay and Kapferer 2003). The most popular definition of brand personality is probably as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker 1997). Objections to this use are often based on the perceived lack of coherence between this definition and that of human personality. There are those that find “the set of human characteristics” too wide a scope since it includes skills, age, and demographic characteristics while human personality according to psychology does not (Azoulay and Kapferer 2003). Others do not think trait theory is the best avenue for describing personality at all (Sweeney and Brandon 2006). The definitions of brand personality thus range from being everything non-tangible about a product, a replacement for the practitioner term USP, to a clear and concise concept mirroring the clinically determined construct of human personality (Azoulay and Kapferer 2003).

The Aaker scale has however become some what of a standard for subsequent studies of brand personality (Azoulay and Kapferer 2003; Parker 2009). Thus, despite its possible shortcomings it has the advantage of being widely used, which means that much of the research that describes how brand personality affects consumer attitudes and behaviour is based on brand personality as defined by Aaker. Since the theoretical foundation of this study depends on the findings of previous work, it makes sense to align the definition of central constructs to the definitions of those previous studies. Therefore, the Aaker Big Five definition of brand personality is used in this study.

Human personality and brand personality is not the same thing

To achieve the coveted self-image congruence and its rewards, the objective is to create a brand personality that matches who the consumer is or would like to be. However, this may not be as straightforward as it first appears because brands are not humans and therefore the personalities may not be directly comparable.

The beauty of the Aaker Big Five scale is that it was generated through the same factor analysis process as the original Big five personality dimensions for human personality (or OCEAN after its dimensions: Openness, Concientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (Aaker 1996, p. 143)). Thus, its validity for measuring brand personality equals that of the OCEAN scale for human personality. The problem is that the process, although identical, did not yield the same personality dimensions for brands as for humans. The two scales are correct for their intended use, but that does not mean they can be used interchangeably. Indeed, this is the very reason a brand personality scale was ever conceived.

This is however only an issue for studies of self-image congruence. In my experiment the respondents are only asked to describe a brand, not themselves, and therefore this problem does not arise. Self-image congruence studies on the other hand rely on the comparison of consumers' personalities to brand personalities, and therefore it is important that the two constructs are comparable, which in a strict sense, is not the case. Sigy et al (1997) argue that there are methodological flaws involved when using the Aaker brand personality dimensions to describe both a brand and a human, because the scale was not developed for humans. The Kressman (2006) study on the other hand supports the findings of Aaker (1997) and McCrae & Costa (1989) and shows that it is possible to measure and compare the personalities of humans and brands using one scale for both.

At any rate, as mentioned above, the Aaker scale has become some what of a standard for studies of brand personality (Azoulay and Kapferer 2003). As Parker (2009, p. 177) puts it "to date, the BPS (brand personality scales) is the only published and most widely employed brand personality measure, shown to be reliable and generalizable across different brands and product categories".

To achieve self-image congruence and its desirable consequences, brand owners want the brand personality to resemble the real or aspired to personalities of their intended consumers. They use the means at their disposal; primary and secondary communication. However, the relative importance of tertiary communication is growing and it is out of their hands. At the same time as brands have become more influential and therefore more valuable, they have also become harder to control. At one time, manufacturers would control most of the communication regarding any given brand through advertising. Word-of-mouth and what consumers read in the paper have always influenced how they perceive brands. However, with the growing number of media outlets, and especially as a result of consumer interaction on the internet, the creation of brand meaning now to a great extent happens beyond the reach of market communications. This means that of all communications that create and modify a brand's meaning, the share that is controlled by the brand owner is now relatively speaking a lot smaller than it used to be. The role of public discourse in brand meaning creation on the other hand has become much more prominent. This development is relevant to this dissertation because one aspect of public discourse is the object of study; typical user imagery. I will elaborate on this construct in the next section.

User Imagery

Personality traits are directly transferred to a brand through the people that are associated with it (McCracken 1989). Apart from company employees, this group includes the type of person who uses the brand (Keller 2000). This psychological shortcut facilitates the establishment of a brand personality (Aaker 1996, p. 147). However, if this effect makes it easier to establish the desired brand personality users of the *wrong* kind would probably tarnish a brand's personality.

David Aaker (ibid) divides users into two types, the ideal user and the typical user. The ideal type is a personality that the company wants to project as a user of a brand in order to improve brand image. Sponsored athletes, brand spokespersons, users of merchandise resulting from product placement in films, as well as people portrayed in advertising are examples of ideal users. Ideal users generate what Kapferer refers to as reflection. Ideal users should not be confused with the target group for the brand. Reflection is the image of the target which the company offers to the public (Kapferer 1994, p. 47). As an example, the actual target group for most cosmetics brands is older than the users portrayed in ads.

The typical user is a person that uses a brand out of choice, for example colleagues, friends, people in the street, real people in media, etc. Although Kapferer does not include them in his concept of reflection, typical users also reflect on the brand, but perhaps not in the manner intended by the company. Like editorial print, word-of-mouth, and other social discourse, a reality-based influence on brand perception like typical user imagery is possibly more powerful than marketing communications. Indeed, typical user imagery can be viewed as visual word-of-mouth. As in the case of word-of-mouth, the information that the consumer receives about the brand in question comes directly from actual users. Only instead of verbal accounts from users it is made up by the impression the consumer gets of the people he or she believes typically uses the brand. As word-of-mouth is the second most powerful influence on consumers after personal experience (Keller 2003, p. 71), typical user imagery should also affect brand perception to a great extent. After all, consumers experience user imagery first-hand while word-of-mouth is only second-hand information. Interestingly, negative user stereotypes are considered particularly powerful (Banister and Hogg 2004).

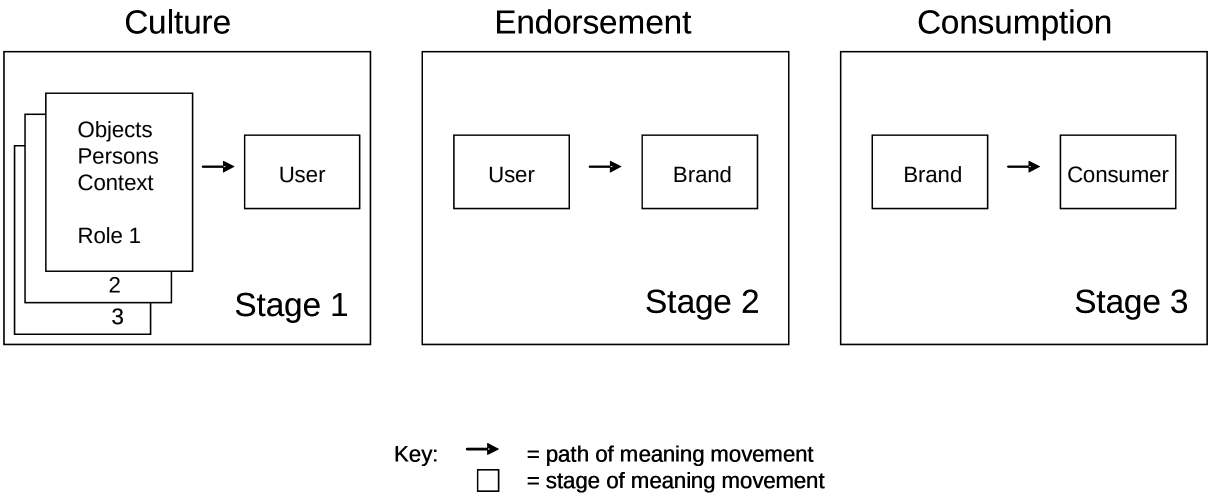
One such example is footballer wife Victoria Beckham. She appeared in a magazine toting a Gucci bag. This outraged the head of the company who assumed someone from the British subsidiary had given it to her in a misguided attempt to improve ideal user imagery, something the executive did not feel she would do (Storm 2007). It turns out she actually bought the bag, and thus functioned not as an ideal, but typical user. Although the division between ideal and typical users may seem clear, there is apparently a grey zone. A person who receives some remuneration in return for his or her usage of a brand is normally considered an ideal user. After all, in such a case the brand owner actively tries to influence someone to become a consumer in order to improve the perceived brand meaning. This is a corporate perspective of ideal users. Another line of demarcation between ideal and typical users could be the consideration of whether the user makes his or her decision based on the reward offered. For instance, a wealthy pop star that routinely is offered free products by a range of fashion designers may choose to use some of the products, which from a corporate perspective would make her an ideal user. However, the celebrity would not use the items if they did not appeal to her. Nor would she refuse to pay for them if she had spotted them in a store. Thus, the decision to use a particular brand is not contingent on the remuneration from the brand owner, even if one should exist (for example in the form of free products). This way of separating typical from ideal users could be called a user motivation perspective. Finally, a third approach is to consider how users appear to consumers. According to this logic, if the target consumers of a brand believe a person is using the brand because he or she receives some separate reward from its proprietor, the user is an ideal user. On the other hand, if they believe a person is using the brand because he or she genuinely likes it, he or she is a typical user. This consumer perception perspective does not take into account any actual user or company motivations. For this dissertation, the latter definition is most suitable since both studies concern the effects of consumer perception.

It is apparently possible that the imagery of users affects our perception of brands, but how does this mechanism come about? Although research in typical user imagery is scarce, image transfer from ideal users to products and brands is less so. McCracken's (1989) meaning transfer model explains why and how celebrity endorsement is an effective means of loading consumer goods and consequently consumers with cultural meaning. It adds perceived users to the previously identified sources of meaning (advertising and product design). According to the model, the celebrity is charged with meanings through his or her public life. That is, meaning is transferred from the culturally constituted world into the celebrity as a result of the celebrity's career. Consumers feel that they know the public figure, and thus they connect certain meanings or values to him or her. By endorsing a brand the celebrity transfers some of his or her meaning as perceived by consumers to the product or brand. Since these meanings are complex and incorporate several roles that together make up the celebrity persona, it is vital that the celebrity is not only attractive and credible as suggested by the source credibility and attractiveness models from social psychology (Hovland and Weiss 1951-1952; Baker and Churchill Jr. 1977). A celebrity does not exist in a vacuum, so it is not possible to be attractive and credible in all contexts. He or she must also be well matched to the brand in question. If that is the case, the personality of the celebrity will help build the desired brand meaning.

When the process works, it is because celebrities build selves well. That is, a celebrity endorser displays a constructed self which is attractive and accomplished, and to which a consumer may aspire. Celebrities prove that it is possible to construct such a self, and thus works as a role model. As McCracken (1989) puts it: "Celebrities have been where the consumer is going". However, when a celebrity is not right for a brand, or when the cultural meaning of the celebrity changes, so that he or she hurts the brand instead of helping it (Behr and Beeler-Norrholm 2006), the leverage of fame is inversed. In this way, the strong and perhaps unwarranted effect on meaning that a celebrity can have on a brand can become a liability.

McCracken (1989) specifically describes celebrity endorsement which is a kind of ideal user imagery. However, it is reasonable to assume that consumers also perceive typical users as carrying cultural meanings, if not as fabulous as those of the rich and famous. After all, not only celebrities are characterized by age, gender, social class, lifestyle, and personality. Whether perceptions are correct or not, consumers most likely register some attributes of the typical brand users they come across. Because consumers can relate personally to them, they may in fact have a stronger perception of these parameters for some typical users than for ideal users, namely people they know. What is more, while the ideal user may seem more attractive, for the same reason that word-of-mouth is often more powerful than advertising, credibility could be stronger for typical user imagery than for ideal. Assuming this similarity between user types, the meaning transfer model would lend itself well to the description of all user imagery.

Figure 5
MEANING MOVEMENT AND THE ENDORSEMENT PROCESS



Source: (McCracken 1989). (The figure is adapted. The term"user" replaces the original"celebrity" in order to encompass typical users)

Brand personality and user imagery resemble each other but are not identical

Brand personality is closely connected to user imagery. Indeed, some marketing scholars, for example Joseph Sirgy (1997), Frank Kressman (2006), and Leslie de Chernatony (2006, p. 245) do not even make a distinction between user imagery (or brand-user image) and brand personality. However, according to many researchers, like Aaker (1996), Aaker (1997), and Azoulay & Kapferer (2003), brand personality consists of the human characteristics we can associate to a brand, not the characteristics of its users. This means that the underlying constructs on which the theory of self-image congruence is based have not been interpreted uniformly by the researchers who have formulated it. In other words, even though different scholars may use the same terms, they mean different things. Therefore, their definitions of self-image congruence are not as similar as they appear. Below is a non-exhaustive table of different definitions of the concept.

Table 3
DEFINITIONS OF BRAND PERSONALITY AND USER IMAGERY

Scholar	A brand's equivalent to a human's personality	Perceived users of a brand
David Aaker	Brand personality	User imagery
Jennifer Aaker		
Azoulay & Kapferer		
Parker		
etc		
Sirgy	Product-user image	Product-user image
Sirgy & Johar	Stereotypical user	Stereotypical user
Kressman	Brand-user image	Brand-user image
McCracken	Brand meaning	

Sources: (McCracken 1986; Johar and Sirgy 1991; Aaker 1996; Aaker 1997; Sirgy, Grewal et al. 1997; Azoulay and Kapferer 2003; Kressman, Sirgy et al. 2006; Parker 2009)

According to self-image congruence theory, if a consumer feels that the human characteristics that can be associated to a brand mirrors his or her own personality, he or she will prefer it to other brands. User imagery shapes brand personality and thus a brand's possibility of achieving the effect in question. For the assortment study, it would not matter whether we believed that user imagery and brand personality were one and the same or not. The focus of the study is on the assortment of garments and the choice they represent, in relation to the demand of the market. For the experiment study on the other hand, the definitions do matter. The research question there is actually how user imagery affects brand personality. If the two constructs were one and the same the study would instead constitute a judgement of the personalities of people of different weight. What is more, the study would be flawed because it would entail measuring human personalities using a brand personality scale; which would be less than ideal.

However, most scholars now separate the two constructs, and for good reason; it is entirely possible for a brand to have one brand personality and different user imagery. For instance, Aaker (1996, p. 172) exemplifies this by the Levi's jeans brand whose brand personality is that of a 19th century gold digger, but whose user imagery is contemporary. For businesses, working to establish a brand personality that is different from the personality of the actual users is a common strategy to make the brands more attractive. Kapferer (1994, p. 47) illustrates this by highlighting the differences in age between the models featured in advertising and that of the actual users. For categories that are linked to self expression and beauty, such as fashion, such age gaps are prevalent.

Methodological considerations

Every discipline seems to have its own practices, and it is important to understand how research is done in one's own field. Several times I have become despondent because I find myself faced with problems related to methodology or analysis. Usually, this is because much of the literature on such matters is authored by statisticians. After all, it is they who invented the tools, so they should know what they are doing, should they not? However, I have realised that marketing scholars take more liberties with regards to data than do statisticians. In addition to the justification of low effect sizes, we accept lower response rates on our questionnaires, we design questionnaires to give a nominally higher reliability thanks to the order of questions (Söderlund 2009) and we treat data in ways that pure of heart statisticians would not (for instance calculating mean values on non-equidistant value scales). This is possibly a consequence of the reality we face. We get lower response rates than for instance Statistics Sweden, so we have to accept them or not do research of this kind. So we make do. This is an understandable course of action, but it is not without its problems. If we, as Gummesson (2001, p. 44) claims, are becoming "measurement technicians, not scholars" we at least should measure well founded phenomena. If we do not, the false sense of security offered by the scientific method (November 2004) is exacerbated. If the scientific method applied to marketing can delude the practitioner into believing that "it is thick ice when in fact it is thin", the scientific method applied to sub standard data in a questionable manor will do so to an even greater extent.

I believe the way to address this is to be extra careful in the design of quantitative studies, and to be very clear in the write up of the findings. An elegant design makes the research question and its possible answers obvious. It is imaginative and its relevance immediately apparent. Presenting the findings in a way that makes it easy for the reader to appreciate them also permits him or her to make an informed decision as to their validity. Unfortunately, I often get the feeling that quantitative methods and findings are presented in a way that hides their meaning rather than reveals it. It is like the authors includes large tables of data with abbreviated headlines, and do not tie them to the text. In other words, it seems like there is a running text that is interrupted by tables of data, and then the running text picks up again without acknowledging the content of the tables. It feels like I am supposed to skim the tables and just trust the text for the meaning of the article. I would prefer a more transparent relationship between the data and the text telling me what the data means. In my mind, the best articles already do this, while the poorer efforts seem to hide behind the data rather than exploit it to its fullest. I strive to make my studies as clear and easy to understand as possible, and I hope I succeed in some measure.

Quantitative studies

Despite their potential shortcomings, quantitative studies have a few things going for them. In quantitative research the eye of the needle which one must pass through is the conceptualization of constructs. This is where the reader has to "buy it". If the reader finds the construct reasonable and the following study is done scientifically, the results will be valid. This offers an opportunity for a researcher to carefully fashion the research design in a way that ensures results. What is more, the results obtained will in my mind be less questionable than those generated by qualitative research. The reader may find them uninteresting, but if he or she accepts the underlying assumptions of the study and its design, at least the results will mean something. The reader does not have to be persuaded at every turn by the writer.

For the studies that make up this dissertation I feel a quantitative approach is a good choice. My research questions regard if and how typical users' BMI affect brand perception of mass market fashion of other consumers. Therefore my choice for these articles is to use a quantitative approach. I simply feel these methods are the right tools for the job.

I chose quantitative methods because I had noticed a consensus in society that fat people are bad for business and are thus shunned by fashion companies. The problem for me was that everyone except fashion companies took this notion as a self-evident truth instead of what it really is until proven; an opinion. I had colleagues in fashion research advising me against this study because it could only give one result, and an uninteresting one at that. All in all, I got the feeling that the negative effect of overweight users on brand perception was a foregone conclusion.

To challenge this, or at least nuance it, it is necessary to do quantitative research. A focus group or in-depth interviews could not possibly generate the data I needed to find the answers to my questions; do overweight users really hurt brand perception of mass market fashion, and do companies act accordingly? They would have given an inkling towards an answer, and would without a doubt have given me a lot more insight into how consumers perceive brands on a deeper level. However, this is not what I am interested in here. This study is about "yes" or "no" and to a degree "how much".

The other methodological concern was the reliability of the questions. How could I be sure that the respondents interpreted the terms for personality dimensions the same way I or really Jennifer Aaker (1997)) intended? If not, they would rate something different than I thought they did. The solution to this problem came via Söderlunds (2009) review of trends in marketing. For quantitative studies it is now de rigueur to build in reliability into the questionnaire. This is done by asking several questions in order to measure one thing. Those questions should be validated to make sure they indeed measure the same thing. Luckily, the Big Five brand personality construct I use comprises five general dimensions that break down into fourteen facets and 42 traits. The factor analysis used to generate the Big Five scale guarantees that the traits measure the same thing as the brand dimensions. The dimensions are actually derived from the traits. My questionnaire was on the trait level, so without knowing it, I had already done just what was needed to resolve the issue. I just needed to realise it.

Study I: User BMI effects on mass market fashion brands

The actual article is found in Appendix I.

How I did it

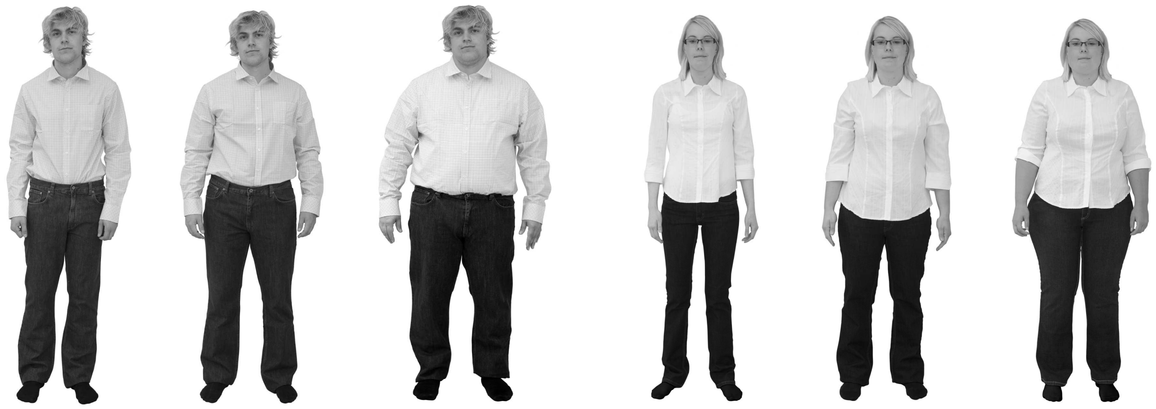
The point of the experiment is to demonstrate what effect, if any, user types of different weight has on how consumers perceive mass market fashion brands. The independent variable is in other words the weight, or more accurately, the BMI of the user. The dependent variable is the mean score on the Aaker Big Five brand personality scale. To realise this, I had to illustrate users that were identical except for their different body types. I had the anthropometric data kindly provided to me by Ingrid Larsson of Sahlgrenska. It revealed the average measurements of people of different BMIs. I chose sizes that were in the middle of the span for each group for validity's sake; to get the most representative illustration possible of a person of each group. I purchased shirts and jeans at appropriate sizes. This posed a challenge in itself. There are not many mass market fashion articles that can be found in sizes that fit consumers from all BMI groups. Mostly, there are lines for the thin to average that overlap with lines for average to obese. I did finally manage to find women's jeans at Lindex, women's shirts at KappAhl, and the corresponding garments for the male models also at KappAhl.

I determined the sizes through a process of matching hip, crista (a point between hip and waist), waist, and neck measurements to garment sizes allowing for appropriate looseness. To get it right I consulted with obesity specialist Ingrid Larsson and a number of sales clerks.

With the relevant garments in my possession, I embarked on the second step; to find models that fit the clothes. Finding thin models proved quite easy. Surprisingly, obese models were not that hard to convince either. Overweight models on the other hand, and especially females, were less eager once I had explained they were supposed to represent a typical overweight person in an experiment. In the end it all worked out, and I used men and women of ages between 22 and 38. The relatively narrow age span should according to my specialist consultant ensure that their body types should be comparable. I photographed the models under identical lighting conditions, with the same lens from the same distance, striking the same pose. This way the photos would be as comparable as possible.

I now had photos of three men and three women in identical clothes. The next step was to let a professional graphic designer manipulate them. The background was cut out, and one head per sex was used for all three bodies. The graphic designer fit it to the different bodies, matched the skin tone and general colour balance. I took this approach because it results in a much more realistic rendering of the models than it would have if I had just stretched or compressed one photo to represent the different body types. Thin people carry themselves differently from obese persons, and clothes hang differently on their bodies. This way I tried to get as realistic material as possible to work with. The results are shown below.

Figure 6
INDEPENDENT VARIABLE, TYPICAL USER BMI



Man, BMI 1 | Man, BMI 2 | Man, BMI 3 | Woman, BMI 1 | Woman, BMI 2 | Woman, BMI 3

To carry out the actual Study I constructed a web-based survey. I took a tool normally used for course evaluations, added photos, and designed approximately forty consecutive web pages showing one model and one question per page. One reason for an internet based solution is cost efficiency, the other is control. Respondents started out rating the brands portrayed in the photos. They then answered questions about themselves. I sent out the survey to the students of Halmstad University.

Sample

The respondents are undergraduate students of Halmstad University. They represent present and future target groups for mass market fashion, and they are readily available, thereby constituting a convenience sample. 6,567 students were asked via e-mail to take part in the study. 1,848 agreed resulting in a 28% response rate. Only fully completed questionnaires were included.

To avoid tipping off the respondents with regards to the research question, the question of their own physique was not raised until after the brand personality part of the survey had been completed.

Validity

The study is a lab experiment, and as a result, the situation facing the respondents is different from real life, thus lowering external validity. However, thanks to the amount of control afforded by the experiment form, internal validity is high.

Quality of data

Ordinal data, possibly useable as interval data as is often the case (Haberfeld 2007).

Study II: To sell or not to sell: overweight users' effect on fashion assortments

The actual article is found in Appendix I.

In the first study, I describe the effects weight has on user imagery and its influence on brand perception. This study constitutes the next step and here I ask the question "do the user imagery effects that are demonstrated in Study I affect business practices of mass market fashion retailers?"

The method used is a standard survey. The units of measurement are observations rather than attitudes.

The study encompasses three categories of users; underweight and average, overweight and obese consumers. Their market segments are valued in relation to the whole market and their respective parts are expressed as a percentage of the total market. This is juxtaposed to the assortment of clothes that fit these consumer groups. The number of garments fitting the groups of consumers will also be expressed as percentages of the total number of garments on sale in the chosen product categories. If any group has less to choose from than the value of their market segment merits, it for some reason suffers from misrepresentation.

How I did it

Since there is a preconceived idea that fat people are discriminated against and that it therefore is harder for them to find clothes that fit, I wanted to find out if that is true. The key component of the study is a gap analysis between what clothes are available to the Swedish population and what clothes would fit the Swedish population. To achieve this I needed to find out two things; what does the Swedish population look like, and what clothes sizes are available to them.

Demand for clothes

The first step is to describe the population in terms of body types. Since there is official statistics available this is easy. If the population of Sweden is divided into groups depending on their BMI, the following emerges.

Table 4
DISTRIBUTIONS OF INDIVIDUALS OVER WEIGHT CLASSES

	Men	Women
BMI 1	48%	62%
BMI 2	41%	26%
BMI 3	11%	12%
Total:	100%	100%

Source: Based on data from the Swedish National Institute of Public Health (Wadman 2007)

We now know the proportions between thin, overweight, and fat people. Next, it is necessary to understand how big these people are. Clinical Nutritionist Ingrid Larsson with the Department of Body Composition and Metabolism at Sahlgrenska University Hospital published her doctoral thesis on the subject of body composition (Larsson 2005). She graciously let me access her anthropometric data. The data is basically a list of body measurements of 1,135 individuals that are representative of the general population. This allowed me to establish the physical sizes that fit into each BMI category. After all, if I am to determine if a BMI group has more or less than its fair share of garments to choose from it is necessary to first determine what garments fit the persons of which BMI groups.

This in itself provides a challenge. Due to the nature of how BMI is calculated (it is a function of weight and height) almost all garments could fit a person from any BMI group. A very short but heavy person will for instance have a high BMI placing him or her in group two or three. However, because of the person's modest height, he or she will have to wear clothes that are small by average standards, clothes that would fit a thin person of normal height. The opposite is naturally true for thin but tall people. However, if I had adopted this definition, the gap analysis would show that all clothes fit people from all BMI groups. Consequently, the data would be meaningless. It would indicate that people of different weight have exactly the same choice available to them, which is clearly not the case. Hence, to make sense of the data, I needed to get rid of the outliers. To do this I defined the body size ranges for each BMI group as the group's mean measurement minus two standard deviations to the mean measurement plus two standard deviations. This approach allowed me to catch almost all observations, that is, assign almost all SKUs to a BMI class. What is more, it resulted in different size ranges for different BMI classes so that all clothes no longer appeared to fit all BMI groups. Naturally, there is some overlap between classes, allowing for tall thin people to go up in clothes size and heavy short people to go down. Below is a table of the sizes assigned to the different BMI groups.

Table 5
BODY SIZE RANGES OF EACH BMI GROUP

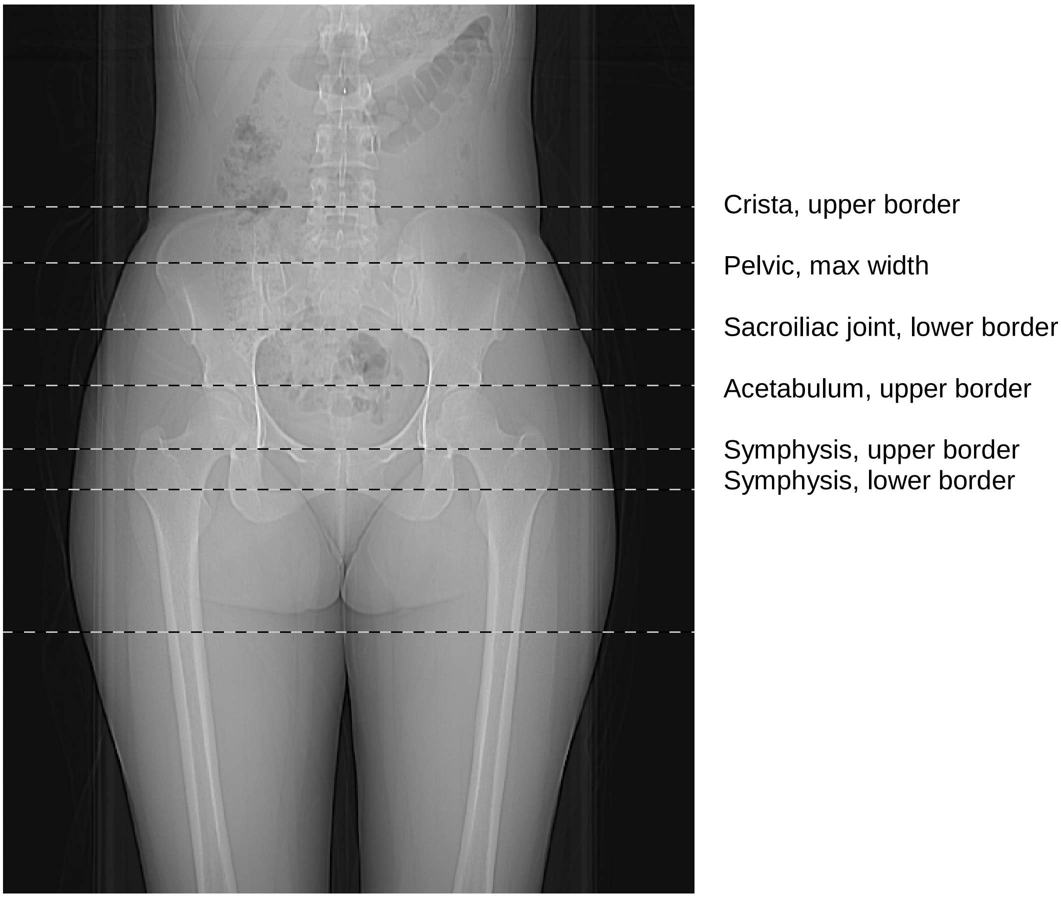
	Men's necks (for shirts)		Women's waists (for shirts)	
	Minimum neck	Maximum neck	Minimum waist	Maximum waist
BMI 1	34 cm	43 cm	80 cm	105 cm
BMI 2	37 cm	45 cm	92 cm	117 cm
BMI 3	40 cm	49 cm	101 cm	137 cm
	Men's cristas (for jeans)		Women's cristas (for jeans)	
	Minimum crista	Maximum crista	Minimum crista	Maximum crista
BMI 1	76 cm	99 cm	68 cm	93 cm
BMI 2	86 cm	110 cm	81 cm	106 cm
BMI 3	95 cm	126 cm	89 cm	125 cm

For men's shirts, neck size is the most relevant measurement. Shirts should fit snugly but not tightly around the neck when buttoned all the way up. Whether you wear shirts with a tie or unbuttoned, the fit is the same. Men's shirt sizes are even expressed as the neck size. For women, it is a different story. The sizes are expressed differently, 40, 42, 44, and so on. The figure is not related to any particular measurement. What is more, the neck is irrelevant, because the collars of many shirt models are not supposed to fit the neck. Therefore, I use the waist measurement.

However, what I have is the measurements of the bodies of individuals, and for women's shirts, body size does not equal garment size. Shirts are not worn skin tight. I have after consulting with several sales clerks decided that the individuals' actual waist measurement plus fifteen centimetres is a reasonable waist size for a shirt. This will no doubt vary between shirt models as well as between individuals. Some women like a loose fit while others prefer tighter shirts. Fifteen centimetres constitutes a rather loose fit. I chose to err on the side of caution because I want to avoid any suspicion that I have manipulated the data to make it seem like overweight people are discriminated against more than they really are.

Jeans sizes are expressed in waist measurements. However, by waist, the manufacturers do not really mean waist in an anatomically correct way. Instead they mean the top edge of the jeans, which when the garment is worn can be found at the waist, but also riding on the hip or anywhere in between. I have chosen to look at a point in between the waist and hip referred to as the crista (the top line in the illustration below). For mass market jeans, it is common to find the top edge at the crista, for both men and women.

Figure 7
ILLUSTRATION OF MEASUREMENT POINTS FOR JEANS



Source: Ingrid Larsson, Department of Body Composition and Metabolism, Sahlgrenska University Hospital

I now knew how many people were found in the different groups and what physical size they were. I had operationalized the research question to the point that I would now be able to allocate garments found in-store to the different BMI groups. The next step was to find out how large the clothes that are available to the population are.

Supply of clothes

The study encompasses shirts and trousers in representative stores of four nation wide mass-market fashion retailers. They are H&M, KappAhl, Lindex, and Dressman. Together they account for approx. 30% of the Swedish fashion market (GfK 2007). These categories were chosen because they represent a considerable part of the supply offered by these companies. That is, the way they are managed should say something about how the companies act. What is more, shirts and trousers are sold to both men and women, and they are tailored to fit the body, thereby making sizes relevant to the body shapes of consumers. Thus, the sample of product categories should ensure validity.

I instructed two students to do a survey of garments in-store. They visited the stores and physically counted and measured all shirts and jeans that were within reach of consumers. The students measured the relevant parts of the garments using a tape measure. Because clothes sizes are not standardized, this approach was necessary for validity's sake. They did not count merchandise in back stock or in displays. The reason for only taking openly available articles into account is that the purpose of the study is to compare supply to demand, and supply is not really supply if it is not readily available to consumers.

Reliability and validity

The survey performed is of SKUs in-store. Because the data controlled consists of observations rather than attitudes, reliability is higher (Haberfeld 2007). What is more, it is reasonable to assume that the assortment in the examined stores is representative of a normal store.

Internal validity in a complex real world case is always vulnerable. However, the fact that both studies cover the exact same retail chains can support the validity of the case. If I fail to provide a plausible explanation to how the findings of the two studies fit together, internal validity would suffer. If on the other hand I present a coherent story that accommodates the results, it supports internal validity claims. External validity is high thanks to the realistic setting and the straight-forward units of measurement.

Results

Weight is a factor, but a subtle one

The results show that fashion users' BMI significantly affects some consumer perceptions of brand personalities. The Pearson correlation coefficient (r) indicates that this effect is small to medium, but for a consumer behaviour experiment, not unusually so. However, not all personality dimensions are affected to a significant degree. Also, there are differences in how BMI affects brand perception depending on the gender of the typical user.

Challenges

The experiment form is well suited to finding out what fat user imagery would do to brand perception. However, I initially had some methodological difficulties. Regarding effect size in marketing experiments, I was afraid mine was too small to draw any conclusions. Sure, my data showed significant effects of users' BMI on brand perception, but the effects were weak. Luckily, I found some literature on effect size significance in marketing, which helped put it in perspective. In consumer behaviour experiments using the same p-value as my study the average effect size is medium (.30), explaining 11% of the variance (Peterson, Albaum et al. 1985). If experiments are conducted in a lab setting rather than in the field, use college students as respondents, and measure answers rather than behaviours, the effect size is expected to drop further. In other words, the effect sizes attained in this study (between .10 and .20) are small, but for a consumer behaviour experiment, not unusually so.

A small effect size is in fact to be expected in a study of this kind. Peterson, Albaum et al. (1985, p. 102) summarize the opinions of Cohen (1977) and Cooper (1981) like this; "such findings are not necessarily bad per se since effects accounting for as little as 1.0 percent of explained variance may well be considered either theoretically or practically important. Indeed, if only research that reports large amounts of explained variance was to be published, it could be argued that the literature would be filled with research findings that are essentially trivial. This is because large effect sizes are more likely to exist for relationships that are "obvious", and thus represent situations that in which no new knowledge is contributed to the research".

Table 6
SIGNIFICANCE LEVELS

Brand personality	Male users				Female users			
Dimension	df	F	p	r	df	F	p	r
Sincerity	2,897	9.42	.00	.14	2,945	3.01	.05	.08
Excitement	2,897	15.53	.00	.18	2,945	9.11	.00	.14
Competence	2,897	3.17	.04	.08	2,945	18.73	.00	.20
Sophistication	2,897	.19	.83	.02	2,945	5.18	.01	.10
Ruggedness	2,897	.61	.55	.04	2,945	6.01	.00	.11

ANOVA (p<.05)

The results show that fashion users' BMI significantly affects some consumer perceptions of brand personalities, but in a subtle way.

Table 7
SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEAN VALUES FOR USER GROUPS

Brand personality Dimension	Male, BMI 1 mean	Sign Vs	Male, BMI 2 mean	Sign Vs	Male, BMI 3 mean	Sign Vs	Female, BMI 1 mean	Sign Vs	Female BMI 2 mean	Sign Vs	Female BMI 3 mean	Sign Vs
Sincerity	3.17	3	3.14	3	2.99	1,2	3.10	-	3.01	-	3.11	-
Excitement	1.98	2,3	1.83	1,3	2.10	1,2	2.02	2	1.88	1,3	2.09	2
Competence	3.07	-	3.16	3	3.02	2	3.32	2,3	3.07	1	3.02	1
Sophistication	1.83	-	1.86	-	1.83	-	2.14	2	1.97	1,3	2.11	2
Ruggedness	2.57	-	2.63	-	2.60	-	2.38	2	2.54	1,3	2.38	2

Tukey HSD post-hoc test (p<.05)

I checked the respondents for weight and gender bias. In other words, I analysed the answers to ascertain if fat respondents would give significantly different responses from thin ones, and if women had answered differently from men. Neither weight nor sex was a factor for how participants in Study I rated brand perception.

Companies do not do anything about it

The overall finding is that overweight and obese mass market fashion consumers do not have less to choose from than thin ones. On an aggregate level on which all garments are compared to all consumer groups of both sexes the obese group (class 3) enjoys greater choice than motivated by its relative share of the population. The members of the normal- and underweight group (class 1) on the other hand have significantly less to choose from than the relative size of their class should motivate while there is no significant difference between supply and demand for the overweight group (class 2).

The population group that is significantly deprived of its fair share of garments to choose from it is found in BMI class 1. Both population groups that are significantly favoured in relation to their fair share of garments to choose from are found in BMI class 3. All other differences between population groups and the garments that fit their members are too small to be significant at the chosen level (CI 99%).

Breaking down the data into product categories it is clear that shirt sizes mirror the body sizes of the population to a lesser extent than do jeans. The reasons for shirts to be more prevalent in large sizes than jeans could be that mass market jeans, unlike shirts, generally display a brand logo, because that is what jeans look like. A pair of jeans with no patch on the back waistband would look weird. Perhaps the visible logo makes the typical user more prominent and thus restrains retailers from stocking jeans in excessive sizes. This would fit with the theory of typical user imagery. However, it might be simpler. Perhaps jeans are just garments for slimmer people. There is no limit on how fat you may be wearing a shirt, but there may come a point when jeans are no longer an option.

Connection between the studies

The two studies were carried out during the same time period. What is more, the attitudes that are measured in Study I concern clothes from the same companies whose behaviour is investigated in Study II. Therefore, it should be unproblematic to compare the results.

Typical user imagery has an effect on how consumers see brands but this does not translate into adapted business practices. As demonstrated in Study II mass market fashion companies do not shape their assortments according to the effects of typical user imagery. That is, they do not stock more clothes for the users whose image would benefit their brands, and they do not try to limit assortments for those that do not. To see this lack of coherence between user imagery effects and business practices, view the table below.

Table 8
DISCONNECT BETWEEN TYPICAL USER IMAGERY AND ASSORTMENTS

	BMI Class 1	BMI Class 2	BMI Class 3
Men's brand personality score	Medium excitement	Low excitement High competence	Low sincerity High excitement Low competence
Men vs. shirt assortment	**Deprived**	Insignificant	**Favoured**
Men vs. jeans assortment	Insignificant	Insignificant	Insignificant
Women's brand personality score	High competence	Low excitement Low sophistication High ruggedness	No extremes
Women vs. shirt assortment	**Deprived**	Insignificant	**Favoured**
Women vs. jeans assortment	**Deprived**	Insignificant	Insignificant

Mass market fashion companies not only ignore the typical user imagery effects on their brands, their assortments do not even mirror the actual demand. If they did, no BMI class would be favoured or deprived of their fair share of SKUs in-store. This is obviously not the case. Or is it? Just because the Swedish population does not face a supply that is equal to its demand, does that mean the companies in question do not try to match their garment sizes to the sizes of the population? It is possible that they do, but on a bigger scale. As stated by a representative from H&M, the company uses international lists of body measurements to guide what sizes to manufacture, and in what quantities (Gripenberg 2004). If we take her word for it, it means that these lists guide how many garments are produced in each size. If the lists are based on averages of the populations of the countries in which H&M is present, it is entirely possible that the company perfectly mirrors demand, but on a global scale. Swedes are skinnier than many other nationalities. 55% is thin, 33% overweight, and just 12% obese (Wadman 2007). Compare this to for example the USA. Only 30% of Americans are thin, nearly 40% are overweight, and over 30% obese (Zettel-Watson and Britton 2008). Taking the lack of correlation between user imagery effects and assortments into account this line of reasoning means there is a definite possibility that the companies studied do the best they can to provide consumers of all sizes with their fair share of garments to choose from. It is just that on a national level, they fail. A possible outcome of Study II is therefore the identification of unexploited market segments. A very basic reading of the gap analysis reveals that under- and normal weight consumers have fewer products from which to choose than their numbers would suggest. If this is a conscious decision on the part of fashion companies, so be it. However, if it is the result of an oversight, there is money to be made by adjusting assortments to actual demand.

The results of the experiment give perspective to those of the survey. Study II would be, if it stood alone, just a negative study. It would say that although branding theory would lead us to believe that fashion companies would exclude overweight and obese consumers to improve brand perception, this is not the case. However, because Study I proves that there are significant effects, but that the effect size is small, we have a credible explanation for the unwillingness of mass market fashion companies to limit assortments. In the next section I discuss what these results mean.

Discussion

What do the results mean?

Overweight male user imagery is characterized by sincerity and competence, but not excitement. This is not surprising. Business men are often overweight (because they are middle aged men) so we are used to the image of an overweight man as a competent but dull person. Consequently, overweight user imagery is good for brands that cater to serious and very conservative consumers like accountants or undertakers, but perhaps less so for brands that want to appeal to a younger, more outgoing type of consumer.

Normal and underweight male users also give an impression of sincerity. However, they are also seen as significantly more exciting than overweight users. Therefore, normal and underweight male user imagery would be beneficial to brands seeking a serious but not dull brand personality; a description that probably fits many brands.

The obese model was rated the lowest on competence, which fits with earlier studies on how both thin and fat people perceive obese people (e g Counts, Jones et al. 1986). The notion of obese persons being incompetent taps into a familiar trope in Western culture. Ever since Julius Caesar surrounded himself with fat men because they lacked ambition and thus posed no threat to him, this group of people has been seen as poor performers.

Obese user imagery is rated low on sincerity. This perception of insincerity is probably due to the popular notion that they have lower morals than thin people (Keys 1955). On the other hand, the obese model got the highest score on excitement, which at first is a little surprising. Excitement represents an upbeat energetic quality and a high score on this dimension could seem contradictory to the low score on competence, a dimension that also comprises a hard working connotation. However, the competence dimension is about reliability, intelligence, and success, while the excitement dimension has to do with being daring, spirited, imaginative, and up-to-date. Since fat people are considered insincere and of low moral fibre, it is not surprising that their user imagery also projects incompetence. The conclusion is that obese male users are bad for corporate wear which demands trustworthiness, but that they could be beneficial to fashion that wants to be exciting. So what kind of clothes could that be?

One type of apparel that comes to mind is hip-hop fashion. Hip-hop is different from other subcultures. In pop, emo, goth, country and western, rock and roll or any other contemporary music genre, the ideal is skinny. If a rock artist is overweight he or she is reduced to a character. This is evident in the case of Marvin Lee Aday, who even took on a funny fat-person stage name; Meatloaf. In hip-hop, on the other hand, a man can be fat and still be regarded a sex symbol. Hiphoppers even use the epithet “fat” to describe something great.

The reason for this unusual tolerance of fat people could be related to the combination of personality traits shown by the study. The excitement dimension is highly ranked for obese users. However, that would mean other music genres would be well served by fat users, which is apparently not the case. The poor perceptions of competence for obese users include traits like Reliable, Secure, Technical, and Corporate. These are traits that should be rated low for a rebellious and exciting person, so they fit hip-hoppers. On the other hand, they would also fit rockers, punks, singer-song writers, etc, to an equal degree. The explanation for why it is OK for hip-hop personalities to be fat would instead lie in their low rating on sincerity. Sincerity comprises traits like for instance Down-to-earth, Small-town, Honest, and Friendly. These are traits that are not necessarily in conflict with representatives of other genres. It is for instance exactly how teen idols like the Jonas Brothers would want to be seen. For hip-hop on the other hand, the picture is a bit different. While there are examples of hip-hop personalities that display these traits, the vast majority do not. Hip-hop is on the contrary often associated with ostentatious jewellery, expensive cars, champagne and designer labels. Urban life is almost always part of the hip-hop narrative, and especially the sub-genre of gangsta rap is frequently accused of romanticizing breaking the law, gangs, and violence. It is an aggressive form of music that confronts the listener rather than ingratiates itself with him or her. Hence, the fat user fits hip-hop better than he does other genres; he is exciting, anti-establishment, and his hustler mentality allows him to cut corners to prevail, defying traditional notions of honesty.

For women, perceptions of users' effects on brands differ from their male counterparts. In the popular TV sitcom 30 Rock station manager Jack Donaghy says about a female character that has gained weight "she needs to lose thirty pounds or gain sixty. Anything in between has no place in television" (Scardino 2007). This mirrors the results of Study I; women should be thin, but if they are not, obese is preferable to overweight.

That thin women would rate higher on competence comes as no surprise. It has been demonstrated that just a bit of curvaciousness is enough for people to judge women to be less competent (Kleinke and Staneski 1980). Apart from competence, the obese user scores better than the overweight user but worse than the thin. What is remarkable is the poor perception respondents had of overweight female users. They rate low on excitement, low on sophistication, and high on ruggedness. Ruggedness comprises toughness and masculinity, so in other words, overweight women are perceived as dull, unsophisticated, and mannish. It is reasonable to assume that few female fashion shoppers would want to identify with a brand personality such as this.

Relevance

Contribution to theory

From an academic standpoint, the contribution of this dissertation is that we now for the first time have quantitative evidence for typical user imagery and its effect on business practices. This is examined in two separate but connected areas; the effect users have on brand perception (which is significant), and what certain companies do about it (nothing).

Typical user imagery has until now been a side note to round out the theoretical frameworks of traditional brand scholars like Aaker (1996, p. 147), Keller (2003, p. 94), and Kapferer (1994, p. 43). They each describe holistic views of everything a brand encompasses, and as one of many peripheral aspects the effect of typical user imagery is explained. It has until now been a construct that is grasped intuitively rather than put through rigorous testing. It has just been assumed that the effect is there; now we know it is.

The effect on mass market fashion, although significant, is subtle. This is probably why the companies I studied do not act on it. If the imagery of a specific user type had been devastating for the brands ruining them for other users, it is reasonable to assume the companies would act differently. As it is, they can afford to ignore it. It is a trade-off, and for mass market fashion it seems a subtle brand perception boost is not worth the lost sales turning away certain users would entail.

Can the results be applied to other product categories?

The experiment in Study I resulted in ratings of brand personality. The ratings are specifically of how respondents perceive mass market fashion brands. However, the garments that participants were shown are very mainstream in character (as you can see in figure 6). Therefore, it is not unreasonable that the findings would apply to a wider spectrum of products. As the outfits that respondents were shown did not communicate a strong personality it is conceivable that what the respondents really rated was how the personality of the users would affect brands in general. If so, the practical implications would be significant; the findings could be extended to typical user imagery in other product categories. However, generalizing the impact of typical users' weight on brands is contingent on what those brands are like. If the purchase motivations for consumers are similar to those of mass market fashion, it is reasonable to assume that the findings of this dissertation would apply. Mass market eyewear, footwear, and accessories are probably such product categories. However, it is not at all certain that the findings would apply to other categories. Night club visits, high fashion, and luxury items are examples of offerings that are probably sensitive to typical user imagery but that are consumed for different reasons than mass market fashion. I would therefore advise against applying the results presented here to revise business practices in these cases.

Can the results be applied to advertising?

The design of the experiment in Study I follows a template previously used to measure how ideal users of different types affect brand perception in advertising (Steadman 1969; Kanungo and Pang 1973; Baker and Churchill Jr. 1977). It is therefore reasonable to assume that the findings of this experiment could be applied to advertising of mass market fashion.

The problems associated with portraying very thin girls as ideal users has been recognized to the point that Spanish authorities have banned fashion models with a BMI lower than 18 (the cut-off point for the definition of under weight). The Italian government in cooperation with the fashion industry have followed, issuing a "Manifesto" to the same effect (Popham 2007). Since the discussion of models' weight in advertising is more heated than ever, it is tempting to apply the results of Study I to advertising. It points to exactly the question that is debated: why are all fashion models so thin? –Is it rational? Society claims this imagery damages the minds of young people and leads to eating disorders, because it can warp consumers' perceptions of what a normal body should look like. However, if it sells products like the industry claims, at least there is an explanation for the practice.

A recurring theme in advertising is that of the real woman as opposed to the skinny model. The skinny model is the norm, but from time to time companies try to win favour with the consumers by employing models that more resemble average women. These companies claim it works (Lunau 2008), although research indicates that plus-size models only give a positive image but does not sell products (Neff 2008). If by a "real woman" one means an overweight woman, the findings of this study supports the latter.

Improving typical user imagery

The dissertation sheds some light on the possibilities and risks of controlling customer base to improve image. Given the relationship between user imagery, brand personality, and brand success, such insights should be valuable to marketers.

Non-branding reasons to reduce choice for BMI 2 and 3

Apart from the negative associations to overweight, there could be other reasons to provide BMI groups 2 and 3 with relatively fewer articles than BMI group 1. For instance, companies could make assortment decisions that are related to the direct profitability of plus-size fashion. Assuming all sizes of a specific garment sells for the same price, manufacturing costs of large sizes may reduce profitability to a point where it is financially wise to avoid them. Further, under equal circumstances, the store surface needed to sell large clothes will generate less profit per square meter. What is more, because of the relatively low number of customers that are very obese, extreme sizes may not be worth the trouble. Assuming that mass market fashion companies offered consumers of every weight a proportionate number of garments from which to choose, there would be perhaps a hundred customers that were of average build and therefore there would be a hundred garments that fit them. On the other hand, there might just be ten obese customers. If they were treated to their fair share of SKUs they would have ten garments to choose from. The ten garments would however be subject to the same fixed costs as the hundred average sized garments. They would need their own patterns, production runs, allocated storage spaces, etc, just like the bigger selling items. At some point, these costs would prohibit adding more SKUs even if there is a certain demand for them.

It is also probable that companies would estimate overweight and obese consumers' spending propensity as low, motivating a reduced assortment. Overweight and especially obese persons have lower incomes than average (Wadman 2007) and therefore less money to spend on clothes. What is more fat people find fashion less enjoyable than the average person (Park, Nam et al. 2009) because clothes, according to society's ideals, look better on slim body types. If so, overweight and obese people would spend even less of their already lower income than thin persons would.

Companies may also make assortment decisions that are ill-informed. Decision makers may misjudge the importance of the consumer segments, especially as the rapid increase of fat people could lead to under-representation of clothes because companies use outdated statistics for the body shape of the population.

To sum up, there are typical user imagery related reasons for shaping assortments. There are also traditional cost-benefit reasons for doing it. These considerations apparently do not resonate with mass market fashion purveyors; at least not enough to manifest themselves in business practices. The examined companies offer assortments that are not the results of user imagery or cost to serve considerations. The reasons behind current assortments are probably tied to sales volume. As I describe in the discussion part of Study II mass market fashion retailers cater to consumers of all body shapes to maximize sales. The companies' business models depend on high volume so they prioritize just that. Although their product category should be susceptible to negative user imagery connected to overweight and obese user types, the issue does not pose a major problem. Because of the inconspicuousness of the brands and the heterogeneity of the users, typical user imagery never takes hold and the companies are free to sell products to consumers of all sizes and create brand personalities through traditional marketing communication.

It is obvious that the function of typical user imagery is not clear cut. It is not possible to look at a product category and assume that if consumers buy the products to express themselves companies will try to control typical user imagery. Mass market fashion brand perception is demonstrably affected by the perceived users of the brands. However, typical user imagery is not enough to impact the way companies conduct business. Why is that, and under what circumstances would typical user imagery actually change business practices? I will in the next section attempt to explain how, and under what conditions, companies might attempt to influence typical user imagery.

The soft approach to improved user imagery: Positioning to reach desirable consumers

From a pure marketing point of view, all customers are not created equally. Sometime the customer who is prepared to pay more is the one who is worth less (Ritson 2003). To succeed long-term, a fashion brand must deliberately avoid appealing to customers lower down in the fashion hierarchy (Ritson 2006). For any brand that is high on meaning and consumer identification, and is consumed in a conspicuous manner, it is important to have the right users. This can be achieved by influencing who the target consumers think is the user of the brand, which is done through the ideal user types that the company displays to the public. A lot of corporate effort is put into creating ideal user imagery. Brand personality is central to marketing and ideal user imagery is a quick shortcut to create it (Aaker 1996, p. 147). This practice encompasses among other things choosing which models and celebrities to use in advertising.

Targeted communication towards desired consumers also has an effect. If marketing to attractive consumers makes them become brand users to a greater extent than other groups, their relative impact on user imagery should be greater than it otherwise would have been. These practices fall within the realm of conventional marketing. Such positive attempts to control customer base to improve user imagery are commonplace. However, the activity described can also be interpreted as just a way to make the brand sell more. Pinpointing target consumers are not done primarily to avoid unwanted ones, but to give the brand meaning. The rationale for positioning is that to make the target group prefer the brand, it must be designed and communicated in a suitable way. If, however, untargeted consumers also buy the brand, so much the better. Companies normally position brands to make it clear what they stand for, not to drive away consumers that do not belong to the target market.

The hard approach to improved user imagery: Managing the customer base

The four P's of the marketing mix should be used to increase the market size from those in the target segment, while simultaneously preventing those from outside this target group from joining (Ritson 2003). If unwanted customers can be avoided, the brand benefits from positive typical user imagery. To achieve this, the brand owner has to be lucky or he or she has to manage the customer base of the brand. Managing the customer base means rejecting unattractive customers.

For most products and services it is impractical or even illegal to refuse potential customers because of their negative impact on brand image. There are indications that some companies actively try to dissuade prospective customers from buying and displaying their brands. The manager of a company specializing in clothes for extreme sports describes how the target market perceives snowmobile drivers as smelly rubes, and how the company therefore tries to limit their access to the brand. This is done primarily through distribution strategies. For smaller brands with selective distribution, the degree of distribution presents a delicate balance between sales volume and brand credibility. Manufacturers want the widest distribution possible to generate sales, but as soon as the brand becomes too available, the core outlets that help create credibility and reach the most attractive typical users to begin with desert the brand because it is no longer selective enough (Anonymous 2007). The Canada Goose down jacket brand has followed the same route; very selective distribution (Canada Goose 2007), very little advertising, but very strong typical user imagery. This proved so successful that the Swedish market at one point accounted for half of the brand's global sales (Persson, Widmark et al. 2007). There exist more direct practices to control who consumes a brand than distribution. Designer Karl Lagerfeldt for instance openly declares that his clothes do not come in large sizes. When H&M manufactured his limited edition line in sizes up to 16 he was displeased, saying "What I really didn't like was that certain fashion sizes were made bigger. What I created was fashion for slim slender people. That was the original idea." (Female_First 2006).

Requirements for customer base management to improve typical user imagery

Not all brands would benefit from the hard approach. First and foremost, for customer base management to make sense, a brand would have to be sensitive to typical user imagery. This involves the brand's own character, which would have to be high on meaning and personal identification. Only brands with symbolic properties that are used for self-expression are susceptible to user imagery. If a brand is consumed solely for practical purposes, the consumer does not care who else is using it. Why would she?

Even if the brand has the properties to make it sensitive to user imagery it would also have to have a personality that is elitist, or at least one that would tolerate such an attitude. If not, rejecting customers could result in a back-lash, hurting instead of helping the brand. This may be one of the reasons the mass market fashion retailers studied do not engage in such practices. They cater to the masses, and openly turning away punters could be counter productive. When mass market fashion retailer Lindex released a line of affordable luxury garments that were only available in sizes small and medium (Jönsson 2009) there were many negative reactions. A fashion editor in a national newspaper writes about a person that would not fit into the garments in question: "Why is she not good enough? And worse, if we of average build cannot wear a medium, how are those with bigger bones, a little larger bottom, a little heftier hips, or wider shoulders supposed to find clothes that fit them? Well, they can visit the 4-5 garments that make up the inviting Big is Beautiful, Generous, or "you are fat" departments, where they once again get to show that they do not belong to the clique in society that is deemed "normal"". Commentaries of this kind are unusual when it comes to high fashion brands. It seems it is expected for high fashion to exclude potential customers, if not through limited sizes, then by not selling clothes outside the metropolitan areas, or by charging so much that only well-heeled fashionistas can afford them. Whatever the case may be, there are not the same expectations of equality or fairness attached to high fashion as there is when it comes to mass market fashion.

In addition to sensitivity to user imagery, and a brand personality for which turning away customers because they are fat would be unproblematic, a brand would also have to be conspicuously consumed for anyone to form an opinion of the user. The consumption of the brand in question must take place within the reach of the public eye, in a way that can be observed. For this reason, clothes should be affected to a greater extent by typical user imagery than for instance moisturizing lotion. If it is not obvious what brand a person is using, that usage cannot shape other consumers' opinion of the brand in question.

What is more, the user characteristics also have to be suitable for typical user imagery. Since user imagery builds on generalizations of what someone that uses a particular brand is like, brand meaning should be influenced to a higher degree if the user types were homogenous. For instance, if Porsches were always driven by stock brokers, while Mercedes cars were driven by soccer moms, executives, and farmers, the perceived characteristics of stock brokers would colour Porche's brand meaning to a greater extent than the more diverse group of users would the Mercedes brand. For ideal user imagery this effect would mean that it is important for companies to display users that project similar personalities in the dimensions that are relevant to the brand. By the same logic, extreme typical user types should be more effective for brand meaning creation than inconspicuous ones. They would simply make a greater impression.

However, sensitivity to typical user imagery and suitable consumption- and customer characteristics is not enough for successful customer base management as a means to improve typical user imagery; it must also be practical to reject customers. The financial feasibility of rejecting customers is a prerequisite for customer base management. To do this a company must target a specific segment of the market. If the business model hinges on selling to the greatest number of people possible turning away customers is not appropriate. This is the case for mass market fashion. Apart from the financial side of things however, there is the question of actual feasibility. In other words, if a company had a brand that was sensitive to typical user imagery as well as the financial means to pull it off, could it reject customers? Fashion manufacturers can avoid obese customers by not providing garments that fit, but could a maker of hand bags do the same? The marketing manager of a top luxury brand admits that the brand's Champs-Elysées store has a list of people that are not wanted as consumers (Saboundji 2007), but in a world of online auction sites anyone anywhere can obtain a product if he or she is willing and able to pay the price.

To illustrate the brand related aspects and the practical aspects related to customer base management as a means to improve typical user imagery, the following model is proposed.

Figure 8
REQUIREMENTS FOR CUSTOMER BASE MANAGEMENT AS A MEANS TO IMPROVE TYPICAL USER IMAGERY

Feasible to reject customers

		Yes	No
Brand sensitive to typical user imagery	Yes	Suitable for CBM	CBM impractical
	No	CBM unneccessary	CBM impractical and unneccessary

What kinds of offerings would then fit into the different squares of this matrix? Mass market fashion is as demonstrated in Study I sensitive to typical user imagery. However, its business model makes rejecting customers financially unfeasible. Therefore customer base management is impractical. High fashion on the other hand with its narrow target groups and elitist brand connotations would probably be suitable for customer base management. Offerings like insurance could exclude customers. In fact, it happens every day, for non-brand related reasons. However, insurance should not be particularly sensitive to typical user imagery. It is probably purchased on functional grounds rather than to express the consumer's personality, and at any rate, its consumption is not conspicuous. Brand related customer base management for insurance brands is therefore unnecessary. There is little doubt ideal user imagery in combination with informative advertising is more effective for such services. Finally, the fourth category is a combination of the last two. A product that fulfils all these criteria is cosmetics. It is insensitive to typical user imagery because consumers do not see what kind of make up typical users wear and what is more, it is impossible to stop customers from buying any particular brand. Consequently, a product category like cosmetics, which is undoubtedly consumed to express the consumer's personality, is still not affected by its typical users. For cosmetics customer base management is both impractical and unnecessary.

Figure 9
EXAMPLES FOR CUSTOMER BASE MANAGEMENT AS A MEANS TO IMPROVE TYPICAL USER IMAGERY

		Feasible to reject customers	
		Yes	No
Brand sensitive to typical user imagery	Yes	High fashion	Mass market fashion
	No	Insurance	Cosmetics

This licentiate dissertation is focused on the mechanics of user imagery and its effects on brands and business practices. However, there is one aspect of the construct that has not been discussed; namely ethics. Is it right to manage the customer base to improve brand perception?

Ethical considerations

One way of looking at customer base management is to equate to market segmentation. It is commonplace for businesses to apply variables such as income, gender, or ethnic origin to divide the market into smaller segments. Segmentation thus allows for greater efficiency; if a company spends its promotional budget only on the right consumers, it gets more “bang for the buck”. This logic already makes marketing an elitist discipline. Its objective is not to offer every potential customer the same options, quite the opposite. However, is that an intrinsically bad thing? Surely corporations are under no obligation to waste money and resources to cater to groups of people that are bad for the bottom line? Why then should they be expected to do the same for people that are bad for brand image? If we accept that companies deploy their resources in a way that yields maximum return on investment, why would we expect them to make their offerings available to users that could hurt one of the most important strategic resource in their arsenal; their brands?

Well, there is a fundamental difference between aiming for the right customers and actively rejecting the unwanted ones. The relationship between a consumer and a brand is like a relationship between two people (Fournier 1998). A person that belongs to a low priority market segment is simply ignored by marketers. This treatment, if expressed as a personal relationship, would thus be similar to not being asked out on a date. However, for an unwanted user that is turned away in order to improve a brand’s image, the experience would be more like a break-up. Adding insult to injury, the motivation for the break-up in question is that the user is so unattractive that the brand owner would rather lose the income generated by that user than accept him or her as a customer. If we use Fournier’s metaphor this is the equivalent to someone going out with you just because you have money, but then realising that it is not worth it. You are just too unattractive. This is of course harsher than just not hearing from the party with which you have a relation.

Another consideration apart from the question of whether it is ethically acceptable to reject customers or not is the methods such practices entail. Turning away customers presupposes that there are people who want to become customers. These are then somehow stopped in their endeavour. For fashion and body types, this is easy; companies can just refrain from manufacturing clothes that fit the unwanted customers. However, if the dreaded users were unwanted because of some other characteristic, customer base management would be less straightforward. For instance, the Burberry brand’s association to Chavs that is mentioned in the introduction could not be mitigated through assortment and sizes. The unattractive character of the Chavs is rooted in their socio-demographics, not in their physique. They represent a cultural meaning that is inconsistent with Burberry’s brand identity.

If a maker of prestigious sports cars would like to avoid nouveau-riche drivers, or a maker of champagne did not want its product to be associated to partying youths that spray the beverage to prove their wealth, their options are limited. Service marketers that rely on user imagery to build brands face similar challenges. Exclusive clubs are by definition not for everyone. Their value lies in this fact. However, this does not deter prospective guests; many are called, few are chosen.

All the offerings above must find a way of rejecting unwanted customers if they want to optimize user imagery. In relationship terms, they have to dump someone. If the unwanted user enjoys high status, simply letting the consumer know he or she is not appreciated can do the trick. The pride of the user will prevent him or her from further contact. This was the case when legendary rapper Jay-Z switched from Cristal to Armand de Brignac champagne. The makers of Cristal were not thrilled with the pairing of their product with hip-hop, and rap music, and let this concern be known. Jay-Z took offence and boycotted Cristal in his videos and the clubs that he owns, switching loyalty to Armand de Brignac (Pickering and Cullen 2008). It is thus relatively easy to dump people that are attractive to others, and that have other options open to them. They will not want to stay in a relationship where they are not wanted anyway.

However, if the unwanted consumers are so because they have low status (which is most often the case), the situation is different. They will still want to be with you (the brand), and therefore, if you want to get rid of them, tougher measures are called for. Lying seems common. In night club lines bouncers will often tell unwanted guests that the club is full, or that only people on the guest list will be admitted. This while they simultaneously let high status guests pass the velvet rope without pause. Intimidation can also be a way. There is a scene in the romantic comedy Pretty Woman where the store clerks of an exclusive Beverly Hills boutique bully Julia Roberts's character to make her leave the store. She, dressed as a prostitute, does apparently not fit their criteria for an attractive customer. Although exaggerated for dramatic purposes, the scene illustrates the ethical dilemma. If you have something that most people want, you may have to play dirty to scare the unattractive customers away in order to keep the attractive ones. Or, as Burberry might put it; to separate the wheat from the Chav.

Future research

I consider this dissertation a first step into the examination of user imagery. I have now demonstrated that user weight have significant effects on mass market fashion brands but that business practices do not align with these findings.

The next step is to look for a deeper understanding of how businesses actually act on the consequences of typical user imagery. I will study an industry where customer base management is at the very core of brand creation; night clubs. To get a deeper understanding of how people in the night club industry see the world, and how they reason in their operations, a qualitative approach is appropriate.

Another subject of interest is the ethical dilemmas the marketer faces when taking the theory of user imagery and customer base management to its logical conclusions. I will attempt to delve deeper into this subject in my doctoral thesis.

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Appendix I: User BMI effects on mass market fashion brands

Abstract
Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to investigate how the weight of users affects the perception of mass market fashion brands.

Design/methodology/approach: This study attempts to show effects of typical - as well as ideal user imagery on fashion brands. An experiment was carried out in which 1848 university students replied to a web survey, rating the brand personality of jeans and shirts according to Aaker's Big Five construct. The garments were worn by digitally manipulated versions of one person as thin, overweight, and obese.

Findings: The findings show that consumers' impressions of mass market fashion brands are significantly affected by the weight of its users. The effect of male user imagery is ambiguous. For women's fashion on the other hand, slender users are to be preferred.

Research limitations/implications: It is possible, even probable, that high fashion would suffer more from negative typical user imagery than would mass market fashion. It would therefore be interesting to replicate this experiment using clothes of higher fashion grade and price.

Practical implications: The demonstrated effects of user imagery support the industry practice of slim ideal female imagery. However, excluding customers to boost brand perception should not be an option for these brands.

Social implications: The results inform the debate over skinny models vs. "real women" in advertising as well as the debate over discrimination of overweight consumers through assortment decisions.

Originality/value: This is the first time typical user imagery effects are included in a study of this type, and it is the first study to test user imagery effects on fashion.

Keywords: Brand personality, user imagery, fashion
Classification: Research paper

1. Introduction

Personality traits are directly transferred to a brand through the people that are associated with it (McCracken 1989). Apart from company employees, this group includes the type of person who uses the brand (Keller 2000) be it in an idealized setting like advertising, or in a more realistic one where regular people use the brand (Aaker 1996, p. 147). In other words, user imagery will make the brand seem more or less attractive depending on what the consumer thinks of the user.

However, the sword cuts both ways. If the typical user is not someone consumers look up to and wish to emulate, the effect can be detrimental. Jonathan Schroeder (2006) describes how the upscale Burberry brand got a taste of this in their British home market. The venerable fashion brand became popular with the wrong kind of people. The low brow group of people called "Chavs" became enamoured with the distinct tartan pattern of the Burberry brand, and lacking self restraint they used it according to the principle "the more the merrier". However, the conservative upper middle class that constitutes the brand's target group did not appreciate the new typical users and abandoned the brand. The detrimental effect of the "Chavs" as typical users was so pronounced that pubs and clubs started to bar people who wore the brand. A common sign outside London night spots at the time read "no jeans, no trainers, no Burberry".

There are many anecdotes of this kind, and they clearly illustrate the impact strong user stereotypes can have on a brand. Apart from treatment in qualitative research there is one aspect of the user imagery construct that also has been studied in more traditional brand literature; how idealized user types presented in advertising affect brand perception. These studies have normally been carried out in experimental settings in which the celebrity or model has been the variable factor. Experiments of this kind have among other things shown that consumer attitudes towards brands are affected by the attractiveness of the perceived user (Baker and Churchill Jr. 1977), his or her perceived sexiness (Steadman 1969), as well as his or her gender (Kanungo and Pang 1973). The experiments have been designed to measure advertising effectiveness, namely which different characteristics of an ideal user produce which reactions with the respondents. The user types have been presented in mock-up ads trying to replicate the consumer experience of reading an advert. The generated insights are important. However, for companies that wonder not only how paid models, but also how regular users, affect their brands, a study design that covers both ideal and typical user imagery and its effects on brand image would be useful. Although this study has a design similar to that of previous research, it differs in this respect.

In order to study the effects of specific users on brand perception, one must choose a product category that is susceptible to the influence of user imagery. What is more, one must choose a type of user that is likely to have an effect on the brand in question. The symbolic nature of clothes consumption (McCracken 1988, p. 57) and its strong links to self-image and self expression (Ratchford 1987) suggests that consumer perception of fashion brands would be influenced by our notion of who uses them. The positive connotations to slim body types and the negative associations to heavier body types (Keys 1955; Wooley and Wooley 1979; Crandall 1994) makes it reasonable to assume that the weight of perceived users would shape consumers' perception of fashion brands. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to show if and how the Body Mass Index (BMI) of mass market fashion users shape the way consumers perceive such brands.

If the results were to indicate that certain user types were especially good or bad for a brand, it could help companies to better run their businesses. The combination of user weight and fashion could have major applications for marketing communications, assortment practices, etc. However, fashion and weight is the topic of heated public debate. One aspect is the thin users presented by fashion companies and the possible distortions they could induce to consumers' perceptions of what a normal body should look like. There are basically two sides to this controversy; the companies claiming that thin models is what sells, and society claiming this imagery damages the minds of young people and leads to eating disorders.

Another debate rages over the alleged discrimination of fat consumers. The notion is that fashion companies would reject them by not producing garments that fit them. Some companies clearly limit the number of sizes they produce, and are criticized for it (Female_First 2006; Jönsson 2009). Even the Swedish government has accepted discrimination of fat fashion consumers as an established fact and declares that fashion stores carry only a narrow assortment of large sizes and that they treat fat people with disrespect (Kulturhuset Stockholm 2006). Reduced choice is one issue. The underlying reasons for any discrimination of this kind is another. There is a popular notion that the reason companies limit the number of garments offered in large sizes is that if fat people were seen in a specific brand it would be ruined for thinner consumers. This idea is prevalent in the media although mass market fashion companies disagree (Ritson 2003; D'Amato 2005).

As we see, there could be implications to overweight user imagery effects on mass market fashion. However, this study is not concerned with whether companies reject consumers because they are fat, but whether it would even make sense to do so.

2. Theoretical framework

For decades marketing scholars have researched the symbolic effect of consumption (Levy 1959; McCracken 1986; Belk 1988; Brioschi 2006, etc). One overarching idea is that we consume not just for utility, but because consumption means something to us. It is relevant to who we are and who we want to be. We use brands to fit in or to stand out.

2.1 Self-image congruence

Brands that are bought primarily because they appeal to consumers' values do so through symbols (Levy 1959). A brand's personality is part of its cultural meaning, and consumers look for products and brands whose cultural meanings correspond to the person they are or want to become (McCracken 1986). Self-image congruence refers to the match between consumers' self-concept and the personality of a given offering. When consumers perceive a match between their own personalities and that of a brand they reach different forms of satisfaction or avoid different kinds of dissatisfaction, which in turn results in positive attitudes or persuasion to buy a brand (Sirgy 1982; Johar and Sirgy 1991). Self-image congruence has been proven to increase consumer preference for stores (Sirgy and Samli 1985), influence purchase behaviour (Malhotra 1981), and improve brand loyalty (Kressman, Sirgy et al. 2006). The consumer's self-image and brand personality may not always be in agreement (Keller 2003, p. 86), but in those categories in which the consumer's self-image is important to consumer decisions they are more likely to be related (Sirgy 1982). One such category is fashion (Ratchford 1987).

2.2 Brand personality

For self-image congruence to occur, two personalities must line up; that of a consumer, and that of a brand. Brand personality, or "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker 1997, p. 347) is a non-product related aspect of a brand (Aaker 1996; Keller 2003, p. 94). It relates more to what the brand says about the consumers and how they feel being associated with it, than what the brand does for them (De Chernatony 2006, p. 244).

In psychology there are many definitions of human personality. Most of these have been adopted by marketing researchers who with varying degrees of success have tried to prove that a person's personality influences his or her behaviour as a consumer (Kassarjian 1971). An influential theory in the field of psychology is the trait and factor theory (Kassarjian 1971). According to this theory the human personality can be described by five dimensions, known as the Big Five. These five dimensions explain 93% of all personality traits (Aaker 1996, p. 143). This five-factor model has become a standard classification scheme for human traits. By employing the same method as psychologists used for human traits Aaker (1997) has created a similar framework for brand personality traits.

The brand personality construct according to Aaker can be expressed in five brand personality dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. These in turn can be broken down into fifteen facets, and further into forty-two traits.

Table 1
BRAND PERSONALITY CONSTRUCT

Big Five brand personality dimensions	Facets	Traits
Sincerity	Down-to earth	Down-to-earth Family-oriented Small-town
	Honest	Honest Sincere Real
	Wholesome	Wholesome Original
	Cheerful	Cheerful Sentimental Friendly
Excitement	Daring	Daring Trendy Exciting
	Spirited	Spirited Cool Young
	Imaginative	Imaginative Unique
	Up-to-date	Up-to-date Independent Contemporary
Competence	Reliable	Reliable Hard working Secure
	Intelligent	Intelligent Technical Corporate
	Successful	Successful Leader Confident
Sophistication	Upper class	Upper class Glamorous Good-looking
	Charming	Charming Feminine Smooth
Ruggedness	Outdoorsy	Outdoorsy Masculine Western
	Tough	Tough Rugged

Source: (Aaker 1997)

Objections to the Aaker scale are often based on the perceived lack of coherence between the definition of brand and human personalities. There are those that find "the set of human characteristics" too wide a scope since it includes skills, age, and demographic characteristics which human personality according to psychology does not (Azoulay and Kapferer 2003). Others do not think trait theory is the best avenue for describing personality at all (Sweeney and Brandon 2006).

The Aaker scale has nevertheless become somewhat of a standard for subsequent studies of brand personality (Azoulay and Kapferer 2003). As Parker (2009, p. 177) puts it "to date, the BPS (brand personality scales) is the only published and most widely employed brand personality measure, shown to be reliable and generalizable across different brands and product categories".

2.3 User imagery

To achieve self-image congruence, a brand personality must be created that is in line with consumers' self-image. One influencing factor is user imagery. Kressman et al (2006) show that there is a strong connection between brand personality and the personality of the perceived users. If we as consumers have a clear picture of what kind of person would use a specific brand, we also perceive the brand to display the same traits. Aaker (1996, p. 147) divides users into two types, the ideal user and the typical user. The ideal type is a personality that the company wants to project as a user of a brand in order to improve brand image. Sponsored athletes, brand spokespersons, as well as people portrayed in advertising are examples of ideal users. The typical user on the other hand is a person that uses a brand out of choice, for example colleagues, friends, people in the street, real people in media, etc. Together these user images help form a stereotype in the minds of consumers of what type of person would use a particular brand.

However, if this effect makes it easier to establish the desired brand personality, it is reasonable to assume a downside where users of the wrong kind would tarnish a brand's personality. Such an effect would be especially harmful to consumers' use of a brand as a tool for self expression, because in addition to an ideal self to which they aspire, consumers also have an undesired self. The undesired self encompasses everything they do not want to be (Bosnjak and Rudolph 2008). The dominant implicit standard that individuals use to assess their well-being is how distant they are from subjectively being like their most negative self-image (Ogilvie 1987). In other words, in the pursuit to improve their self-concept, it matters more to individuals that they distance themselves from negative self-images than that they approach positive ones. Indeed, it has been shown that for fashion consumers the motivation to avoid being identified with negative images is stronger than that of achieving positive ones (Banister and Hogg 2004). Therefore, we identify with the brands we consume, especially in high involvement product categories like fashion (Ratchford 1987).

Fashion and clothing has symbolic properties (Kawamura 2007, p. 148), that is, it is consumed not primarily for its utility, but because of what it represents to the user and the surrounding world. It satisfies two opposing functions, social identification and distinction (Banister and Hogg 2004), also expressed as "get along or get ahead" (Schroeder 2006). In other words, fashion brands are perceived as meaningful, and people consume them to show who they identify with (social identification) and who they do not identify with (distinction).

Given the way we consume fashion, negative user imagery should have great impact on a brand's ability to express consumers' personalities. What is more, as consumers' strongest urge is to distance themselves from the undesired self, it stands to reason that an undesired brand personality would be disastrous. After all, self-expression through identification with brand traits is what fashion brands are for (Ratchford 1987). If those traits represent something from which consumers want to distance themselves, chances are the brands will suffer.

One such characteristic is overweight. The public in general is more negative towards overweight people than it is towards people of normal weight. There is a kind of symbolic racism attached to fat people (Crandall 1994). Prejudices against overweight people manifest themselves in much the same way as those against people of certain races, and many studies show that heavy people are seen as unattractive (Wooley and Wooley 1979) and morally inferior (Keys 1955). All in all, overweight is universally considered a negative characteristic. This negative aspect of overweight leads to some assumptions regarding the effect of fat user types on how we see fashion brands. Simply put, to help build desirable brand image, users should be thin. Logically, the opposite should also be true. The negative impact of overweight would probably be even worse than the beneficial effect of thinness considering consumers' efforts to distance themselves from negatives rather than aspiring to positives (Ogilvie 1987; Banister and Hogg 2004). The resulting hypothesis is therefore:

H_1: overweight and obese user imagery should have a detrimental effect on consumer perception of mass market fashion brands

This damaging effect should be more pronounced in women's fashion than in men's fashion. Women have stronger investments in their looks than do men (Muth and Cash 1997). Even though they are less prone to overweight than are men (Statistics Sweden 2009), weight is more related to self-image for women than it is for men (Bordo 2003; Dolliver 2005), and overweight women feel discriminated against to a greater extent than do men (Puhl, Andreyeva et al. 2008). Therefore, a perception that a brand's typical users are overweight should affect women's preferences to a greater degree than that of men. After all, if men care less about their looks than do women, they should be less sensitive to what typical users look like when forming an opinion of a brand.

What is more, both genders prefer thin female body shapes while the relationship to male body shapes is more equivocal (e. g. Cohn and Adler 1992; Demarest and Allen 2000; Philips and Drummond 2001). That is, while there are many ideal body types for men, both sexes prefer women to be thin. The second hypothesis is therefore:

H_2: female overweight and obese user imagery should have a more pronounced negative effect on mass market fashion brands than male overweight and obese user imagery

3. Method

The purpose of the study is to examine if and how the imagery of thin, overweight, and obese users affect the perception of mass market fashion brands.

3.1 Experimental design

The study was conducted via the internet. One reason is cost efficiency; the other is control of the order in which the questions were answered. Respondents started out rating the brands portrayed in the photos. They were asked to describe the brand of clothes that was presented to them on the screen. The description of the brand was done according to the Aaker (1997) Big Five brand personality construct. The rating was done on a 5 grade Likert type scale. The independent variable is the BMI of the person wearing the clothes in the photo. The dependent variable is the brand personality score. This type of experiment is a validated approach when it comes to measuring how different user types affect brand perception with consumers (Steadman 1969; Kanungo and Pang 1973; Baker and Churchill Jr. 1977).

User types were represented by digitally manipulated photos of one man and one woman, portraying them as having different body types; normal-and underweight, overweight, and obese. These three groups are henceforth referred to as BMI 1, BMI 2, and BMI 3. They are described in the table below.

Table 2
BMI CLASSES

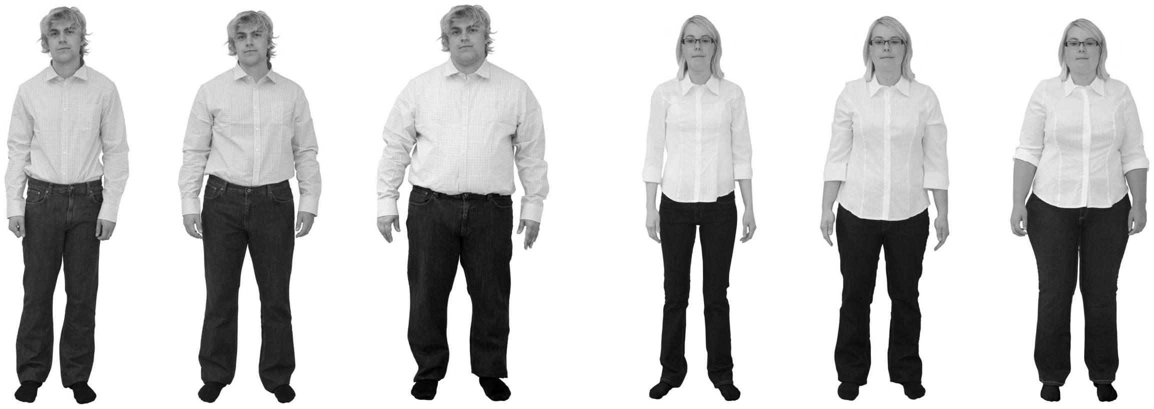
Class	BMI range	Explanation
BMI 1	<25	Under weight & normal weight
BMI 2	25-29.9	Overweight
BMI 3	Equal to 30 or above	Obese

Source: (WHO 1997)

To increase validity, real bodies of normal-and underweight, overweight, and obese people were photographed. Identical clothes were purchased in three different sizes to be worn by the persons representing the different weight classes. The sizes required to be representative for each BMI group were determined through the use of anthropometric data collected by a medical researcher. Head shots of one man and one woman were used. These were manipulated by a professional graphic designer to fit the different body types. This practice makes the rendering of body types more realistic than if one body had been stretched to appear obese and squeezed to appear normal- to underweight. The method of digitally manipulating photos of humans to depict them as thinner or fatter to experimentally measure resulting attitude effects has previously been used and validated (Lin and Kulik 2002).

The users wear jeans and shirts. This delimitation is due to the number of photos used. For every new variable that is added, like categories of users, types of garments worn, etc, the number of photos needed is doubled. However, shirts and jeans are some of the items most sensitive to body shape, and they are staples of the mass market fashion industry. It is therefore reasonable to assume that any conclusions that are reached regarding these product categories would apply also to others. However, to be sure it would be necessary to replicate this study for every category, like dresses, suits, etc. Below in Figure 1 the photos used are displayed.

Figure 1
INDEPENDENT VARIABLE, TYPICAL USER BMI



Man, BMI 1 Man, BMI 2 Man, BMI 3 Woman, BMI 1 Woman, BMI 2 Woman, BMI 3

A between-subject design is used, so each respondent group is exposed to only one photo, and the groups work as control groups to each other. The main reason for this approach as opposed to a within subject design which would allow for a smaller sample is the user type photos. Since they are of the same individuals who are portrayed as fat and thin, respondents would be able to see through the design and infer the research question, thus reducing the validity of the study. In other words, if respondents understand that they are rating brands based on the user types' BMI they may feel obliged not to express negative attitudes towards the brands featuring heavier users.

3.2 Reliability

Another reason for the design is that a between subject design requires the respondents to answer questions based on just one photo for each gender. As they are not subjected to a large number of photos, it is possible to ask them more questions about the ones they see. Therefore, respondents rate users on all forty-two traits defined in the Big Five construct as opposed to just the five dimensions, or the fifteen facets. They are then compiled into the main five dimensions. Because respondents have rated forty-two traits instead of just five dimensions, the risk of misunderstanding is reduced. It is less likely that a respondent will misinterpret the meaning of ten traits that make up a dimension than just the one name of the dimension. Thus, reliability is built into the questionnaire. The respondents also state their own weight, height, and gender. This to see if the respondents' own BMI and gender influences how they are affected by those of the portrayed users'.

3.3 Validity

The threats to internal validity comprise omitted variables and testing. The omitted variable would be unrealistic manipulation of user photos. If the manipulated photos do not portray a credible vision of a person of the intended BMI the experiment's independent variable would be something else than intended. This was screened prior to the study by a sorting procedure where a separate group of respondents tried to determine which of the three photos the unaltered one is. There were not significantly more than 1/3 of respondents per set who picked the genuine photos, thereby confirming the experiment's internal validity. As for testing, if respondents were to find out what is tested they may be more sympathetic to overweight users than if they did not. To avoid tipping off the respondents with regards to the research question, the questions covering their own physique and gender was asked at the end of the survey. Thus, thanks to the amount of control afforded by the computerized experiment form, internal validity is high. Being a lab experiment, the situation facing the respondents is different from real life, thus lowering external validity.

3.4 Sample

The respondents are undergraduate students of a European university college. They constitute present and future target groups for mass market fashion, and they are readily available, thereby constituting a convenience sample. 6,567 students were asked via e-mail to take part in the study. 1,848 agreed resulting in a 28% response rate. Only fully completed questionnaires were included.

4. Results

A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of user BMI on brand perception in BMI 1, BMI 2, and BMI 3 conditions. This was done for male and female users on all brand dimensions; Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness.

Levene's test indicated that the assumption of homogeneity of variance holds for all brand personality dimensions over all BMI groups for both genders, F(2, 897)=1.28, p=0.28 (male users, Sincerity dimension); F(2, 897)=1.55, p=0.21 (male users, Excitement dimension); F(2, 897)=0.39, p=0.68 (male users, Competence dimension); F(2, 897)=0.93, p=0.40 (male users, Sophistication dimension); F(2, 897)=0.92, p=0.40 (male users, Ruggedness dimension); F(2, 945)=0.20, p=0.82 (female users, Sincerity dimension); F(2, 945)=1.60, p=0.20 (female users, Excitement dimension); F(2, 945)=1.22, p=0.30 (female users, Competence dimension); F(2, 945)=1.32, p=0.27 (female users, Sophistication dimension); F(2, 945)=0.02, p=0.98 (female users, Ruggedness dimension).

Male users of different BMI significantly affected brand perception at the $p < .05$ level on the Sincerity [F(2, 897)=9.42, p=.00], Excitement [F(2, 897)=15.53, p=.00], and Competence [F(2, 897)=3.17, p=.04] dimensions. For female users there was a significant effect of user BMI on brand perception at the $p < .05$ level for the three conditions on the Excitement [F(2, 945)=9.11, p=.00], Competence [F(2, 945)=18.73, p=.00], Sophistication [F(2, 945)=5.18, p=.01], and Ruggedness [F(2, 945)=6.01, p=.00] dimensions.

To see *how* different user BMIs influence the respondents' perception of brand personality a Tukey HSD post-hoc test was carried out. The test shows differences in means between surveys**.** In other words, it shows if the effect that a thin, overweight, or obese user has on the consumers' perception of each brand personality dimension is significantly different to the effect of the other user types. Naturally, direct comparisons are only made between surveys of the same sex as cross-gender comparisons would be invalid because the male and female users are different individuals.

4.1 Male user types

The post-hoc comparisons indicates that for male user imagery the mean scores on the Sincerity dimension for the BMI 1 condition (M=3.17, SD=.58) and for the BMI 2 condition (M=3.15, SD=.55) are significantly different from the BMI 3 condition (M=2.99, SD=.53). However, the differences between the BMI 1 and BMI 2 conditions are not significant. Taken together, these results suggest that obese user imagery really has an effect on perception of brand sincerity. Specifically, they suggest that when consumers perceive that the typical user of a brand is fat, that brand is perceived as less sincere. However, it should be noted that users must be obese in order to see an effect. Overweight user imagery does not appear to significantly affect the perception of sincerity.

For male user imagery the mean scores on the Excitement dimension for the BMI 1 condition (M=1.98, SD=.59), for the BMI 2 condition (M=1.83, SD=.59) and for the BMI 3 condition (M=2.10, SD=.64) are all significantly different. In other words, these results suggest that user imagery BMI really has an effect on perception of brand excitement. Specifically, they suggest that mass market fashion is considered most exciting when consumers perceive that the typical user of the brand is obese, significantly less so if the typical user of the brand is thin, and even less if he or she is overweight.

On the Competence dimension, the mean scores for the BMI 2 condition (M=3.16, SD=.63) is significantly different from the BMI 3 condition (M=3.02, SD=.66). However, the BMI 1 condition (M=3.07, SD=.67) did not significantly differ from the BMI 2 and BMI 3 conditions. Taken together, these results suggest that overweight and obese user imagery really affects perception of brand competence. Specifically, they suggest that when consumers perceive that the typical user of a brand is overweight, that brand is perceived as more competent than if the user were obese. However, it should be noted that users must be overweight or obese in order to see a significant effect. Under- and normal weight user imagery does not appear to significantly affect the perception of competence.

4.2 Female user types

The post-hoc comparisons indicates that for female user imagery the mean scores on the Excitement dimension for the BMI 2 condition (M=1.88, SD=.58) is significantly different from the BMI 1 condition (M=2.02, SD=.67) and from the BMI 3 condition (M=2.09, SD=.62). However, the differences between the BMI 1 and BMI 3 conditions are not significant. Taken together, these results suggest that overweight user imagery really has an effect on perceived brand excitement. Specifically, they suggest that when consumers perceive that the typical user of a brand is overweight, that brand is perceived as significantly less exciting than if the user is fat *or* thin.

On the Competence dimension the mean scores for the BMI 1 condition (M=3.32, SD=.61) is significantly higher than those of condition BMI 2 (M=3.07, SD=.68) and BMI 3 (M=3.02, SD=.70). The differences of mean scores between BMI 2 and BMI 3 on the other hand are not significant. This means that for typical female users to impact the perception of brand competence positively, they must be thin.

For female user imagery the mean scores on the Sophistication dimension for the BMI 2 condition (M=1.88, SD=.58) is significantly lower than the BMI 1 condition (M=2.02, SD=.67) and than the BMI 3 condition (M=2.09, SD=.62). However, the differences between the BMI 1 and BMI 3 conditions are not significant. These results suggest that when consumers perceive that the typical user of a brand is overweight, that brand is perceived as significantly less sophisticated than if the user is fat *or* thin.

The opposite is true for Ruggedness. On this dimension the BMI 2 condition (M=2.54, SD=.64) scores significantly higher than both the BMI 1 condition (M=2.38, SD=.70) and the BMI 3 condition (M=2.38, SD=.65). However, there are no significant differences between the BMI 1 and BMI 3 conditions. In other words, when consumers perceive that the typical user of a brand is overweight, that brand is perceived as significantly more rugged than if the user is fat *or* thin.

Respondents were assigned to three groups according to their own BMI to check for bias, the hypothesis being that overweight or obese respondents would rate users of varying BMI differently than thin respondents. To check for such a bias the scores from all combinations of respondent BMI and user BMI were submitted to an ANOVA test. The Tukey post-hoc test revealed no significant differences between the ways respondents of different BMI scored users. That is, for each BMI condition, there were no significant differences in scores that could be attributed to respondent BMI. It does not matter if the respondents are thin, overweight, or obese. They all perceive the brand personality of the garments identically when worn by a user of a particular BMI. This exercise was repeated to test for gender bias, that is, to check if male respondents rate users of different BMI significantly differently than do female respondents. No significant differences were found.

5. Discussion

Judging from previous work in the field, fashion, as a symbolic good (Kawamura 2007, p. 148) that is consumed to express the self (Ratchford 1987), should be vulnerable to negative user imagery. Since consumers dread a negative self-image (Banister and Hogg 2004), the negative characteristics of overweight and obesity should according to theory be detrimental to fashion brands. However, the notion that there is a straightforward relationship between BMI and brand personality is obviously false. User BMI influences consumer perception of mass market fashion brands significantly, but in a nuanced way.

Mass market fashion brands that are worn by obese men are perceived as less sincere than others. They are also seen as less competent, at least compared to clothes worn by overweight men. On the other hand, brands used by obese men are seen as more exciting than others. Obese user imagery could therefore be beneficial to brands that seek an exciting but perhaps not so serious brand image; it may be okay for Hawaii shirts but not for business suits.

Overweight male user imagery is characterized by sincerity and competence, but not excitement. Therefore, overweight user imagery should be reserved for brands that cater to serious and very conservative consumers like accountants or undertakers.

Normal and underweight male users give the impression of sincerity and competence to the same extent that overweight men do. However, they are also seen as significantly more exciting than overweight users. Therefore, normal and underweight male user imagery would be beneficial for brands seeking a serious but not dull brand personality.

For female mass market fashion brands it seems best to establish thin user imagery. The under- and normal weight BMI group rate highest for competence. Obese users fare better than overweight ones, but they do not outperform thin users significantly on any brand personality dimension. What stands out however, is that overweight user imagery should be avoided at all cost. Overweight women (BMI 2) rate low on excitement, low on sophistication, and high on ruggedness (a masculine trait). In other words, they are perceived as dull, unsophisticated, and mannish. It is reasonable to assume that few female fashion shoppers would want to identify with a brand personality such as this.

How does this relate to the expectations? For female user imagery the impression is unequivocal; it is best to establish thin user imagery no matter what. Surprisingly, the next best is obese. So, while the findings are in line with the hypothesis that thin and underweight female users are most beneficial to brand image, there is no linear relationship between weight and brand personality scores. It is not possible to say “the thinner the better, the fatter the worse”. Rather, it is “thin is good, overweight is bad, and obese is in between”.

For male user imagery, there is a possible use for user imagery from each BMI class. Thin, overweight, and obese users can convey personality traits that could be valuable for mass market fashion depending on what is sold and to whom it is sold. Thus, the first hypothesis is rejected.

H_1: overweight and obese user imagery should have a detrimental effect on consumer perception of fashion brands – rejected for men, rejected in part for women

Although the overall impression for female user imagery is that thin is better, for male fashion brands the answer is more ambiguous and the second hypothesis is therefore not rejected.

H_2: female overweight and obese user imagery should have a more pronounced negative effect on fashion brands than male overweight and obese user imagery –not rejected

So, while the findings were not in line with the hypotheses there is obviously a difference between how we see females and males. Despite the high level of gender equality in Swedish society, women users, to be seen at their most attractive, should be thin. For male users on the other hand, different body types convey different personalities, but none of them is superior on all dimensions.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study corroborates that the BMI of typical users influence how we perceive mass market fashion brands. Should companies then avoid users with a BMI that carries the wrong connotations? Could they?

6.1 Ideal user imagery

The results provide some insights that could be of use to the marketer when developing advertising. A recurring theme in advertising is that of the real woman as opposed to the skinny model. The skinny model is the norm, but from time to time companies try to win favour with the consumers by employing models that resemble average women more. These companies claim it works (Lunau 2008), although research indicates that plus-size models only give a positive image but does not sell products (Neff 2008). If by a "real woman" one means an overweight woman, the findings of this study would support the latter notion.

6.2 Typical user imagery

Given that 45% of the Swedish population is overweight or obese (Statistics Sweden 2009) it is very probable that mass market fashion retailers could not afford to exclude this group. It would hurt them financially. Mass market retailers are dependent on large sales at relatively low prices, so rejecting customers would defeat their business model.

But even if the companies did not need the turnover, they might not turn away customers based on BMI, or any other negative trait for that matter. Granted, this study shows that user BMI affects the brand, but it might not matter. In an experimental setting like this we get an isolated view of any significant effect. In other words, if the respondents as a group feel differently towards the clothes worn by a certain typical user it shows in the data. For typical user imagery to affect sales in a real world setting however there has to be such an effect, but the potential consumer must also connect it to a specific brand. If he or she sees a shirt worn by a person in the street and dislikes the garment because of the wearer's weight it does not matter as long as the brand is inconspicuous. For typical user imagery to matter, it has to be obvious what brand someone is wearing. Expensive fashion often uses logos that signal to the surrounding world that the wearer has paid a premium for it. Thus, the expression of personality through expensive clothes relies on other people's ability to discern what brand the consumer is wearing. For such conspicuously branded garments the effect of the typical users contributes to the public's perception of the brand. Because it is obvious what brand a person in the street is wearing it is easy for consumers to use their perception of that person to form an opinion of the brand. Mass market garments are however generally not as attributable to a specific brand. Their logos are less prominent, and do normally not invoke the corporate brand, but lesser known sub brands. The mainstream styling of mass market fashion also makes brand identification difficult. This may be a conscious strategy. After all, if no one can tell where a person bought his or her clothes, how could the user imagery resulting from unattractive typical users hurt?

However, it is not enough that we can tell what brand someone is wearing. We must also be able to form a stereotypical opinion of the wearer. For this to be possible, it helps if the users of a brand resemble each other. What is more, they must be different from the average person. In other words, the more homogenous and extreme a brand's typical users are, the clearer the user imagery. This means that if a company targets a large number of consumers of different types, the typical user image gets muddled. After all, if the consumer can not form an opinion on the personality of the typical user, how could his or her personality affect that of the brand?

7. Future research

Anecdotal evidence for typical user imagery effects in fashion often refer to high fashion. While it is possible that negative user imagery of overweight and obese consumers would affect high fashion in the same way as it does mass market fashion, it is also possible, even probable, that it would hurt high fashion more. In addition to more recognizable garments and more homogenous and extreme user types, high fashion is to a great extent used by consumers to express themselves. Given this, it would be interesting to replicate this experiment using clothes of a higher fashion grade and price.

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Appendix II: To sell or not to sell: overweight users' effect on fashion assortments

Abstract

Overweight people claim to be mistreated by the fashion industry. Fashion companies disagree. Despite the controversy, actual research has been scarce. This study compares the sizes of clothes the four leading mass marketing fashion retailers in Sweden offer to the body sizes of the population. Although branding theory would support the idea of rejecting fat consumers to improve user imagery for fashion brands, such practices were not evident. The main contribution of this paper is that it provides the first quantified empirical evidence on the theory of typical user imagery.

In the discussion, it is posited that although mass market fashion brands should be susceptible to negative user imagery related to overweight and obese users, the companies avoid such problems by making garments that are not directly attributable to a specific brand, thus mitigating the negative effect of overweight and obese user imagery.

Keywords: Brands, assortments, fashion
Track: Product and Brand Management

1. Introduction

The rate of overweight and obesity grows constantly in the Western world (Zierath 2006). Many of these overweight or obese people feel badly treated by the fashion industry. They perceive that fat people have less to choose from, and what there is, is getting harder to find (D'Amato 2005). In fact, this notion is so widely accepted that it is taught to school children as a fact. A syllabus instructs teachers to tell their students that fashion stores carry narrow assortments in large sizes and that they treat fat persons without respect (Kulturhuset Stockholm 2006). In other words, even though the consumer segment for large sizes is growing, there exists a strong perception with the general public that the supply of clothes fitting overweight people is shrinking. This situation has sparked a lively debate. Fashion companies on the one hand claim that their assortment reflects demand (D'Amato 2005). Overweight consumers, on the other hand, claim they are being discriminated against because fashion companies do not want to see their brands associated with fat people (Ritson 2003). If companies actually behave this way, the rationale for doing so is based on branding theory.

The consumption of brands is symbolic (Levy 1959), that is, we do not buy them primarily for their utilitarian aspect, but for what they represent to us and how they allow us to express our concepts of self (Belk 1988). A brand's personality is part of its cultural meaning, and consumers look for products and brands whose cultural meanings correspond to the person they are or want to become (McCracken 1986). Self-image congruence refers to the match between a consumer's self-concept and the personality of a given offering. When achieved, it has been proven to increase consumer preference for stores (Sirgy and Samli 1985), influence purchase behaviour (Malhotra 1981), and improve brand loyalty (Kressman, Sirgy et al. 2006). The consumer's self-image and brand personality may not always be in agreement, but in categories in which the users' self image is important to consumer decisions, brand personality and the users' self image are more likely to be related (Keller 2003, p. 86). Thus, consumers often choose and use brands with a personality consistent with their own self-concept, although in some cases the match may be based on their desired self-image rather than their actual image (Sirgy 1982; Aaker 1999). Given the importance of brand personality for creating brand preference, all influences on brand personality is of great importance to the brand owner. One such influence is user imagery.

Personality traits are directly transferred to a brand through the people that are associated with it (McCracken 1989). Apart from company employees, this group includes the type of person who uses the brand (Keller 2000). Kressman et al (2006) show that the personality of the brand is strongly related to the personality of the perceived users. In other words, if consumers have a clear picture of what kind of person would use a specific brand, we also perceive the brand to display the same traits.

Although users displaying positive traits make it easier to establish the desired brand personality, it is logic that the *wrong* kind of users would tarnish a brand's personality. It is reasonable to assume that overweight and obese people may have such an effect on the brand. The public in general is negative to overweight people. There is a kind of symbolic racism attached to fat people (Crandall 1994). Prejudices against overweight people manifest themselves in much the same way as those against people of certain races, and many studies show that heavy people are seen as unattractive (Wooley and Wooley 1979), and morally inferior (Keys 1955). All in all, overweight is considered a negative characteristic, which is evident in fashion marketing. Almost all fashion models are thin. Thus, if we interpret the industry's marketing communication from a user imagery perspective, overweight users should be detrimental to a fashion brand. As a result, companies may therefore not serve them in the way they other market segments.

The purpose of this study is to examine if retailers in the mass market fashion industry discriminate overweight consumers by not stocking clothes that fit them. Discrimination in this context is defined as a reduction of choice for any market segment that is unproportionate to that segment's relative size. The results can provide new insights into an issue of social concern, but also for the first time provide some quantified empirical evidence on the theory of typical user imagery.

2. Theoretical framework

The general principle that people are drawn to entities that are similar to their actual or aspirational self-image is well established in psychological studies (Garner 2005; Caprara, Vecchione et al. 2007). However, when the principle is extended to a marketing context, it is not easy to apply. One problem is that the constructs are fuzzy, and another that all consumption is not symbolic.

2.1 Fuzzy constructs

Most studies of self-image congruence focus on measurements and consequent analyses of brand personality and consumer self-image. This is natural since brand personality and consumer self-image are the building blocks of self-image congruence. Once the degree of self-image congruence is established the researchers check it against consumer attitudes and behaviours. This type of study has demonstrated that self-image congruence can lead to a number of desirable outcomes for the brand owner (Malhotra 1981; Sirgy and Samli 1985; Kressman, Sirgy et al. 2006). For these types of studies it is crucial that the constructs involved are clearly defined. However, in reality, different researchers use them in different ways.

The most popular definition of brand personality is as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker 1997) while user imagery is defined as the perceived user of a brand (Aaker 1996, p. 147; Azoulay and Kapferer 2003). However, there are scholars that equate the two (Sirgy 1982; Kressman, Sirgy et al. 2006). What is more, self-image congruence rests on a match between human- and brand personalities, two constructs that may not be interchangeable (Azoulay and Kapferer 2003). Therefore, using one scale for both types of personality may mean that you compare apples to oranges.

For this study, however, this should note pose a problem. I am not measuring correlations between human and brand personality, so any misalignment between the two scales will not be an issue. In other words, as long as the overarching principle of self-image congruence is valid, this study is not affected by any shortcomings in the definition of its parts. The study is a survey of garments and does not attempt to measure self-image congruence, only look for its implications on business practices.

A more important caveat is that the match between our own personality and that of the brand is central only if the consumption that is studied is symbolic and self-expressive (Johar and Sirgy 1991). This is not always the case.

2.2 Consumption is not entirely symbolic

Leslie de Chernatony writes (2006, p. 244) that "while brand positioning focuses on what the brand can *do for* the consumer, brand personality concentrates on what the brand says about the consumer and how they feel being associated with it". In other words, people do not only consume products for symbolic reasons, they also choose brands because they have core attributes (ibid), for instance product and non-product related attributes like design, quality, uses, etc (Aaker 1996, p. 74). Utilitarian products that are bought to fulfil a functional need will be preferred if there is a match between the need and the impression the consumer gets of the practical functionality of the product. Such a match is referred to as functional congruity and is created through communication of function (Johar and Sirgy 1991). Especially for mass market clothes it is reasonable to assume that consumers take functional aspects into consideration. For instance, the forty-year old woman that visits KappAhl to equip her entire family may prioritise water resistance, durability, price, or any number of non-symbolic properties of the garments. What is more, if mass market fashion were consumed for its practical use rather than for self-expression, it would reduce the motivation for the companies to turn away customers displaying unattractive personality traits. However, even though mass market fashion consumption entails some practical considerations, it does not mean it is only practical. If one were to place clothes consumption along a continuum that ranges from the completely symbolic and self-expressive on the one hand to the absolutely practical on the other, mass market fashion would no doubt be closer to the practical side of the spectrum than high fashion. However, it is probably still a very symbolic and self-expressive form of consumption, just not as extreme as high fashion.

2.3 Clothes are communication of the self

The symbolic aspect of consumption is especially evident in high involvement product categories like fashion which is used to express the self through identification with brand traits (Ratchford 1987). Also in more general terms, clothing is one of the most expressive product categories in existence (McCracken 1988, p. 57) and is often likened to a language through which one expresses oneself. What is more, fashion consumers are more motivated to avoid being associated with negative images than to be associated to positive ones (Banister and Hogg 2004). This is because in addition to an ideal self to which they aspire, consumers also have an undesired self. The undesired self encompasses everything consumers do not want to be (Bosnjak and Rudolph 2008). The dominant implicit standard that individuals use to assess their well-being is how distant they are from subjectively being like their most negative self-image (Ogilvie 1987). A negative brand personality resulting from associations to unattractive user types would therefore hurt a fashion brand, and companies would act rationally from a brand management perspective if they tried to avoid individuals that display such negative traits. This leads to the first hypothesis.

H_1: Consumers should have relatively less to choose from the more overweight they are

The damaging effect of overweight and obese users should be more pronounced in women's fashion than in men's fashion. Women have stronger investments in their looks than do men (Muth and Cash 1997). Even though they are less prone to overweight than are men (Statistics Sweden 2009), weight is also more related to self-image for women than it is for men (Bordo 2003; Dolliver 2005), and overweight women feel discriminated against to a greater extent than do men (Puhl, Andreyeva et al. 2008). Therefore, a perception that a brand's typical users are overweight should affect women's preferences to a greater degree than that of men. After all, if men care less about their looks than do women, they should be less sensitive to what typical users look like when forming an opinion of a brand.

What is more, both genders prefer thin female body shapes while the relationship to male body shapes is more equivocal (e. g. Cohn and Adler 1992; Cohn and Adler 1992; Demarest and Allen 2000; Philips and Drummond 2001). That is, while there are many ideal body types for men, both sexes prefer women to be thin. The second hypothesis is therefore:

H_2: Overweight and obese women should have relatively less to choose from compared to their male counterparts

Positively charged brand traits let consumers express themselves as they desire, negative ones push them away. From a branding perspective it would therefore be rational for fashion companies to try to avoid overweight users. From a practical standpoint, unlike other unwanted user types, overweight users can easily be eliminated as customers for a fashion brand. Companies can simply choose not to manufacture garments that fit them. The question is; do companies act this way?

3. Method

To this researcher's knowledge, the prevalent notion that overweight fashion consumers have less to choose from than other groups has never been verified. To do so, it is necessary to investigate if there is indeed a discrepancy between the relative size of the overweight market segments and the supply of clothes that are available to them. In other words; do overweight consumers have less to choose from than what is motivated by their numbers?

3.1 Companies

The study encompasses shirts and jeans in four nation wide mass-market fashion retailers. They are in order of turnover H&M, Lindex, KappAhl, and Dressman. H&M is the category leader; the others follow with variations of the concept. They are all very broad in their market approach and share many strategies; prices are uniformly affordable, stores tend to be located in premium spots in the busiest areas of cities and shopping centres, promotion is a mix of brand building above the line media (mainly TV and billboards) and recurring sales promotion activities. The chains do differ in brand positioning. More than any other mass market fashion brand, H&M has worked consistently to be associated with the right people to allow the brand to be perceived as a fashion brand even though its offering is cheap. The company claims to use the best photographers and the best models for their ads. What is more, H&M has collaborated with iconic personalities ranging from fashion designers like Karl Lagerfeldt and Stella McCartney to stylish celebrities like Madonna to create limited collections of clothes and Kylie Minogue to model swimwear.

Women's apparel retailer Lindex has a more mature brand personality. In a focus group interview Lindex is described as "frumpy and middle-of-the-road" (Ehrstedt, Ottosson et al. 2007) (Ehrstedt, Ottosson et al. 2007, p. 33) although the company is trying to rejuvenate the brand by the use of a former top model as spokesperson.

KappAhl also caters to a slightly older clientele. One of the company's principal owners explains that the company targets women aged thirty and up that shop for themselves, but also for their family. The company strives to feel modern for their customers, but not to latch on to the more off-beat items that become popular. KappAhl has always been affordable, but is trying to expand into a slightly higher price range without losing the low-end part of the market. The ideal user imagery approach has been adopted by the KappAhl company that has launched an unexpected and self-professedly successful initiative. To entice their middle aged target group, the company has enlisted Hollywood stars Dustin Hoffman and Goldie Hawn to appear as themselves in commercials (Kennedy 2007).

Dressmann is the only non-Swedish company of the four and the only one to cater exclusively to men. It is based in Norway and is a relative newcomer to the Swedish market. Dressmann established its first Swedish store in 1997 (Dressmann.se 2009) and has been very successful although the company is still the smallest of the four. Marketing-wise, Dressman is the odd one of the group. The company is no stranger to user imagery, but instead of celebrities, the

Norwegian value retailer consistently sticks with a formula of square jawed men in TV ads. The brand, although obviously popular in the target group, is considered extremely un-hip in trendier environments. This uncool image is possibly a result of the company's conservatively designed low-end apparel which the number one advertising magazine describes as "boring, ill fitting clothes that only the drabbest people wear" (Fagerlind 2010).

3.2 Sample of garments

The method used is a survey of actual availability of clothes in different sizes. Two students visited one store from each chain, counted each article of clothing that was to be found in the shopping areas, and measured their waist and collar with a tape measure. This is necessary because clothes sizes are not standardized, and one garment can therefore be larger or smaller than another of the same nominal size. Measuring the garments solves this problem and thus raises the study's validity. 3,312 garments were tallied in-store.

The product categories jeans and shirts are chosen because they represent a considerable part of the supply offered by these companies. It is consequently reasonable to assume that the way the product categories are managed should be representative of how the companies act. What is more, shirts and jeans are sold to both men and women, and they are tailored to fit the body, thereby making sizes relevant to the body shapes of consumers. All companies included in the study have standardized assortments. Therefore, the sample of one store per chain is indicative of the chain's total policy.

3.3 Sample of population

The survey of clothes concluded the first step of the study; to map what the supply of clothes is like, size wise. The second step is to map what the demand for clothes is like, size wise. To realise this, it is first necessary to know how the population is distributed over different weights, that is, how many are thin and how many are fat? The study includes three categories of users; underweight & average, overweight, and obese consumers.

TABLE 1: BMI CLASSES

Class	BMI range	Explanation
BMI 1	<25	Under weight & normal weight
BMI 2	25-29.9	Overweight
BMI 3	Equal to 30 or above	Obese

Source: (WHO 1997)

The allocation of the Swedish population into these different weight groups is done based on data from The Swedish National Institute of Public Health (Wadman 2007). Once this data is in place, the next step is to describe what the population looks like physically. How big is a person in BMI group 1, 2 , or 3? We have to know this to compare supply to demand. Clinical Nutritionist Inger Larsson with the Department of Body Composition and Metabolism at Sahlgrenska University Hospital graciously let me access her anthropometric data. The data is a list of body measurements of 1,135 individuals that are representative of the general population. This allowed me to establish the physical sizes that fit into each BMI category.

3.4 Comparison

It is now possible to compare the supply available in-store to the demand. There is a span of garment sizes that fit each BMI group, and each registered stock-keeping-unit (SKU) can therefore be allocated to a BMI group. This allows the garments that fit one BMI group to be expressed as proportions of the total. These proportions can then be compared to the people who can wear the garments. This gap analysis allows us to see if any weight classes have more or less to choose from than is motivated by the relative size of their group.

3.5 Reliability and validity

The data collected from the stores is stock-keeping-units (SKUs). Because the units of measurement consist of observations rather than attitudes, reliability is higher. External validity is high thanks to the realistic setting and the straight-forward units of measurement. As for the body measurement data to which the garment sizes are compared, reliability and validity is high. The bodies of a sufficient number of representative individuals were measured by a medical researcher, a method that is both repeatable and relevant for the study of body shapes.

4. Results

Based on the assumption that optimal economic efficiency for companies occurs when supply mirrors demand, each weight class would face a supply of clothes that was proportionate to that class's relative size. In other words, if thin people accounted for half the population, half of the clothes in stores would fit thin people.

TABLE 2: DISTRIBUTIONS OF INDIVIDUALS AND GARMENTS OVER WEIGHT CLASSES

	Men				Women				
	% of men per class (n=524)	Distribution of men's shirts (n=1,518)	Distribution of men's jeans (n=881)	Total garments men (n=2,399)		% of women per class (n=611)	Distribution of women's shirts (n=373)	Distribution of women's jeans (n=540)	Total garments women (n=913)
BMI 1	48%	28%	52%	36%		62%	33%	53%	45%
BMI 2	41%	35%	35%	35%		26%	32%	30%	31%
BMI 3	11%	37%	12%	28%		12%	23%	15%	18%
Smaller than BMI 1		0%	1%	1%	Smaller		0%	1%	1%
Larger than BMI 3		0%	0%	0%	Larger		12%	0%	5%
Total:		100%	100%	100%	Total		100%	100%	100%

	Men and women combined			
	% of people per class (n=1,135)	Distribution of shirts (n=1,891)	Distribution of jeans (n=1,421)	Total garments (n=3,312)
BMI 1	55%	28%	53%	37%
BMI 2	33%	35%	34%	34%
BMI 3	12%	35%	13%	27%
Smaller than BMI 1		0%	1%	0%
Larger than BMI 3		2%	0%	1%
Total:		100%	100%	100%

Based on data from the Swedish National Institute of Public Health (Wadman 2007) , the Sahlgrenska Academy (Larsson 2005), and in-store data collected during 2007.

To test the statistical significance of the data a Z-test was carried out. It indicates in which categories the composition of assortments is significantly different to the composition of the populations to which they are supposed to fit.

TABLE 3: SIGNIFICANCE

		z-value	Critical z-value*	Significant	p-value
BMI 1	Men/shirts	8.331	2.58	Yes	.000
	Men/jeans	1.395	2.58	No	.163
	Men/total garments	5.073	2.58	Yes	.000
	Women/shirts	8.763	2.58	Yes	.000
	Women/jeans	3.025	2.58	Yes	.002
	Women/total garments	6.457	2.58	Yes	.000
	Men & women/shirts	14.768	2.58	Yes	.000
	Men & women/jeans	.968	2.58	No	.333
	Men & women/total garments	10.584	2.58	Yes	.000
BMI 2	Men/shirts	2.407	2.58	No	.016
	Men/jeans	2.193	2.58	No	.028
	Men/total garments	2.541	2.58	No	.011
	Women/shirts	1.955	2.58	No	.051
	Women/jeans	1.444	2.58	No	.149
	Women/total garments	2.051	2.58	No	.040
	Men & women/shirts	1.083	2.58	No	.279
	Men & women/jeans	.49	2.58	No	.624
	Men & women/total garments	.578	2.58	No	.563
BMI 3	Men/shirts	11.105	2.58	Yes	.000
	Men/jeans	.479	2.58	No	.632
	Men/total garments	8.089	2.58	Yes	.000
	Women/shirts	4.459	2.58	Yes	.000
	Women/jeans	1.405	2.58	No	.160
	Women/total garments	3.096	2.58	Yes	.002
	Men & women/shirts	13.858	2.58	Yes	.000
	Men & women/jeans	.698	2.58	No	.485
	Men & women/total garments	10.297	2.58	Yes	.000

** 99% confidence interval*

The overall finding is that overweight and obese mass market fashion consumers do not have less to choose from than thin ones. On an aggregate level on which all garments are compared to all consumer groups of both sexes, the obese group (class 3) enjoys greater choice than motivated by its relative share of the population. Normal- and underweight consumers (class 1) have significantly less to choose from than the relative size of their class motivates. There is no significant difference between the relative size of the overweight group (class 2) and the size of the assortment offered to them.

Only consumers in BMI class 1 are significantly deprived of their fair share of garments in these stores. Only consumers in BMI group 3 have significantly more to choose from than their group's relative size would motivate. All other differences between population group sizes and corresponding garment sizes are too small to be significant at the chosen level (CI 99%).

Analysis of product categories shows that the assortment of shirt sizes mirror the body sizes of the population to a lesser extent than the assortment of jeans.

Both hypotheses can be rejected. *Consumers do not have relatively less to choose from the more overweight they are. Nor are overweight and obese women deprived of choice compared to their male counterparts.* The reasons for these unexpected results are discussed in the next section.

5. Conclusions and implications

In this section I present a possible reason for why overweight and obese user imagery fails to impact assortment practices of mass market fashion retailers. I also propose an explanation of how it is possible for these companies to escape typical user imagery effects. Lastly, I speculate as to why so many people would think overweight and obese fashion consumers are deprived of choice when the opposite is true.

5.1 Mass market fashion cannot afford to turn away customers

User imagery theory suggests that fashion companies would be well served by excluding fat users in order to avoid tainting their brands with the undesired connotations of overweight. Why then are these groups favoured at the expense of the image-wise more attractive thin group? One possible reason is that excluding significant market segments would hurt companies financially. Mass market retailers are dependent on large sales at relatively low prices, so rejecting customers would defeat their business model.

To reach the maximum number of customers, conventional assortment building logic indicates that all market segments should get their fair share of SKUs, with the exception of growth segments (such as overweight and obese consumers). These can be favoured disproportionately to improve future total market share. Such business practices would explain the findings of the study. It would however leave the lack of user imagery management on the part of mass market fashion companies unexplained. Therefore, the assortment building practices of these companies leads to one of two conclusions. Either mass market fashion brands are not vulnerable to negative user imagery, or the companies in question have found a way to avoid it without rejecting customers.

5.2 Typical user imagery does not ruin mass market fashion

As described in the theoretical framework, the power of user imagery to affect brand personality relies on the consumer buying into the brand's meaning. It has to meaningful, and the consumer must be involved, otherwise the he or she will not care who else uses it. Low involvement consequently reduces the impact of typical user imagery, but even so, consumers visiting mass market fashion stores are not indifferent to the garments they choose. They want to express themselves through the clothes they wear. Perhaps consumers are less involved in a mass market fashion purchase than in a high fashion purchase, but that does not mean they do not care. Like high fashion, mass market fashion garments are used to express the identity of the bearer. Thus, it seems that mass market fashion fulfils all the prerequisites for successful user imagery management through customer rejection, but it cannot afford to act on it. It needs all the customers it can get. However, if their brands were being destroyed by overweight and obese user imagery the companies would have to act. The reason for their passiveness could be factors that prevent typical user imagery from taking form in the minds of consumers, and therefore let mass market fashion retailers have their cake and eat it.

In addition to the brand characteristics above there are some conditions surrounding how consumption takes place that relate to typical user imagery creation. For typical user imagery to come into effect, it has to be obvious what brand someone is wearing. Expensive fashion often uses logotypes that signal to the surrounding world that the wearer has paid a premium for it. Thus, the expression of personality through expensive clothes relies on other people's ability to discern what brand the consumer is wearing. For such conspicuously branded garments the effect of the typical users contributes to the public's perception of the brand. Because the brand a person in the street is wearing is within plain view it is easy for consumers to use their perception of that person to form an opinion of the brand. Mass market garments are however generally not as attributable to a specific brand. Their logos are less prominent, and do normally not invoke the corporate brand, but lesser known sub brands. The mainstream styling of mass market fashion also makes brand identification difficult. This may be a conscious strategy. After all, if no one can tell what brand a person is wearing, how could his or her personality affect the brand?

It is however not enough that we can tell what brand someone is wearing. We must also be able to form an opinion of the wearer. For this to be possible, it helps if the users of a brand resemble each other. What is more, they must be different from the average person. In other words, the more homogenous and extreme a brand's typical users are, the clearer the user imagery. This means that if a company targets a large number of consumers of different types, the typical user image gets muddled. After all, if no one can form an opinion on the personality of the typical user, how could his or her personality affect that of the brand?

The consequence of unclear typical user imagery leaves the field open for the retailers to define their brands without interference. Therefore, mass market fashion brands are created primarily through traditional marketing communications. This means that most of the information a prospective consumer gets about a mass market fashion brand is controlled by the manufacturing companies. They use attractive models that are displayed in advertising in order to create the desired brand personality. In other words, mass market fashion user imagery is shaped less by who is actually wearing the clothes (typical users) and more by who appear in the adverts (ideal users).

In conclusion, mass market fashion retailers cater to consumers of all body shapes to maximize sales. Although their product category should be susceptible to negative user imagery connected to overweight and obese user types, the issue does not pose a major problem. Because of the inconspicuousness of the brands and the heterogeneity of the users, typical user imagery never takes hold and the companies are free to sell products to consumers of all sizes and create brand personalities through traditional marketing communication.

5.3 Reasons for the misapprehension

Regardless of the actual availability of clothes in each size, slim people are more likely to have satisfactory experiences with ready-to-wear articles than people with larger bodies. This leads to a higher leisure-seeking orientation whereas heavier consumers focus more on convenience. In other words, thin people shop for pleasure, overweight by necessity (Park, Nam et al. 2009). Why? Perhaps because overweight and obese consumers feel poorly treated by the industry. There is in any case a paradox in that overweight groups have more than their fair share of choice but experience the opposite.

One reason could be that fat people suffer from discrimination in most areas of society (Roe and Eickwort 1976; Crandall 1994). Compared to thin people, they are unhappy with themselves (Rodin, Silberstein et al. 1984). This might lead to expectations of discrimination. If you are used to being treated badly, you may interpret your experiences accordingly.

The degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's body, or the body cathexis (Secord and Jourard 1953), shapes consumers' experience when shopping for clothes. Overweight people generally display poorer body cathexis than slimmer persons (Shim, Kotsiopulos et al. 1991). Therefore, even if overweight and obese consumers were to face identical circumstances as thin consumers when shopping for clothes the body aspect of their self-image would exacerbate their experience.

This could be related to the ideals of today's society. Thin is beautiful, overweight is less attractive (Wooley and Wooley 1979). The images in fashion advertising portray an ideal that is very thin, and if advertising is effective, our attitudes are formed accordingly. In other words, marketing communications is at least in part responsible for consumers' mental image of which garments are fashionable, how they are supposed to fit, and what we are supposed to look like wearing them. If this is the case, it should come as no surprise that fat consumers find it difficult to find clothes. They may actually have a lot to choose from, but if their perception of what a fashionably dressed person should look like is formed by advertising and media, they will have a hard time finding clothes that will make them fit the mould. In other words, even though there are more articles in-store that physically fit their bodies than motivated by their relative number, since fat people are so different from society's ideal, it is hard for them to find clothes that make them happy.

6. Further research

The study is based on data from four Nordic mass marketing retailers. Clothes sizes vary over geographical areas. Southern European brands normally offer smaller garments than do brands from northern Europe. It would therefore be interesting to include a mass market brand like the Spanish Zara to see if the country of origin has an impact on assortment building practices.

There may also be a fashion grade point or a price level that has to be reached in order for user imagery to come into effect as a tool that companies use to improve brand image. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence to this effect. For instance, the low brow Chavs severely hurt the Burberry brand in the UK just by adopting it (Schroeder 2006), and cool Lower Eastside kids saved the fledgling Hush Puppies brand through their association with it (Gladwell 2000, p. 4). However, quantified data is scarce to non-existent. Repeating this study with garments from medium and high fashion brands could reveal such practices which if found, could account for fat consumers' perception of discrimination.

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