



Department of communication

**#AerieREAL: Exploring the tactics of using authentic images in branding of young
women's fashion companies**

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Abstract

This thesis explores themes of authenticity in the Aerie REAL branding campaign. In it, I explore how Aerie links notions of authenticity, expressed as a vocal denunciation of photo-editing techniques, with the ideal female body. To do this, I analyze Aerie's branding materials (including social media posts on two different websites, as well as Aerie product photography) in context of its lack of photo-editing and other branding choices, including its choice of brand spokesperson. I consider these materials within a semiotic framework developed from the French school of semiotics, and analyze them both through this framework and a content analysis. I also consider concepts of Aerie's brand personality. In this study I illuminate many of the tensions between Aerie's explicit goals in its REAL campaign and what it has presented within the campaign. This has implications for future representations of women in advertising, as well as the use of authenticity as a brand position.

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Table of Contents

<i>Chapter One: Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Chapter Two: Literature Review</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology</i>	<i>40</i>
<i>Chapter Four: Results and Analysis</i>	<i>47</i>
<i>Chapter Five: Conclusion</i>	<i>90</i>

Chapter One: Introduction

This study explores the themes Aerie uses in its corporate branding. It links notions of “authenticity” and the ideal female body in its advertisements and other branding materials. This research will make contributions to the field of literature on brand positioning as the use of “authenticity” as a positioning strategy becomes more prominent. To situate this case study, I have used concepts of branding and the representation of the female body to make sense of my data. This research will also have implications in the field of feminist theory. While photo editing and its effects on the presentation of women in media have been extensively studied, the opposite side of the this has not. The implications of *not* editing images of women must be addressed, and this study opens up avenues for more extensive investigation into the subject.

As the manufacturing of actual physical products has moved from factories in developed nations to sweatshops and factories in developing nations, branding and brand image have become the new products of companies in developed nations (Klein, 1999). This shift is especially apparent in industries of “fast fashion,” a term used to describe clothing retailers that order fewer clothing pieces more often and sell them for very low prices (see Hines & Bruce, 2007). In support of this new brand-as-product, companies have begun branding their imagery as life-styles rather than as mere products (Klein, 1999). While there has been some consumer backlash against these all-encompassing life-style brands (see Klein, 1999, for examples), with the rise of social media and the 24/7 online world, brands have come to represent and provide foundations for consumer identities (Benritter et al., 2017). In this constantly evolving branding and marketing context, understanding the techniques and strategies that companies use to achieve these all-encompassing brands and brand images is vital. Authenticity is one avenue for brands to define themselves.

The Aerie REAL campaign (hereafter referred to as the REAL campaign) is a

comprehensive branding strategy used by the women's apparel company Aerie (owned by popular teen retailer American Eagle Outfitters) to sell its products. This strategy consists of Aerie's public denunciation of photo editing and refusal to use photo manipulation techniques on any of its models. Throughout its branding materials, and even in the name of the campaign itself, the company refers to "real" women, effectively women unaltered by photo editing techniques. The women targeted by this campaign are consumers of the clothing; not those who produce it in factories. The images used in the campaign are those of Western (or Western-ized) models, rather than images representing the producers of the clothing. It is a campaign that is somewhat disconnected from the origin and production of the garments, and focused on the women wearing them and their comfort.

The company emphasizes the use of these "real" women in its advertisements and product photos; although it also sells men's clothing and uses the same strategies in its branding towards male customers, this study will focus on the campaign directed at female consumers for reasons outlined below. While the REAL campaign began as a mere advertising campaign, according to Aerie's parent company, the concept has "grown" beyond its original limited scope (AEO, 2016a). The "brand DNA" has, according to the company, become "deeply rooted in [the] #AerieREAL campaign" (AEO, 2016b, p. 3). I have chosen to limit the object of inquiry to one brand owned by a single company. I have chosen to limit this study in this way because Aerie uses the concept of 'authenticity' as an overarching branding strategy for its entire line of products and corporate image, rather than in one single advertising campaign or product line. This situation provides an excellent opportunity for a full and comprehensive case study on Aerie's use of authenticity in its brand development, and how this impacts the brand's presentation of the 'ideal' body.

Overall, this study is based in the tradition of liberal feminism, specifically active feminist research, as discussed by Olesen (2000). While liberal feminism is concerned primarily with concrete legal and occupational injustices towards women, its recognition of the individual is useful in this research (Tong, 1997). In addition, liberal feminism is often concerned with the portrayal of women in media and advertising, and so fits well with this subject matter (Tong, 1997). Situating my study in this tradition by considering the individual model or person presented in each photograph has allowed me to conduct a study founded on the idea that the research is “*for* women” rather than merely “*about* women” (Olesen, 2000, p. 236). This will allow me to explore the themes of Aerie’s campaign in consideration of both the women featured in the campaign and women who view the campaign. In addition, I make use of professional branding and positioning theory throughout this study, in order to consider the advertisements and Aerie’s branding strategy in consideration of industry realities and best practices.

The central research question of this study is twofold. First, I ask:

- What are the themes that characterize both the original Aerie REAL campaign, and Aerie’s subsequent branding strategy?

The secondary research question I address is:

- How does the company, through its REAL campaign and social media posts, link the above themes to notions of authenticity and the ideal body?

The first stage of this study involves the selection of images from the Aerie brand. I have selected these images from those posted on Aerie’s website (as product photos), and from its Facebook and Instagram accounts. My full inclusion criteria are listed in the methodology chapter, but included requirements such as “the image must feature a model” and “the image must be marked as #aerieREAL”. I narrowed my final dataset to 353 images from all three

sources, because the examination of multiple documents from multiple sources is imperative to exploring a full picture of the Aerie brand as it is presented across various platforms (Creswell, 2014).

I analyze these images through a semiotic content analysis to explore the use of ‘authenticity’, as well as who was presented as the ideal and how this was signified; in essence, I examine the semantics of the Aerie images (Leiss et al., 1990; Noth, 2011). I use the combined semiotics-content analysis approach to analyzing advertisements as suggested by Leiss et al. in their 1990 book *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, products, and images of well-being* because of their argument that a semiotic approach can alleviate weakness of a content analysis, and vice versa (Leiss et al., 1990). This approach is discussed in depth in the methodology chapter below.

Throughout my analysis of the data, I kept a record of themes and categories (both objective, including aspects such as the size of the photo and what text is included with it, and subjective, including aspects such as how many models are included, their races, their positions, etc.) for coding of the information (Gibbs, 2007; Bock et al., 2011). I then conducted a semiotic analysis of what the data signifies about Aerie as a brand, and the message that it is conveying to consumers through its advertisements and branding materials.

The next chapter of this thesis will address the existing literature on the subject as well as the theoretical framework I have used for this study. I will examine the concepts of authenticity, branding, positioning, body image research, and body image research as applied to advertising practices. I will then discuss my use of active feminist research as the guiding theoretical base for this study, in addition to the rationale for my research and its importance in the field. Finally, this chapter will set out my guiding research questions.

The third chapter of this thesis consists of a discussion of my research strategy, design, and methodology. In this chapter I discuss in detail my use of the semiotic-content analysis mixed design, as well as situate my work within the broader context of qualitative research. I also discuss my sampling and data selection procedures, including my detailed inclusion criteria.

In my fourth chapter, I present the results of my data collection, as well as the detailed results of my analysis of the data. This chapter discusses my research questions in light of the gathered data and resultant analysis, and will set out answers for them.

My fifth chapter concludes this thesis, and provides a brief summary of my findings, and a discussion on their applications to advertising and branding practices (as well as women's potential body image issues). In addition, this chapter will outline the limitations of this study, and I will provide suggestions for improving future research in this area. Finally, I will list my bibliography and citations for this thesis.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

I first address “authenticity” as it is used throughout this study, describing several varied definitions of the concept and outlining the specific way that the term is defined in this study. I will address branding and the literature on the representation of women’s bodies in advertisements, which is vital to understand the concepts underpinning branding techniques as a whole before addressing their potential effects on the representation of women’s bodies. Finally, I discuss my use of active feminist and liberal feminist theory in this of my study. This discussion provides a detailed review of the relevant theoretical concepts that frame this study.

Review of Relevant Literature

Authenticity

“Authenticity” is a concept that can be defined in a number of ways in terms of its use in scholarly inquiry, depending on the specific field and subject of study. Definitions of authenticity include those based on product manufacturing (for example, a product being manufactured in the same country it is sold), commitment to tradition (for example, accompany selling the same product for a hundred or more years, or a company owned by the same family for a length of time), and the perceptions of consumers. In their study on Australian brewing industry advertising, Beverland et al. (2008) found that consumers typically respond to three types of authenticity in advertising: pure or literal authenticity, approximate authenticity, and moral authenticity. According to the authors, pure authenticity involves a “guarantee of the genuine article” (Beverland et al., 2008, p. 8). In other words, pure authenticity is indicated in advertising by acknowledging the unbroken commitment of a brand to the manufacturing process of its products. While this definition makes sense for their study of the beer brewing industry, it does not apply well to Aerie, which does not create advertising based on the location of manufacturing of its products.

Beverland et al. (2008) define their second type of authenticity in advertising, approximate authenticity, as a brand whose advertising seeks to remind consumers of tradition, as in pure authenticity; the difference is that “absolute fealty to the past [is] not necessary” (Beverland et al., 2008, p. 9). Again, this definition is not easily applied to Aerie, which does not advertise based on its history or tradition. Finally, Beverland et al. (2008) identify the use of moral authenticity in advertising, or advertising that “[emphasizes] the essential human component” of the manufacturing process, rather than purely focusing on history and tradition (Beverland et al., 2008, p. 12). According to the authors, this moral authenticity, when used in advertising, leads consumers to identify with products they believe will provide them with self-authentication (Beverland et al., 2008). This definition of authenticity is more applicable to the #AerieREAL campaign than the others discussed by Beverland et al. (2008), as the REAL campaign certainly focuses on the moral judgments of viewers. However, this definition still focuses on the manufacturing process, rather than on the advertising process.

Another definition for authenticity that is more suited for this case study is that of authenticity as a state perceived by the viewer (Mullada, 2010). Authenticity can be defined by an object’s perceived value, and the positive attributes that viewers assign to it (Trilling, 1997). While this definition of authenticity as perception certainly informs this case study, a more concrete definition is required to actually analyze the brand.

Therefore, in this study, “authenticity” will be defined as the active and vocal denunciation of photo editing techniques by companies, as well as the use of the “real woman” concept to explain this denunciation. While this does limit the focus of study to brand images and statements, it will provide a means to concretely explore the use of authenticity across Aerie’s product photography, advertisements, and social media posts, which gives a very full

picture of the brand.

Branding and Advertising

Academic and professional literature on marketing and branding practices is extensive. For the purposes of this study, I have focused on branding and brand positioning to address Aerie's branding strategy as a whole, and its advertisements in context of this strategy, rather than advertisements in isolation.

A brand is a wide ranging concept that includes many elements, both physical (generally speaking, the product itself) and psychological (again speaking generally, how people think about the product) (see Hatch, 2012; Kohli et. al, 2015; Murphy, 1988; Randazzo, 1995; Ries & Trout, 1986). However, there is some disagreement in the academic literature on what exactly comprises the physical and psychological elements of branding. According to John Murphy, one of the earlier branding theorists, a brand includes a company's products, its packaging, the names of the company and products, and the advertising and promotional material associated with it (Murphy, 1988). A brand also contains "aesthetic, rational, and emotional elements," in addition to these physical aspects (Murphy, 1988, p. 4). However, companies must also predict what potential customers will consume, as "branding consists of thinking ahead of the consumers, or anticipating and sharing their needs and wants" (Murphy, 1988, p. 6). When a company is branding a product, it must consider the consumer because ultimately, it is the consumer who chooses to engage with the brand and buy its products (Murphy, 1988).

However, this concept of a brand does not acknowledge the potential of producers of goods to influence consumer purchasing decisions, rather than retailers of the goods (Murphy, 1988). This aspect of branding is irrelevant in terms of this study, as Aerie is a retailer and producer of goods – its products are not sold anywhere other than Aerie/American Eagle stores and the Aerie website. Overall, Murphy's focus on retailers is somewhat outdated in the era of

online shopping direct from producers, and should be combined with other theories (addressed below) to update this weakness. This is especially relevant considering the ability of social media (which was not a concept in 1988 when Murphy was writing), which allows the producers of goods to connect directly with consumers.

In 2012, Fetscherin and Usunier published a literature review of the academic writing on corporate branding, focused on its evolution over time. They found that corporate branding as a systematic practice began in the 1970s with managerial efforts, and that a concern for corporate reputation specifically evolved throughout the early 1990s (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012). Throughout the 1990s, literature on branding began to focus on corporate identity, and that the 20th century brought with it a focus on “the consistency between corporate image and company policies and actions” (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012, p. 740). The importance of consistency, both in general for the brand and specifically in terms of image and actions is touched on by a number of authors on the subject of branding (see also Hatch, 2012; Murphy, 1988; Randazzo, 1995). Due to the expansion of avenues in which a corporation can promote and develop its brand with the rise of social media and the internet (Kohli et. al, 2015), brand consistency across all channels is key. Aerie demonstrates this concept in the consistency of its messaging across its social media channels; there is no one channel that allows photo editing, and all of its accounts denounce editing equally in their written messaging.

Cognitive dissonance is an important factor, even considering brand consistency. In this specific context, cognitive dissonance refers to a brand’s identity being inconsistent with the ways in which its targeted consumers see themselves (Randazzo, 1995). Consumers will either accept the dissonance and change the way they see themselves, or outright reject the brand entirely (Randazzo, 1995). This tension is particularly important in the context of this study;

brand personality (as a general concept of the personality perceived to ‘fit’ within a brand’s products; I discuss a specific framework of brand personality in a following section) is especially important in sectors where consumers are more involved in their purchases – and fashion purchases are particularly involved (Randazzo, 1995). Given that Aerie is a fashion retailer, its brand personality relating to its consumers’ images of themselves then becomes particularly important, and it will be seen whether ‘authenticity’ is a viable avenue to achieve this relationship.

While this research will focus on Aerie’s presentation of female models, the company does also sell to men. At the time of writing, Aerie also does not use photo editing on its male models; however, this fact is much less advertised than its lack of photo editing on female models. The lack of editing images of male models also began later than female models; Aerie only stopped editing images of its male models in late 2016, while the REAL campaign began in 2014 (Schlossberg, 2016). However, this announcement only came after Aerie was embroiled in a controversy regarding its #AerieMan April Fool’s joke (Schlossberg, 2016), which provides an example of cognitive dissonance both within its brand and between its brand and consumers.

This joke campaign consisted of a video posted by Aerie on April 1, 2016, in which male models with non-traditional “model” body types (i.e. no visible muscles and a greater visible body fat percentage than typical male models in underwear campaigns) wore Aerie products. This video included the words “the real you is sexy”, and featured four men with non-traditional model body types as they produced the campaign for Aerie. The joke campaign was introduced by the official Aerie REAL spokesperson Iskra Lawrence, which served to legitimize the message. However, soon after the publication of the video, Aerie announced that it was an April Fool’s Day joke campaign (Schlossberg, 2016). This campaign certainly does not exemplify

consistent brand identity; non-traditional male models are seen as a joke by Aerie, yet non-traditional female models are to be celebrated for improving the body image of women and girls.

In fact, when this campaign was revealed to be a joke, there were reports that the male models featured were not aware that the campaign was not real; Kelvin Davis, one of the featured models, stated in an interview with a BuzzFeed reporter: “my part and contribution to the project was 100% authentic and real... I had nothing to do with the way it was marketed” (Gerstein, 2016). This joke campaign is a perfect example of cognitive dissonance, both within Aerie’s brand identity and in terms of its consumers. Consumers needed to either reconcile Aerie’s disparate treatment of male and female models (and, by extension, male and female body issues and insecurities) with their own ideals and identity or reject the brand entirely. While it is impossible to determine the exact impact of this joke campaign on the brand’s profits, American Eagle Outfitters Co. as a whole saw 3% increase in profits in fiscal year 2016, compared to 7% increase in fiscal year 2015 (American Eagle Outfitters Co., 2017).

Sal Randazzo discusses several useful concepts in his 1995 book, *Mythmaking on Madison Avenue: How Advertisers Apply the Power of Myth and Symbolism to Create Leadership Brands*. His contributions in the area of brand positioning are discussed in detail in the section below; in the following paragraphs, I will discuss his theories on branding itself. Throughout the book, Randazzo discusses the ways companies use mythology and archetypes in branding and the ways that advertisements create symbolic worlds for consumers (Randazzo, 1995). Randazzo’s concept of a brand is that it is what he refers to as a perceptual entity combining both physical aspects of the brand and mental aspects (Randazzo, 1995).

A company can only become a successful brand if it considers its consumers in every decision it makes. This is a common theme in branding research; most authors acknowledge the

importance of either consumer research or deep consideration of consumer values and desires (Hatch, 2012; Kohli et. al, 2015; Murphy, 1988; Randazzo, 1995). In addition to this, Randazzo places a great deal of importance on what is essentially consumer research. Companies should glean potential brand mythologies and communication objectives from their consumers; to gather their thoughts about products or even about themselves as consumers (Randazzo, 1995).

Brands achieve their personalities through the use of mythologies (Randazzo, 1995). There are three levels of brand mythologies: low, which consists of engaging, entertaining, and involving the consumer; mid, which involves “communicating product attributes and benefits” to the consumer, and high, which “provides a sense of identity [to the consumer] by reinforcing and reflecting the consumer’s values and sensibilities” (Randazzo, 1995, p. 123). Each advertisement a brand releases is part of this greater brand mythology, and thus brands must be consistent in their advertisements and other branding materials (Randazzo, 1995).

There are a number of more recent authors who assume that consumers do not buy products on “strictly rational grounds” (Hatch, 2012, 885). This is a useful assumption for this study, as I am exploring the use of non-rational concepts in branding strategies. In her article, Hatch acknowledges the importance of consumer-brand interactions, and consumers’ input in branding decisions, as an extremely important factor (Hatch, 2012). Her most relevant finding in terms of this study is her concept of ‘co-creation’; that successful brands are those which involve all of their stakeholders in the creative process, and that brands must be ‘beautiful’ to be profitable (Hatch, 2012). Aerie posts composite photographs of its customers fairly often, particularly on its Facebook account; in the early stages of the REAL campaign, many of the text-based images the company posted were quotes from customers.

Given this study’s focus on Aerie’s posts on Facebook and Instagram as well as its

product photos, addressing the literature on branding and social media is necessary. Kohli et al. discuss the potential effects of social media on branding activities and brand success in their 2015 article “Will social media kill branding?”. Social media will likely have a “limited impact” on brand differentiation in terms of positioning (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 38). However, it can have a large impact on the emotional connections consumers form with brands due to the lack of corporate control inherent on social media (in terms of consumer reactions and comments – companies can only delete unwanted comments so quickly) (Kohli et al., 2015). With increased use of social media brands, smaller ones especially, now need less effort for market acknowledgment (Kohli et al., 2015). While American Eagle Outfitters is a large brand, this finding is significant in that Aerie is not one of the top lingerie brands in North America or worldwide (Victoria’s Secret holds 61.8% of the total lingerie market) (Schlossberg, 2016).

In addition to the above influences on market position, social media allows consumers to talk about brands and create their own brand narratives (Kohli et al., 2015). This can result in brand awareness that “spreads much more virally through social media than traditional media” (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 38). This has an important impact on brand reputation that should not be ignored in a study that addresses how a specific brand positions themselves using a new concept, such as this one. Overall, however, the most significant finding from Kohli et al.’s study is that “branding will become more transparent, and reliance on physical attributes will decrease...[and] there will be a shift toward creating niche brands targeted at smaller segments” (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 39-40). Aerie is exemplary in this regard; it focuses on the way that its models are presented rather than the physical attributes of its product (as shown through my analysis below), and it is a niche brand under the umbrella of a larger retailer which does not necessarily follow the same brand ethos of themselves. While American Eagle does not tend to photoshop

imperfections such as stretch marks from its models, it does tend to use more traditional models, both in terms of weight and facial features, than Aerie does.

It is clear that when analyzing a company's branding strategy, there are many aspects to consider. Physical product branding and psychological aspects of a brand are important to consumers and must be equally considered, especially as producers of goods become retailers of their own goods in non-physical spaces (online shop fronts). With many different ways to connect with brands, including non-traditional advertising and close connections between brands and consumers on social media, brand consistency continues to be important and opportunities for cognitive dissonance to become an issue for brands are exacerbated.

Brand Positioning

There are two aspects included in brand positioning: what the brand represents in the physical market (for Randazzo, this is literal shelves in stores, but can in this context also apply to the products in online shops), and what the brand represents psychologically in the mind of the consumer (Randazzo, 1995). The position of the brand and its products in the physical market is based on physical features of the brand's products, including the usefulness, technological specifications, and overall packaging and physical product form in comparison to competing brands and products (Randazzo, 1995; Ries & Trout, 1986). However, in terms of this study, the position of the brand in the consumer's mind is more relevant.

The psychological position of a brand does include the physical position in the marketplace, but also involves aspects such as the brand mythology (stories told by the brand about itself and its products) and the feelings that consumers develop about the brand and its products (Randazzo, 1995). There is a general consensus among authors that positioning a company correctly – whether in the market or in the mind of the customer – is paramount to the success of a company (Randazzo, 1995; Ries & Trout, 1986; Leiss et. al, 1990). There are a

number of different views on what the correct position actually entails and how it is best achieved, which are outlined in the following paragraphs.

According to Al Ries and Jack Trout's 1986 book *Positioning: The battle for your mind*, the correct position is the singular most important aspect of a company's success, as sales, products, and advertising in isolation are not enough for the market (Ries & Trout, 1986). Positioning "transcends every aspect of a company" (Ries & Trout, 1986, p. 171), and the first brand or product that occupies a specific position receives long term success in terms of market share (Ries & Trout, 1986). For an example, they show how Xerox was first to the market with copying technology, and so became synonymous with paper copying techniques, while IBM floundered with a similar product due to its late entrance into the market (Ries & Trout, 1986). Aerie, while certainly not the only brand to not use photo editing techniques, was one of the first large companies to actively denounce the use of photo editing (Dove started focusing on consumer's unedited beauty earlier, but is in a different market sector as a company focusing on beauty and cleansing products).

In this concept of positioning, 'new' is everything. In addition to the authors' discussion on being first into a specific position, they suggest that a brand struggling to find a satisfactory market position adopt new technology as quickly as possible, or change its name for the illusion of newness, or emphasize the newness of its products (Ries & Trout, 1986). While it is possible for latecomers and second-best products to be successful in terms of sales and advertising, this success is reliant on finding the correct position in the market, which is in turn reliant on finding the place in the market that no other product or company has yet sought to occupy (Ries & Trout, 1986).

One of the authors' most extensive arguments throughout the book is that acting like

one's competitors is not useful and will not result in success, whether in finding a market position to occupy or in general for a company (Ries & Trout, 1986). However, one company may reposition another company's products in order to create a psychological position for their own, though there are some debates about the ethical ramifications of this practice in the professional field (Ries & Trout, 1986). In this vein, Aerie does not specifically name other clothing companies that do use photo editing on its models; it focuses on its own lack of it instead. In addition, the authors spend a great deal of time on the ways that a product or company's name affects its positioning, both in the market and psychologically (Ries & Trout, 1986). While this line of thinking is interesting and valid to the field, it is irrelevant to this study and thus will not be addressed.

However, one of the most significant contributions of Ries and Trout is their statement that "the solution to a positioning problem is usually found in the prospect's mind, not in the product" (Ries & Trout, 1986, p. 152). This early recognition of the importance of psychological positioning sets the stage for subsequent work on the subject by other authors and provide a good foundation for the field. It is also extremely relevant to Aerie, the subject of this study, which (as discussed further below) found a position by changing its image in the minds of its consumers; the brand's product remained exactly the same throughout its branding overall and subsequent strategy.

In his 1995 book, Sal Randazzo delves deeper into the psychological aspects of brand positioning, including the concepts of latent product mythology and perceptual inventories in relation to brands (Randazzo, 1995). The perceptual inventory is comprised of the psychological aspects consumers draw from brands and products; essentially, the symbols, feelings, and images they associate with the brands and products (Randazzo, 1995). The perceptual inventory is

“dynamic and malleable”, as it exists in psychological space rather than physical space (Randazzo, 1995, p. 8).

The latent product mythology is a concept of a certain product pre-existing in the consumer’s mind that is formed from prior beliefs, pre-conceptions, and experiences of similar products (Randazzo, 1995). It is heavily influenced by the perceptual inventories of these brands and products discussed above. It is important to note that while this latent product mythology has a significant impact on the consumer’s perceptions of the new product or brand, the consumer is unaware of it (Randazzo, 1995). The only time the latent product mythology is irrelevant is when a product is entirely new; in this case, there is no latent mythology to effect the consumer’s perceptions of the new product (Randazzo, 1995).

These elements combine to form the brand mythology; Randazzo defines this as “what the brand stands for in people’s minds” (Randazzo, 1995, p. 8). Essentially, this brand mythology is the result of the perceptual inventory of a brand colliding with the latent product mythology of its products (Randazzo, 1995). This brand mythology is conveyed to the consumer through advertising, which “uses fictitious elements to engage and entertain the consumer... communicating the brand’s attributes and benefits... perceptually positioning the brand in the consumer’s mind” (Randazzo, 1995, p. 10).

Randazzo uses the term ‘market position’ differently than most other authors, who use it to refer to the physical position of a brand’s products in the store. For Randazzo, a brand’s market position is its position relative to competing brands in the consumer’s mind (Randazzo, 1995). This is, of course, particularly relevant when considering brands like Aerie that rely heavily on web sales direct to consumers. The market position plays a strong role in positioning products that fall within an existing product category; according to Randazzo, a company must

decide whether to compete with existing product and brand positioning, or whether to create an entirely new position (Randazzo, 1995).

Brand positioning includes both physical positioning and psychological positioning. These positions are relative to other brands selling the same products. While Aerie does have physical stores, it relies primarily on psychological positioning to set itself apart from other companies. Throughout my analysis of Aerie's REAL branding materials, I will show that Aerie addressed the positioning issue by creating a new position for its products and especially its brand as a whole using the concept of authenticity.

Brand Equity

Brand equity is the value provided by a product or service (Aaker, 1991). According to Aaker's classic model of brand equity, there are five categories of assets and liabilities that are linked to a brand, its name and its symbol or logo, which are brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality (of a product or service), brand associations, and other brand assets (Aaker, 1991). Together, these assets and liabilities make up the brand's equity, or the value of the product or service. Brands can have negative or positive brand equity, depending on the interactions of these factors. It is important to note that these categories consider value both in terms of the consumer and the brand or firm (Aaker, 1991).

Brand loyalty refers to how loyal consumers are to a specific brand, which can help to lower marketing costs as it increases; brand awareness is how well known a brand is amongst the public (Aaker, 1991). Brand quality refers to the products or services a brand offers and how the quality of these offerings are perceived by consumers; brand associations refers to the associations triggered by mention of the brand (Aaker, 1991). The other brand assets referred to by Aaker include things like patents, partnerships with other brands and significant people, and

intellectual property that a brand possesses – with an increase in these assets, a brand increases its competitive advantage over other brands in the same field (Aaker, 1991). Brands that make use of these elements can influence consumer perceptions on brand trustworthiness, as well as the quality of the brand experience and the loyalty to the brand (which is in itself one of the categories of brand equity). Positive brand equity means that brands can reduce promotional and marketing efforts while maintaining positive brand impressions. Establishing positive brand equity will also act as a means to prevent consumers from switching their loyalty to another brand (Aaker, 1991).

For Aaker, building brand equity involves building a brand identity. The components of a brand's identity are the brand as product, brand as organization, brand as person, and brand as symbol (Aaker, 1991). The brand as product includes the product scope, attributes, value and quality, as well as considerations about product users and their origins; the brand as organization includes the brand's activities globally and locally. The brand as symbol includes the imagery associated with the brand; its logos, advertising, metaphorical symbols, and the brand's history and heritage (Aaker, 1991). Finally, the brand as person consists of the brand's personality (as discussed further below) and its interactions with consumers. In the case of Aerie, the brand as person is an incredibly important aspect of its brand identity; brand representatives, including models, spokespeople, and employees, interact with consumers regularly. Brand accounts on social media also regularly interact with consumers, removing the human aspect and allowing the brand itself to develop a personality.

Brand Personality

Brand personality is a concept that associates human characteristics with brands. A brand's personality is important to consumers; it “tends to serve a symbolic or self-expressive

function” (Aaker, 1997, p. 347), as consumers relate the characteristics they perceive in a brand to characteristics they perceive in themselves. A brand’s personality traits are formed as consumers interact with a brand in some way, whether that be in physical stores, through advertisements, or online on social media websites (Aaker, 1997). Brand personality also includes demographic traits, which come about through association with the perceived consumers of the brand as well as its presented imagery (Aaker, 1997). In this sense, Aerie would be considered younger than many other lingerie brands (for example, La Vie en Rose), but perhaps older than others (such as PINK, Victoria Secret’s teen retailer) due to the ages of its models and the collegiate focus of much of its products.

Aaker gives five primary facets of brand personalities in her 1997 work. Two of these facets are extremely relevant in terms of Aerie’s branding. These are sincerity (associated with being down-to-earth, wholesome, cheerful, and honest) and excitement (daring, spirited, imaginative, and up-to-date) (Aaker, 1997, p. 352). The other three facets identified are less relevant, but are competence (reliable, intelligent, and successful), sophistication (upper-class and charming), and ruggedness (outdoorsy and tough) (Aaker, 1997, p. 352). Aerie tends to associate itself especially with people who embody the excitement facet of brand personality; it certainly emphasizes the uniqueness of women, as well as daring and spirited model choices, and trendiness and coolness in its customers. The sincerity facet is also important in Aerie’s branding. The company is not necessarily focused on tapping into a family-oriented, small town feeling as discussed by Aaker, but it does focus on accessible, down-to-earth imagery and models. Of course, the entire Aerie REAL campaign is built around the idea of realness and honesty, another trait associated with sincerity.

A brand’s personality traits are influenced both by the actions of the company itself, the

company's products and spaces (including stores, websites, and social media presence) and by direct or indirect contact with the people associated with the brand (Aaker, 1997). Aerie influences perceptions of its brand personality extensively on its social media accounts in particular, as it is incredibly active on social media platforms. The company also makes a real effort to connect consumers with models. This allows influence on the brand's personality to a great degree by the perceived traits of Aerie models, particularly Iskra Lawrence, whose relationship with Aerie is discussed in detail in the analysis section of this paper.

Representation of Women's Bodies

The use of real women in fashion advertising has been studied extensively as more fashion brands run campaigns based on this type of advertising. However, conclusions of the literature are mixed, with some studies finding that overweight women are viewed more favourably in advertisements, some finding that thin women in advertisements result in more favourable perceptions, and some finding that the weight of the women in advertisements makes no difference to the effectiveness of the advertisement. There are also studies that address other aspects of realness of the models portrayed and their effectiveness in promoting favourable consumer perceptions on brands. Ten such studies are addressed throughout this section to provide a relevant cross section of the current state of the literature. These range from studies addressing the physiological differences in reactions between edited and unedited women's bodies to self-reported levels of identification with various types of women. The studies show mixed results, but do indicate that women identify more closely with images of women in advertisements who resemble themselves. This body of research tends towards the suggestion that seeing oneself represented in the media one consumes is important, and a powerful factor in influencing consumer perceptions on advertising, as discussed below.

Using photo editing techniques on women's bodies in advertisements is one way that

women are not represented as authentic in advertisements, and will be my primary aspect of focus in this study. One study used eye-tracking technology to determine how the inclusion of disclaimers of edited images affected the way that women looked at advertisements (Bury et al., 2014), and found that disclaimers that indicated which specific body parts had been edited tended to direct women's gazes towards those body parts (Bury et al., 2014). Another study compared two fashion companies, one that used unedited women in its advertisements and one which heavily edited women's bodies in its advertisements. The study presented the results of several group interviews with women, and found that generally they preferred the images of unedited women (Ruggerone, 2006). The women interviewed saw the edited images as catering to the male viewers of advertisements rather than the female viewers, which impacted their perceptions of the brand negatively (Ruggerone, 2006). These results illustrate both that editing changes the way women view images, and that these editing techniques can result in negative brand impressions.

The age of models is another way that brands can present real women in their advertisements, and is certainly a technique that brands use to market themselves to their preferred demographics. Kozar & Damhorst (2008) conducted a study of 163 women between the ages of 60 and 80 in which they presented the women with images of a number of fashion models. The women rated models who looked older as more attractive, and indicated that they would be more willing to buy the clothing featured in the photographs of the older models (Kozar & Damhorst, 2008). Similarly, women between the ages of 30-59 rated models that appeared close to their own age as more attractive and found the clothing they wore more fashionable than that of younger models (Kozar, 2010). Again, the younger group of women indicated that they would be more likely to buy the clothing in advertisements featuring women

close to their own ages (Kozar, 2010). These studies show that individual women do identify more closely with women who resemble them, and that this identification can favourably impact their perceptions of specific products. This has implications for Aerie; consumers can recognize themselves and their own perceived flaws in the unedited photographs of models in Aerie branding materials.

Alternatively, general attractiveness can also influence consumer perceptions of products. Bower & Landreth (2001) examined the relationship between the use of highly attractive models and normally attractive models and consumer perceptions of several different products. While highly attractive models were more effective in developing favourable consumer perceptions of products that are designed to enhance the consumer's attractiveness, normally attractive models are more effective for products that are designed to solve the consumer's problems (Bower & Landreth, 2001). Of course, Aerie's products are clothing and undergarments, and thus designed to enhance the consumer's attractiveness rather than solve their problems.

Another potential use of authenticity in advertisements is that of gender identity. Feiereisen et al. (2009) studied the connection between the consumer perception of a brand's gender identity (i.e. of Yves Saint Laurent's Opium perfume as a more masculine female perfume, due to its strong scent) and the effectiveness of an advertisement of the brand in question. The study found that advertisements are more likely to be effective when they are congruent with a consumer's gender identity (Feiereisen et al., 2009). However, the same study found that cultural perceptions of gender also significantly impacted an advertisement's effectiveness (Feiereisen et al., 2009). These results, again, highlight the importance of individuals' specific perceptions and frame of reference for analyzing brands and branding techniques.

Another way that many companies, including Dove, Aerie, and other fashion companies, have used real women in advertisements is in terms of weight. Aagerup (2011) conducted a survey of 640 female respondents assessing their perceptions towards thin, overweight, and obese models. While the respondents tended to identify with models close to their own weight, using thinner models was more likely to result in favourable opinions towards the competence of the brands featured in the photographs in question (Aagerup, 2011). However, these favourable opinions did not extend to other aspects of respondents' brand perceptions (Aagerup, 2011). Similarly, Halliwell & Dittmar (2004) conducted a comparative analysis of alternative and traditional advertisements and found that advertisements featuring very thin women were not more effective than those featuring average (UK size 14, US size 12) women. However, exposure to images of very thin women can potentially cause body-related anxiety for female consumers (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004). These studies show that perceptions are formed in complicated ways and results are mixed.

There is some evidence for stronger correlations between the use of thin women in branding and positive perceptions of brands. D'Alessandro & Chitty (2011) found that very thin models used to endorse brands resulted in more favourable consumer perceptions of those brands. Even when using more realistic body types for endorsement, medium-thin bodies rated higher than medium-fat bodies (D'Alessandro & Chitty, 2011). The study also explored the relationship between the ethnic background of models and respondents, but found no significant correlations in terms of favourable or unfavourable brand perceptions (D'Alessandro & Chitty, 2011).

While the benefits of using real women as opposed to thin models may be unclear, it is evident that consumer perceptions of brands are easily impacted in terms of their attitudes

towards weight and body type. A case study of American Apparel (Weed & Davis, 2013) illustrated this in relation to the brand, a clothing retailer notorious for its controversial advertisements, after its ‘XLent’ modelling contest resulted in negative reactions towards the company. In this contest, the brand released a call letter for consumers to submit photographs of themselves in the brand’s new extra-large size clothing (Weed & Davis, 2013). However, the language used in the call letter was considered highly offensive towards the overweight women who were its target, and the eventual winner of the contest was a woman who submitted photographs of herself eating unhealthy foods to make fun of the brand (Weed & Davis, 2013). Clearly, using overweight models in a way that is perceived as mocking will not result in favourable consumer perceptions of a brand (Weed & Davis, 2013). In fact, American Apparel filed for bankruptcy in 2017 and was purchased by a Canadian wholesale company, Gildan, in the same year (Lam, 2017). While there were a number of factors contributing to American Apparel’s bankruptcy and sale, its sexualized advertising featuring young women is often cited as a major one (Lam, 2017).

Clearly, the literature is divided on whether authentic images of women have a positive or negative effect on consumer perceptions of brands that use them. However, it does show that the use of authentic images (however “authentic” is defined in the context of the specific study) does have some influence on consumer perceptions of the brand. And the importance of seeing oneself represented in media and advertising is certainly a consideration. Many of the above studies make reference to women having more favourable perceptions of brands that use women close to their own age, weight, or attractiveness. Gerbner and Gross’ classic 1976 article *Living With Television: The Violence Profile* introduces the concept of “symbolic annihilation”, which refers to the idea that a lack of representation leads to the feeling of unimportance in society; as

if the viewer is not important enough to (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 182). In contrast, being represented in a piece of media is a sort of validation of oneself; “representation in the fictional world signifies social existence” (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 182).

However, it is important to note that the previous articles primarily deal with the effects of the way women are portrayed in advertisements, which although a valuable consideration for this research, is not the primary focus of this study. Some review of previous semiotic analysis on advertisements generally, and on the portrayal of women’s bodies in advertising specifically, is necessary.

Barthes’ semiotic analysis of advertisements is discussed in depth in the Conceptual Framework section below. A brief review of several other studies that use a semiotic approach to analyze advertising follows here. In their 2011 paper, Najafian and Azzizolah use semiotics analysis to explore the ways that advertisements use visual cues to connect with ideological concepts. They analyze two images and explore the ways in which signs like colour, textual keys, and intertextual references connect with various ideological concepts that strengthen the messages of the advertisements in question (Najafian & Azzizolah, 2011). They find that the use of certain models and colours strengthen the connections between the product being advertised and the concepts of beauty or strength; the signs used in the advertisements act as “carriers of ideological meanings” (Najafian & Azzizolah, 2011, p. 24). Semiotic analysis allows for the exploration of how certain signs connect with and reference certain ideological meanings.

Much of the literature that uses semiotic analysis to explore gendered portrayals in advertisements connects portrayals of men and women with existing gender stereotypes. In their combined content and semiotic analysis of 827 advertisements, Bell and Milic (2002), found that the vast majority of the advertisements they studied upheld gender stereotypes based on

dimensions identified in Goffman's *Gender Advertisements*. These stereotypes are relative size (men are larger and taller than the women portrayed), the feminine touch (women touch objects or others lightly), function ranking (men are shown executing tasks while women support them), the family (father-son relationships and mother-daughter relationships are portrayed differently), the ritualization of subordination (women are shown in inferior or lower poses), and licensed withdrawal (women are shown withdrawing from the scene or viewer) (Goffman, 1979). While the majority of these stereotypes were upheld, one significant finding from their study was that women were actually more likely to be looking directly into the camera than men were; women were engaging in relationships with the viewer rather than offering something to the viewer (Bell & Milic, 2002).

Tekvar's study on differences in images of men and women in a men's magazine (FHM) compared to a women's magazine (Cosmopolitan) also used a combined content and semiotic analysis. In the words of the author, content analysis "is supposed to support and strengthen the results" (Tekvar, n.d., p. 1). In her content analysis, Tekvar found that textiles and shoes (clothing and fashion) was the category of advertisements that made the most used of sexualized images of women (Tekvar, n.d.). She also found that the images and visual texts played a more important role in the advertisements than textual keys, although textual keys were more present in the women's magazine studied than in the men's (Tekvar, n.d.). In her semiotic analysis, she found that women portrayed in the men's magazine were often shown as fantasies, while women portrayed in the women's magazine were "objectified by the product, and promised a value, an identity" (Tekvar, n.d., p. 13). This finding is significant, as it shows a difference in the portrayals of women in advertising directed towards men compared to advertising directed towards women. This finding is significant for this study, as the majority of Aerie advertisements

and social media posts are directed towards the female consumers of their products.

In their 2017 study, Jha et al. recognize the relationship between portrayals of bodies in media and body image, as is extensively discussed in the sections above. The researchers examined images from the magazines *Cosmopolitan* and *Femina* to explore how gender roles and stereotypes are portrayed in advertisements published in them. They also use Goffman's categorization of gender roles, exploring each category through the lens of the signs (e.g. human), signifiers (e.g. woman), and signifieds (e.g. "happy but under control, dependent") in various advertisements (Jha et al., 2017, p. 4). The authors linked these portrayals to the various ways men and women are sexualized in images according to gender stereotypes (Jha et al., 2017). They found that women are more often portrayed to be sex objects, while men are more often portrayed taking an active role in the image (Jha et al., 2017).

While extensive study has been conducted on the effects of women's portrayals in advertising and media on other women, it remains to be seen how brands develop themes and techniques to portray authenticity in their brand materials, and how the use of this technique relates to their presentation of the ideal female body. This study will explore these issues in the context of photo editing of young women's bodies and the fashion brand Aerie, through an examination of its REAL campaign.

Conceptual Framework

Due to Aerie's focus on women and girls as the primary consumers of its products (and advertisements), this study adopts the feminist lens. This framework is appropriate as it allows for the consideration of societal and cultural factors that affect women and the representations of their bodies (Olesen, 2000). While there are many different theoretical perspectives within the framework of feminist theory, I have based my inquiry in this study in the tradition of liberal feminism. Because of its detailed, individualistic consideration of women and women's issues,

liberal feminism was the most appropriate framework for this study (Tong, 1997). In addition, modern liberal feminism tends to concern itself with women in the media (Tong, 1997), which is what this study addresses.

While this study is based in theoretical discussions and analysis, I did not wish for it to simply be “about women”, but instead “for women” (Olesen, 2000, p. 236). This concept is based on Olesen’s concept of active feminist research (Olesen, 2000). This perspective allows for the consideration of potential opportunities for policy change and direction, should any such opportunities arise throughout my data collection, analysis, or report writing process (Olesen, 2000).

Within this feminist framework, I used semiotic theory to conduct my in-depth analysis of Aerie’s images. Semiotics, or the study of signs, is one approach commonly used to analyze advertisements (Leiss et al., 1990). Semiotics analyzes the interconnected relationships between the visual and textual elements of the object in question – in this case, the advertisement or branding material – paying particular attention to the meaning of the visual elements. It is a particularly useful theoretical framework for analyzing advertisements because of the heavy reliance of modern advertising on visual elements with textual ‘keys’, rather than on visual elements with accompanying textual explanations (Leiss et al., 1990). There are two main schools of semiotics, both of which I considered for this project. These schools are the French school, based in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, and the American school, which finds its foundation in the work of Charles Peirce. While I ultimately chose to situate this project within the French semiotic tradition, I will provide an overview of both traditions below.

The American School of Semiotics

The American school of scholarship on semiotics is based largely in the work of Charles

Sanders Peirce. In contrast to the French literature on semiotics, which is more structuralist, American semiotics can be considered grounded in the pragmatic tradition. To Peirce, a sign is essentially “something that relates to something else for someone in some respect or capacity” (Merrell, 2014, p. 28). While accurate, this definition is vague. To Peirce, signs always present their semiotic object in some way, however abstract (Liszka, 1996), and are “something by means of which we know something we did not previously know” (Merrell, 2014, p. 37). Peirce breaks down his concept of semiotics into a number of different types, categories, and ideas, discussed below.

There are three major parts to a sign in the American school of semiotics (often spelled semeiotics; for the purpose of consistency, the concept will be spelled semiotics throughout this paper); the representamen, the object, and the interpretant (Peirce, 1940). These concepts cannot be truly separated and defined in isolation, since Peirce’s sign can only be considered triadically; each portion mediates the other portions and all interrelate with each other (Liszka, 1996). The object is essentially the thing that is being represented; it can be considered the semiotic object, but can “never be more than semiotically real”, similar to the concept of a Platonic form (Merrell, 2014, p. 28). The representamen is something that “correlates[s] with or represent[s] and object” (Liszka, 1996, p. 19). It is what “directs our attention to the object” (Merrell, 2014, p. 19), and allows for the development of the interpretant. The representamen is what allows for the ground of the sign, which “stands for [the] object...in reference to a sort of idea” (Peirce, 1940, p. 99). The interpretant takes these ideas and “relates to and mediates between the representamen and the semiotic object” (Merrell, 2014, p. 28) which allows all three aspects of the sign to mediate and interrelate to each other.

Peirce also discusses the concepts of firstness, secondness, and thirdness to explain the

interrelated nature of signs. He considers firstness to be a form of possibility; there is no relation to anything else yet. Secondness is a form of actuality, in which something is related to something else but not to a third thing, while thirdness, which he considers potentiality, comes when there is something capable of bringing a second thing in relation to another thing, amongst those two entities, and in relation to itself (Merrell, 2014). However, the sign can only take on this value and meaning through mediation. There is no semiosis (or signs becoming other signs, the process of symbol-making) without all of these components being present.

Icons, indices, and symbols can be understood as different levels of signs. An icon is a first, the most basic type of sign; essentially, something that looks like the thing that it is associated with (Peirce, 1940). An example of an icon would be a map; it looks like the geographical territory it represents (Merrell, 2014). An index is a second; it is related to its semiotic object by some sort of causal connection, whether natural or imagined (Peirce, 1940). A weathervane provides a good example of an index; the weathervane represents the direction of the wind through the wind's action on it (Merrell, 2014). A symbol a third; this is, according to Peirce, the most complex type of sign. There is no necessary, natural link between the symbol and its object; instead, the relationship is conventional, or defined by a societal tradition in relation to the sign (Peirce, 1940). An example of this would be the word "Coke", which represents the Coca-Cola drink product only because it has been repeated in society to the point of association with it; any other arbitrary word could be "Coke" if that word had been what people experienced (Merrell, 2014).

The French School of Semiotics

The French school of semiotics builds on the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, a linguist working in early 20th century Europe. For the purposes of this paper, Saussure's semiotic work is

combined with Roland Barthes' rhetorical analysis of images, which builds heavily on Saussure's work in any case. The French school of semiotics, in contrast to the American school, is the foundation of structuralism (as opposed to the pragmatism discussed earlier), and is more appropriate for my research and analysis. This is especially true considering the work of Roland Barthes and his advertisement analysis through semiology; however, it is necessary to first discuss Saussure and the origins of French semiotics.

Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics has three main aspects. For Saussure, the three main aspects are the sign, the signified, and the signifier. The signifier and signified make up the whole that is the sign. He defines the signifier as the "sound-image", which is sensory, and the signified as the "concept" – the connection between these two aspects creates the third aspect, which is the sign (Saussure, 1957, p. 66). Saussure is a linguist, and thus speaks mainly of signs in terms of auditory language. For him, there is "no natural connection with the signified" (Saussure, 1957, p. 67); signs are arbitrary (Saussure, 1957, p. 69). The classic depiction of Saussure's concept of the sign is as follows:

Sign	Signified
	Signifier

This is not to say that Saussure does not discuss the historical nature of signs; he argues that the signifier itself is tied intimately to *langue* (which is an intersubjective set of abstract signs as understood by a social group; *langue* can be considered the context), and thus to previous generations of speakers – while *langue* is arbitrary, it does need to be considered in terms of its social context to actually be understood (Saussure, 1957). Saussure considers *langue* to be "immutable" for several reasons: because *langue* is arbitrary, there is no actual reason to change it because there is no reason to prefer one sound over another; there are too many signs

within a system for one person or a group to be able to force a change to it; *langue* is for everyone – too many people use it daily for it to be changed quickly; and, as Saussure says, “because the sign is arbitrary, it follows no law other than that of tradition, and because it is based in tradition, it is arbitrary” (Saussure, 1957, p. 74).

However, while *langue* is immutable, signs themselves are not. *Langue*, and thus signs, require an entire community to be able to exist – they cannot exist apart from the people who speak them. This means that *langue* is a social fact – however, the meaning of words and language can only be controlled until a society starts to speak it (Saussure, 1957). This means that “shift[s] in the relationship between the signified and the signifier” (Saussure, 1957, p. 75) happen rapidly, and so linguistic signs can change rapidly (though not necessarily).

Roland Barthes, a French literary theorist and philosopher, draws inspiration from Saussure in much of his work on myth and semiotics. Barthes’ process of mythmaking involves the creation of ideology; making a myth is the process of naturalizing something historical (Barthes, 1957). For Barthes, a myth can be anything, and everything can be a myth, as long as it is conveyed through discourse and creates or strengthens an ideology (Barthes, 1972). Barthes views myths as a second order of semiotics (the first order being, as in Saussure, language itself), and refers to myth as “a mode of signification” (Barthes, 1972, p. 107). What is a sign in language becomes a signifier in myth (Barthes, 1972). Myths are a “metalanguage... a second language in which one speaks about the first” (Barthes, 1972, p. 114). Barthes and Saussure recognize myth as having a “historical foundation” (Barthes, 1972, p. 108) rather than the natural foundation proposed by Peirce, as discussed above. Myth is often represented by the following diagram:

Language	1 Signifier	2 Signified	II SIGNIFIED
	3 Sign		

MYTH	I SIGNIFIER	
	III SIGN	

Figure 1 Representation of myth (Barthes, 1972, p. 113).

This diagram shows how language, the first level signifier (a sound) and signified (its meaning) becomes a sign (a word). This sign, or language, for Barthes, is the signifier in the second level of meaning. When combined with the signified at this level, which is another level of meaning, a new sign is created, which is myth. The second level of meaning is not arbitrary, but is instead created with the purpose of making or reinforcing an ideology. Barthes goes further than Saussure in his definition of speech, including not only oral and written language but any form of representation of a thing, including items like drawings, photographs, and movies (Barthes, 1972). Essentially, speech is anything that means something. When Barthes analyzes images semiotically, he is dealing with a specific myth rather than a theoretical myth; this makes his work especially useful in analyzing advertising, which he does himself in *Rhetoric of the Image*.

There are three different aspects that Barthes considers in his semiotic analyses – like Saussure, Barthes calls these aspects the signifier, signified, and the sign (Barthes, 1972). These three parts “cannot be dissociated” (Barthes, 1972, p. 112). For Barthes, the three aspects of semiotics “[concern] objects which belong to different categories” (Barthes, 1972, p. 111) – this makes their relationship equivalent rather than equal (Barthes, 1972).

Barthes’ definitions of the three aspects are similar to Saussure’s, but he goes several steps further than Saussure. For Barthes, the signifier can either be considered meaning, or a form – in the linguistic level of semiotics the signifier is empty and only mentally real, whereas when it is the first term of the mythic level it is full (Barthes, 1972). The signifier at the linguistic level is tied to the words used to create the language, which is why it is only mentally real – that

is, it does not take history into account. The signifier at the mythic level takes into account history; it is rich and full of sensory reality, not just mental reality. The mythic level is where the historical begins to become natural. Finally, Barthes' idea of signification is as the third and final term of a myth; essentially, it is the myth itself, and "the only part that can be seen" (Barthes, 1972, p. 120). The myth is where the ideology is perpetuated.

This is not to say that this relationship is only linear; Barthes recognizes that there is no "regular ratio between the volume of the signified and that of the signifier" (Barthes, 1972, p. 119), and that more than one signifier can be related to the same signified (Barthes, 1972). Each of these parts are woven into each other. Nothing is hidden and nothing is arbitrary in myth; everything is apparent, and myths are historical – this means that they are not fixed and can be changed and suppressed throughout time (Barthes, 1972). The concepts (as used by Barthes) within myth do not erase the meanings, but they are related to them through the uniting process that Barthes calls deformation (Barthes, 1972). Myth contains analogies which are related to their forms through association rather than through nature (Barthes, 1972).

Barthes takes these aspects farther than Saussure, applying them not only to language and words but also to images in his analysis of a Paris Match cover:

...A young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolor. All this is the meaning of the picture. But... I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag...there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier, itself already formed with a previous system (a black soldier is giving the French salute); there is a signified (it is here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness); finally, there is a presence of the signified through the signifier. (Barthes, 1972, p. 115)

While this particular image is not an advertisement, the same method can be used for

advertisements, and is by Barthes himself in his later work, “Rhetoric of the Image” (Barthes, 1977). There are a number of ways to analyze myths, both dynamic and static. Exploring the myth as a full signifier, rather than as just an example, will lead to a dynamic interpretation of the myth (Barthes, 1972). However, myths can also be undone to explore the meaning and form of the myth as separate but related entities, or taken as only literal signification (Barthes, 1972). Both of these strategies lead to static interpretations of myth.

It is important to consider Barthes’ methods of analyzing myth for this research because of the ways that he applies this method to the analysis of advertisements. Myths transform meaning and history into nature for the people who consume them, and gives “historical intention a natural justification, and make[s] contingency appear eternal” (Barthes, 1972, p. 142). This process of making the historical natural is applicable to advertisements; in “Rhetoric of the Image”, Barthes discusses how advertisers intend specific meanings in the image in advertisements (Barthes, 1977). In addition to the intentionality of the images and the signification in them, the “signifieds have to be transmitted as clearly as possible” (Barthes, 1977, p. 152). This is so that the intended meaning can be understood by the greatest proportion of people. By making the signifieds clear, advertisers are trying to make their own company’s history natural. Any signs and myths uncovered in advertisements are, by the nature of advertisements, completely intentional and “formed with a view to the optimal reading” (Barthes, 1977, p. 153). Others agree; as stated by Leiss et al., “it is only through the interaction of component parts that meaning is formed” (1990). This is particularly appropriate in this study, in which I am exploring the entire, interrelated branding strategy of the Aerie company. Not every image analyzed is an explicit advertisement in the traditional sense that Barthes speaks of (after all, social media in the sense that we use it today, as a tool to build relationships, were

certainly not part of Barthes' life). However, each post is carefully considered and released by the company as a part of its larger brand image, so the intentionality remains.

In this study, I explored two research questions. The primary research question I addressed was:

- What are the themes that characterize both the original Aerie REAL campaign, and Aerie's subsequent branding strategy?

The secondary research question I addressed was:

- How does the company, through its REAL campaign and social media posts, link the above themes to notions of authenticity and the ideal body?

In addition, before I answer these questions, I need to address the objectives of the Aerie REAL campaign (both explicit and implicit), and determine whether the campaign objectives were met. The objectives of the REAL campaign have necessarily informed the themes that characterize the campaign, and whether these objectives were met or not is, due to its nature (as covered in the discussion section below), important to Aerie's presentation of the ideal female body.

Rationale for Research

Advertisements that do not alter models' bodies are a high-profile issue in the fashion and beauty industry at the time of writing. One of the largest beauty retailers in the United States, CVS Health, announced in January 2018 that it would apply special indicators to product images and advertisements featuring models that have been digitally altered in all of the U.S. stores (Morgan, 2018). The rationale provided by the company for this move was the body image and mental health of young women (Morgan, 2018). However, the perceived positive impact to the company's brand is not lost on CVS – or other companies who use similar strategies. The

retailer's spokeswoman, executive vice president Helena Foulkes, followed up her discussion of helping girls and women feel better about themselves with the following:

[The girls say] 'I want to relate to people who have my own imperfections and feel that I'm empowered by the fact I look like these people.' It's a huge opportunity. and [sic] it's what a lot of indie brands are doing so effectively and why they're growing. They're tapping into this empowerment among girls, and that's what we're hoping to fuel that with this conversation." (Foulkes in Morgan, 2018)

Body image, and its connection to the representation of women's bodies in the fashion and beauty industry, is also a high-profile issue. France made headlines in 2017 when it tabled a law requiring a minimum Body Mass Index (BMI) for fashion models (Samuel, 2017). A clause of the same law, which took effect October 1, 2017, states that edited images in fashion sectors must be indicated with "*photographie retouchée*" (Samuel, 2017). Justifications for this law were, again, related to the body image of young people – the French law includes stipulations for both female and male models (Samuel, 2017).

My literature review, and a cursory review of headlines over the past several years, clearly demonstrates that the issues of branding, brand positioning, and the representation of female bodies in advertisements (including photo-editing techniques and the lack thereof) have been studied extensively and are a relevant issue in the public mind. However, the combination of these topics, particularly in terms of a brand that bases its identity on its lack of photo-editing techniques, has not been previously addressed. Therefore, my study will provide insight into a new set of branding techniques and strategies involving the use of 'authenticity', as demonstrated by Aerie's brand materials. I will also provide insight into what these techniques reveal about the brand's notion of the idealized female body.

The objective of this study is primarily to explore the themes which Aerie uses in its corporate branding. I have also sought to explore the ways that the company links the notions of

‘authenticity’ and the ideal female body in its advertisements and other branding materials. This research will make contributions to the field of study on brand positioning, as the use of ‘authenticity’ as a positioning strategy becomes more prevalent. I have situated this case study within the larger scholarly discussion on both branding and the representation of the female body, and have used theories and concepts in both of these areas to help make sense of my data, as discussed in my literature review and in my analysis below.

In addition to contributions to the literature on branding and positioning, my research will have implications in the field of feminist inquiry. Photo editing of women’s bodies and its effects on the representation in media of women has been extensively studied. However, the opposite side of the coin – the implications of *not* editing images of women – must also be addressed. This study has done so, and opens up avenues for further, more extensive investigation into the subject.

Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology

Research Strategy

In addition to a semiotic analysis, I will use some elements of a content analysis to categorize and organize different elements of the Aerie REAL campaign. One issue with semiotic analysis is the lack of generalizability semiotic analysis offers (Leiss et al., 1990). Because a semiotic analysis examines a specific image or text so deeply and specifically, any application of the results to another image or text will not work unless only the most general themes are compared (Leiss et al., 1990). It is also difficult to quantify results of semiotic analysis (Leiss et al., 1990). This is an important weakness in the context of this study; many of the advertisements I have gathered do not have any accompanying textual keys, which means results could vary if another coder was to view the images. Because of this, additional analysis is required to uncover themes and categories for the images in order to properly analyze them.

Both methods can examine single advertisements, but in my study I will use content analysis to provide more broad categorization of the elements (Leiss et al., 1990). I will use content analysis of the text-based and image-based advertisements to identify categories that will shape the results of the analysis; these categories are the constituent parts of the concept being studied. This step is considered to be the most important step in a content analysis approach, because it frames the results and conclusions drawn from the research so specifically (Leiss et al., 1990). Sampling and coding data are the next two stages of content analysis; both of these phases are highly dependent on and framed by the categories identified in the prior stage. Sampling involves selecting the general set of advertisements relevant to the study, and then further refining to the units of analysis (often through the use of sampling tables) (Leiss et al., 1990). The coding stage is the point at which the advertisements that make up the unit of analysis are sorted into their respective categories. Finally, the data gleaned from the previous stages is

analyzed and conclusions are drawn (Leiss et al., 1990).

A content analysis approach addresses many of the potential weaknesses of the semiotic approach, including questions of reliability, objectivity, and generalizability, as well as the size of the dataset for analysis. These concerns are alleviated by the categorization of themes and data, as well as the distinct coding processes that are used in content analysis (Leiss et al., 1990). Because content analysis only addresses that which is obvious to all viewers of the advertisement, using this approach allows for a higher level surface analysis of advertisements. This can be used to identify themes with the sample and relate them to the whole of the dataset in a more reliable manner; each coder should have comparable results, since content analysis primarily yields insights on surface level meaning (Leiss et al., 1990). However, using content analysis for advertisement and branding research has its own weaknesses. It is impossible to consider the advertisements' effects on the audience using a content analysis approach. This surface level analysis ignores any connections that the consumer is expected to make, which is a major facet of modern advertising (Leiss et al., 1990). This is especially true for advertisements posted on social media, which often contain layers of references to popular and internet culture. For example, one of the images I include in my semiotic analysis plays on the "suns out guns out" meme by including copywriting reading "suns out buns out" in reference to the model wearing a bikini bottom. There is also no way to measure the significance of themes for consumers of the advertisements when the analyst is using pure content analysis, since only the number of times something is repeated is measured (Leiss et al., 1990).

The strategy I have used in this project is a combined approach involving semiotics and content analysis, as described by Leiss et al. in their 1990 book, *Social communication in advertising: persons, products, and images of well-being*. This approach combines qualitative

and quantitative methods, which allows for a study that addresses a much broader and more comprehensive analysis of the advertisements in question. This combined approach utilizes content analysis by categorizing data based on thematic analysis, while also using the in-depth analysis that semiotics provides.

Sampling and Selection of Data

There were several steps taken in the process of gathering my dataset. First, I developed my initial inclusion criteria, based on a preliminary overview of the Aerie REAL campaign history:

- Posts must have been published after the original #aerieREAL advertising campaign began in spring of 2014;
- Posts must have either the #aerieREAL indicator on them, or another indication that the lack of photo editing is the ‘point’ of the advertisement;
- Social media posts must be tagged with the #aerieREAL hashtag;
- Product photos must feature models and be gathered from the official Aerie website; and,
- Branding statements must make reference to the Aerie REAL campaign or strategy.

It is important to note that the vast majority of the images and posts I have used to form my dataset are social media posts from the brand’s Facebook and Instagram accounts. I chose to gather data from the brand’s social media accounts because of the nature of the #aerieREAL campaign; all of the brand’s materials, including in-store posters and bags that customers receive to carry their products, are branded with the #aerieREAL tag. This directs the viewer to the brand’s social media accounts. These accounts post images and text that create a concept of a life-style rather than directly advertising to consumers through paid advertisements (although these sorts of advertisements are also used by the brand). This allows consumers to engage with

the brand directly, rather than through the medium of advertising in a magazine or a paid online advertisement on an external website. I also gathered product photos from the Aerie website; these images allow exploration of how the brand presents its products, and the women wearing them, to sell to consumers in a virtual environment.

Although I had originally intended to use the Aerie Twitter account as a source for data collection, upon review of the account and the company's Instagram account I decided to utilize the brand's Facebook page instead. I chose to do this because the brand's Twitter account was essentially identical to its Instagram account, while the Facebook page contained a great deal more unique content and images. I collected both model based and text based image posts from Facebook, again using the screen shot tool and retaining the primary brand comment while blocking any user comments. I collected a total of 126 image based posts and 188 text based posts, dating to the beginning of the Aerie REAL campaign.

The next medium I explored for data collection was the Aerie Instagram account. To collect relevant images from this account, I examined each post and collected those that were indicated #aerieREAL and featured model images, ensuring that the posts were recent to avoid gathering anything from prior to the original campaign. To capture the images, I used the screen shot tool, and took screen shots that included the image and the brand's comment. I blocked user comments as they are not relevant for this study. I repeated this process until I had gathered 20 images. Because of the sheer number of Facebook posts gathered (as discussed above), I limited the Instagram dataset to 20 images that were unique and not repeated on the Facebook account (where possible).

I visited the Aerie brand website (found through the website of its parent company, American Eagle) on October 13th, 2017 in order to gather product photographs. I sorted by 'New Products'

to ensure that I would be obtaining recent images, and selected every fifth product featuring a model as the primary focus of the photograph. Within the individual product window, I selected the image that featured the model most prominently and downloaded it. I repeated this process until I had collected 20 images. I limited this study to 20 images because of the huge number of products carried by Aerie which featured images of the same several models; 20 images provided images of a variety of women without too many repeated models. I also gathered five 'branding' images from the Aerie website. I collected these images by exploring the front page of the website, which featured a #aerieREAL banner, as well as general advertisements for the brand's 'Real Me' line of undergarments, and statements about charities that Aerie supports with the proceeds of its products.

Design of Research Tools

Methods and Procedures

I have analyzed the collected images through a semiotic content analysis to explore the use of ‘authenticity’, as well as what is presented as the ideal female body and how this is signified; in essence, I have examined the semantics of the Aerie images (Noth, 2011). This allows, as discussed above, for a content analysis of the data as well as the in-depth analysis that semiotics provides.

First, I categorized the images gathered from the Aerie Facebook account using several axes of analysis. I categorized each image based on the body type and race of the model, as well as by whether disability representation was shown in the image. Images featuring very thin women with visible bone under their skin, large thigh gaps, and concave stomachs were classified as typical model weight (as compared with models featured in advertisements by similar brands that make no claims about photo editing images, such as Victoria’s Secret and PINK). Thin women without these features and some minor creases at their joints from visible fat were considered larger than the typical model (again, in comparison to other brands in the same product category). Women who had significant visible body fat (for example ‘rolls’ of fat) were classified as plus size. Determination of race was made into broad categories based on models’ facial features and skin tones. If only single body parts were visible, models were classified as “unidentifiable” in terms of race regardless of their skin tone, for purposes of consistency. For an example of an image analyzed in this manner, please see Appendix One. Disability representation was based on whether models had a visible disability (such as wheelchair use, missing limbs, visible colostomy bag, etc.). These categories were subsequently used to analyze the Instagram and Product Photos as well.

The qualitative and very specific nature of this case study does mean that the results of

this analysis will be difficult to generalize to other brands and branding strategies. I feel that the in-depth analysis of the Aerie case study yields important results, particularly in terms of the analysis of ‘authenticity’ as a brand position, and Aerie’s use of its advertisements and branding materials to develop a very specific brand personality.

Chapter Four: Results and Analysis

Results

Facebook: Text Based Posts

While many of the images gathered from Facebook involved image-based posts containing models, the majority of the posts were text based – essentially, quotes in a design template. I gathered 185 images of this nature, and categorized them based on the concept that they prioritize in the text of the post. These categories are as follows: loving one’s authentic self for the realness of one’s body/appearance; redefining perceived flaws as beautiful; avoiding comparison of one’s body/appearance to that of other women; general inspiration for other women/girls/the reader; accepting one’s inner beauty regardless of one’s outward appearance; attracting others to oneself; loving one’s self/body in order to improve one’s health; not applicable to study (i.e. a statement such as “Sundays we wear pajamas”); direct comparisons to other women; and, explicit acceptance of disabilities. The results of this categorization are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Results of preliminary content analysis and categorization of text-based Aerie advertisements collected from official Aerie Facebook account posts.

Category	Images	% of Total ¹
Loving the authentic self	64	34.6
Redefining/accepting perceived flaws as physical beauty	53	28.6
General inspiration for other women	29	15.7
Avoiding comparison of oneself to other women	13	7.0
Accepting inner beauty regardless of outer appearance	7	3.8
Loving one’s body to improve one’s health	7	3.8
Not applicable to study	7	3.8
Attracting others to oneself	2	1.1
Direct comparison to other women	2	1.1
Explicit acceptance of disabilities	1	0.5%

¹ Please note that due to rounding, percentages do not equal 100%.

The largest category of messaging I analyzed prioritized the reader or person quoted loving their authentic (primarily referred to as ‘real’, to tie in with the name of the Aerie REAL campaign) self. These images contained text referencing the “realness” of women’s beauty, including direct references to loving one’s self without changing any physical aspect of the body. For example, an image with the text: “Want to know how to get a perfect beach body? Put a bikini on your body. The REAL you is sexy!” (Aerie, 2015) would be categorized as loving the authentic self, because it promotes accepting one’s body as it is. This category covered 64 of the 185 images, or 34.6%. The second largest category involved the redefinition of the reader’s (or the person quoted) perceived flaws as beautiful and accepting these perceived flaws, with 53 images or 28.6% of the total dataset. These images typically referred to stretch marks, body weight (mostly high weights, though a few images referred to low body weight as a perceived flaw), scars, and acne as flaws. Each image focused on the redefinition of these flaws as physically beautiful and accepting their reality. For example, an image with the text “I’m #aerieREAL because I refuse to let acne and blemishes stop me from being confident and beautiful” as stated by an Aerie consumer, would be placed in this category. The next largest category was comprised of images imploring women to embrace their ‘unique’ beauty and avoid comparing themselves to other women. This category is interesting because three of the earliest Aerie REAL related images in the dataset directly compared the reader to other women, telling the reader there was no need to look like any specific woman. An image with the text “All flowers are beautiful in their own way and that’s like women too. I want to encourage women to embrace their uniqueness” (Miranda Kerr, 2015) would be placed within this category. This category contained 13 images, or 7% of the dataset.

Generally inspiring other women was another reasonably large proportion of the data,

with 29 images or 15.7% of the total set being related to uplifting women in general. Images in this category were not necessarily related to physical beauty; some of the images referred to famous feminists, or general life, confidence, and career goals. Images with text such as “When a woman becomes her own best friend life gets easier” (Diane von Furstenberg, 2014) would be categorized here. There were seven images, or 3.8% of the dataset, that prioritized accepting inner beauty over one’s outward appearance. These images contained references to the readers’ smiles, or their kind personalities – for example, an image with the text “Happiness is the best makeup: a smile is better than any lipstick you’ll put on” (Drew Barrymore, 2015) would be categorized here. Seven images referred to loving one’s body for physical health reasons; five of these images were part of a short campaign Aerie ran involving breast and ovarian cancer awareness. An example of one of these images reads “I’m #aerieREAL because I’m strong, empowered, and educated. I know my risk of developing breast and ovarian cancer and am taking steps to prevent it”, as submitted by an Aerie consumer in 2016.

There were two images focused on attracting others (not specified as male or female) to the reader; these images were generally focused on attracting others with inner beauty rather than outward appearance, similarly to the previous category. For example, an image with the text “The most alluring thing a woman can have is confidence” (Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, 2014) would be placed in this category. Seven images, as discussed above, were irrelevant to this study; either statements about Aerie’s product line, or awards Aerie has received from various organizations (i.e. not directed to changing consumer views or how consumers view their bodies). Finally, one image referred to the person quoted (an Aerie consumer, not a model) accepting her own disability and not trying to hide it; she referred to wearing her hearing aid with pride. The REAL campaign’s relationship with disability has significantly evolved since the

beginning of the campaign and this data collection; I will discuss some of the steps the company has made in regards to disability representation in the conclusion of this study.

Facebook: Image Based Posts

The preliminary content analysis of data collected from Facebook involved basic categorization of images based on a visual analysis. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2. 126 images were viewed and categorized in terms of model sizes, model races, and disability representation (each image was classified in terms of each category). Within these categories, images were further categorized into the sub-categories discussed in the next paragraph. Three of the images portrayed women and men, who were indicated in the caption to be their romantic partners. For the purposes of this study, the men were ignored.

Sub-categories in the model weight category were: ‘Typical models’; ‘Larger than typical models’; ‘Plus sized models’; and, ‘Mixed group’, meaning the images showed multiple women of different sizes. The concrete definitions for these sub-categories are discussed in detail in the previous section. Sub-categories in the model races category were: ‘White’; ‘Black’; ‘Asian’; ‘Unidentifiable’, meaning that the model’s face was not visible, or only a body part (most typically rear end) was shown in the picture; and, ‘Mixed group’, meaning that multiple women of different races were shown. Finally, the ‘Disability representation’ category was split into two sub-categories: ‘Visibly disabled’, which for the purposes of this study includes major scarring (but excludes stretch marks) or an indication in the photograph’s caption that some disability was present; and, ‘Not visibly disabled’. The raw data collected was then converted into percentages of the total image set in each sub-category.

This categorization and sub-categorization allows for a first level analysis of the dataset collected from Aerie’s Facebook posts, which is the source of the majority of the images

collected for this project. Deeper semiotic analysis of specific images was also conducted and will be discussed in further detail in the following sections of this chapter.

Table 2 Results of preliminary content analysis and categorization of photographic Aerie advertisements collected from official Aerie Facebook account posts.

Model Weights					
Typical models	75	59.5%	Larger than typical models	22	17.5%
Plus sized models	2	1.6%	Mixed group	26	20.6%
Model Races					
White models	63	50%	Asian models	13	10.3%
Black models	11	8.7%	Unidentifiable	13	10.3%
Mixed group	26	20.6%			
Disability Representation					
Visibly disabled models	1	0.8%	Abled models	125	99.2%

In terms of model weights, 75 of the 126 images (or 59.5%) in the data set featured women who were a similar size to models in traditional advertisements; namely, the 75 women in this group were extremely thin. These women were designated as unedited, and in many cases it was clear that they had not been altered, as stretch marks, rolled skin, and cellulite were visible in the photograph. In many cases, these imperfections appeared to be the focus of the image, particularly in the case of stretch marks around the thighs, rear end, and breasts of the models. 26 images, or 20.6% of the total set, featured multiple women of differing sizes. Most of these images were composites demonstrating how Aerie carries different sizes of its clothing, most often bras, to fit different sizes of women.

22 (17.5%) of the women portrayed were slightly larger than models typically featured in traditional advertising. These women were comparable in size to ‘plus sized’ models found in traditional advertising. While there is no standardized definition of a ‘plus sized’ model, one modelling agency (Gemini Models, an agency based in South Africa) defines ‘plus sized’ as a women’s size 10 to 18 (Gemini Models, n.d.), which is a size range significantly smaller than the

average sizes of women in North America, who wear sizes between 16 and 20 (Christel & Dunn, 2016). All 22 of these women are extremely conventionally beautiful in terms of their facial features. Only two of the women featured in the Facebook dataset could be considered overweight (based on a visual analysis, as BMI data was not available) by the typical North American standards mentioned previously. The two women shown in these images were not actually models. They were Aerie consumers, featured in images that were not professionally staged, styled, or photographed, but rather submitted by the consumers to the company themselves.

I also analyzed these images in terms of race, which while secondary to this study is an important aspect of the ‘ideal’ woman that Aerie is presenting in its advertisements and branding posts. 63 of the images featured a white model, comprising 50% of the total dataset. 13 images featured models of an unidentifiable race (due to their faces not being shown), while 26 of the images featured groups of women of differing races. Many of the mixed race groups were composites of Aerie consumers, or, as outlined above, images meant to illustrate the different fits of Aerie products. 11 images featured black women, which comprised only 8.7% of the total dataset. 13 images showed Asian women; however, 10 of these images featured the same model.

Finally, I analyzed the images according to visible disability representation, as discussed above. While it is entirely possible that some of the models featured had invisible disabilities, only one image featured a woman with a visible disability. This woman was not a professional model, and instead, like the two overweight women, was an Aerie consumer featured in a post focused on her success as a one armed weightlifter. Again, this image was not professionally staged, style, or photographed, though it was unclear whether the consumer submitted the image to Aerie or if the brand sought it out themselves for a planned post.

Instagram and Product Photos

These images were gathered from the official Aerie Instagram account and the Aerie website, yielding 20 images in each set. Both sets were subject to the same systematic analysis discussed above. I have chosen to group these sets together for a discussion on results and an analysis of these results because they are more similar to each other than to the images gathered from Facebook. The Facebook images tend towards traditional ads, with copy-writing included directly on and within the images themselves.

The product photos are the other end of a sort of spectrum here; they show a ‘life-style’ based image that never includes copy-writing, and instead presents an ideal situation and person who would wear the clothing items in question. The posts gathered from Instagram were similar to the product photos in that they rarely contained copy-writing, instead relying on the comment feature within the app for advertising purposes. The images found here present the same sort of ‘life-style’ advertising, with the presentation of ideal users and situations. The preliminary results from these sets are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Results of preliminary content analysis and categorization of photographic Aerie advertisements collected from official Aerie Instagram account posts, and official Aerie product photography found on ae.com.

Product Photography					
Model Weights					
Typical models	13	65%	Larger than typical models	6	30%
Plus sized models	1	5%	Mixed group	0	0%
Model Races					
White models	12	60%	Asian models	0	0%
Black models	4	20%	Unidentifiable	4	20%
Mixed group	0	0%			
Disability Representation					
Visibly disabled models	0	0%	Abled models	20	100%
Instagram Posts					
Model Weights					

Typical models	10	50%	Larger than typical models	3	15%
Plus sized models	2	10%	Mixed group	5	25%
Model Races					
White models	11	55%	Asian models	2	10%
Black models	2	10%	Unidentifiable	0	0%
Mixed group	5	25%			
Disability Representation					
Visibly disabled models	0	0%	Abled models	20	100%

First, I will discuss the product photographs collected from ae.com. These images accompany the ordering form for each product, and are the last piece of imagery used to sell Aerie's products to consumers visiting its website. In terms of model size, 65% of images featured thin models who would not be out of place in any traditional women's clothing advertisement. 30% of the women featured were larger than typical models; only 5%, or 1 woman, was truly a plus-sized model. The image that did feature a plus-sized model did not show her face; used to sell leggings, it only showed the model's lower half. This is not an uncommon tactic – it shows how the clothing item would fit in greater detail – but the rest of the product photos for that item featured thin models, and showed their faces. None of the photographs showed a mixed group of women, although this is not surprising, as product photographs do typically only show one model per image.

12 of the models, or 60%, were white women. Only four were black women, and there were no Asian models in the collected product photographs. 4 images were unidentifiable, as they focused on models' body parts or on the clothing itself. No photographs showed visibly disabled models in the product photographs. In this set, even visible stretch marks and skin rolls are uncommon, especially in comparison to the Facebook photographs.

The images gathered from the official Aerie Instagram account are more similar to the product photographs than to the Facebook posts. This is due to the lack of copywriting and the

focus on life-style advertising as discussed above. On Instagram, 10 (or 50%) of the images featured women who were a typical model size, while only three women were somewhat larger than typical models and only 2 women featured could be considered plus sized. There were five images featuring multiple women, though unlike on Facebook, these images were not meant to illustrate how Aerie products fit different sized women. Instead, they primarily featured Aerie corporate employees, or groups of models ‘off duty’ on shoots – again focusing on a more ‘life-style’, aspirational type of advertising. 11 of the images collected from Instagram featured White women, while only four images showed Black or Asian women. As discussed above, five images showed multiple women. As with the product photographs, no images featured visibly disabled women.

Analysis

Content Analysis

On all platforms analyzed, the majority of the women featured were as thin as typical fashion models. Even the women featured who were larger than typical models were still not actually plus sized. Only six of the images across all platforms analyzed featured women who could actually be considered plus sized, and only one of these women (the woman portrayed in the product photograph) was explicitly a paid model for Aerie. The others were all Aerie consumers with inspiring stories or quotes attached. The fact that these women are not paid models is important; by paying a model and making it explicit that this woman works for the company to display its products, Aerie presents these bodies as the ‘right’ body types, that might be used to show off clothing to the best of its capabilities. While of course women who look like these models exist (the models are, after all, women who exist), in a Canadian context, 44% of women ages 20-39 are overweight or obese (Statistics Canada, 2010). This is a huge difference

from the dataset, in which 3.6% of the total images feature an overweight woman. Even when considering the data in terms of platform specific numbers, the highest portion of overweight women is only 10%.²

Most of the Facebook text-based posts from quoting consumers and various celebrities prioritized the reframing of women's perceived flaws as physically beautiful. This is a major goal of the Aerie REAL campaign as a whole, and materials posted by the company tend to address body weight, freckles, scars, acne, cellulite and stretch marks as perceived physical flaws. While no company materials explicitly say that these features are flaws, they implicitly support the women quoted in their perceptions by publishing the quotes in an official space (the company Facebook account, in the case of the text posts). However, this redefinition of physical beauty is not necessarily supported by the images Aerie posts of its own models. All of the women posted by Aerie (that are paid models) are conventionally beautiful in terms of facial structure and features. No models in the dataset have visible scarring or acne, and cellulite and stretch marks visible tend to be minor. If cellulite or stretch marks are visible, they are often the focus of the picture, and very often (though not always) the model's face is omitted (as in the "Sun's out buns out" image discussed in depth below). The only perceived flaw seen in the professional model images is that of facial freckles. While the women presented as models in these images may be slightly larger than the average fashion model, they overwhelmingly do not show the perceived flaws discussed by consumers in the Aerie campaign.

The text-based posts provide some insights into Aerie's brand personality as well. The categories that they fall into align quite well with several traits in Aaker's system of brand

² Please note that this study is not meant to and does not address any health ramifications or other judgements on body weight, but merely presents the facts of women's weights in Canada compared to the representation of different body weights in Aerie advertisements.

personality classification. The concept of loving the authentic self, inspiring other women, focusing on inner beauty, and accepting flaws all speak to the facet of sincerity; these concepts are certainly wholesome, down-to-earth, and cheerful (Aaker, 1997). There is an undercurrent of excitement throughout the text-based posts as well; by using exclamation points in many of the posts, as well as design techniques to emphasize important words. For example, image 12 in the dataset reads “Love your body. It’s beautiful” (@Sarshepp, 2014). This sounds flat and uninteresting, but the image itself emphasizes the word “love” by making it by far the largest text. The image also highlights the phrase “It’s beautiful” by putting it on its own line and bracketing it with lines above and below. This breaks up the text, allowing the reader to break up the text while reading it into pauses and emphasis that carry significance, and make the image considerably more exciting and impactful. The reader can imagine who @Sarshepp is, and how she might say this phrase. The design of this image gives the impression of someone spirited, and cool, traits within the excitement facet of brand personality (Aaker, 1997).

While it is not the explicit focus of this study, race is an important consideration in terms of beauty and identity. Race or racial identity is not a consideration in the text-based posts in any way; although the company does quote some famous non-white women, such as Maya Angelou (a prominent black feminist writer), no posts make any mention of race or culture (non-white or white). In addition, white women feature in the majority of the image-based posts, making up 66.9% of the total dataset. While this is a fairly small majority, it is significant to note that most of the non-white women represented in the dataset fall into the typical model weight category, and only occasionally into the larger than average model category. No non-white models are represented in the few photographs of women who could actually be considered plus sized, whether they are models or not. With this breakdown of models, Aerie sends a subtle message

that non-white beauty is even more restricted than white beauty; while it effectively endorses the beauty of plus sized white women, it ignores plus sized women of other races.

As discussed above, the Instagram posts and product photos do not feature copywriting and are more ‘life-style’ advertisements than traditional advertisements selling a specific product. Many of the Facebook posts, on the other hand, do contain copywriting, and are more recognizable as traditional advertisements selling a single product or product line. One of these images is discussed in depth in the section below, through the use of semiotic analysis. However, looking at these images as a whole, the Facebook advertisements featuring copywriting tend to focus on a single body part of the model featured, whether that be their breasts, stomachs or (most often) rear ends. This reduces the model to one specific feature of her body, especially when the model’s face is obscured (often by her hair, but sometimes simply cropped out of the photograph altogether).

In fact, the photographs in which the models’ faces are obscured only serve to exacerbate this effect. This practice tends to create a mannequin effect; models are not seen as real people, but rather as mannequins for clothing display and body parts only. Though not all of these images explicitly sexualize the features shown, whether the feature is sexualized in the advertisement or image in question or not is irrelevant here. Because these features are sexualized in the vast majority of popular media, they are seen through a sexualized lens in these images by the vast majority of people.

Eight of the images from Facebook discussed body acceptance and self-love for health reasons; five of these were, as discussed above, related to a campaign Aerie did in relation to women’s cancers. Almost none of the health focused images were related to women’s body image and mental health specifically. One of the tag lines of the REAL campaign is simply

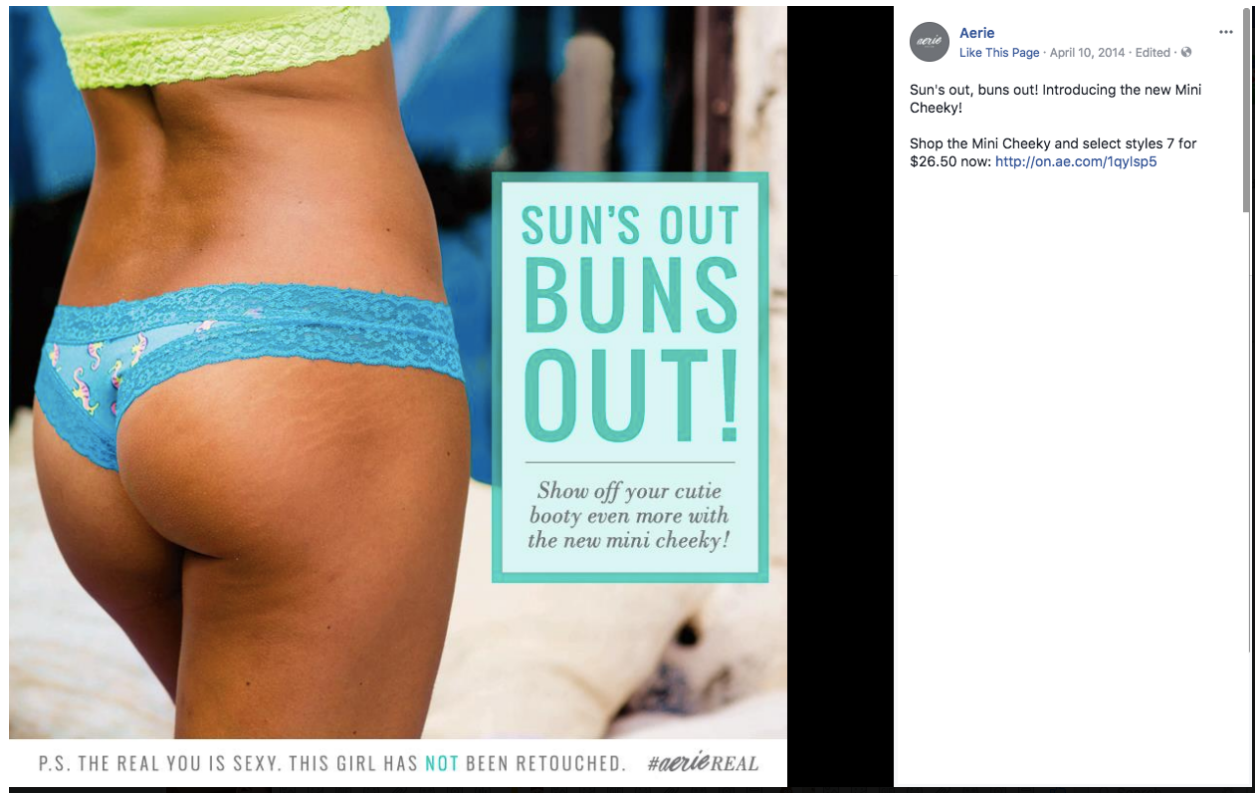
“Body positivity”, which is a term often associated with mental health related to body image (ae.com, 2018b). One which was focused on such issues came from a consumer and was not attached to an image; merely a quote on a coloured background. No models or celebrity spokeswomen were featured, so, as discussed above, the impact of the endorsement is less from an unknown customer than it would be from a model or celebrity representing the Aerie brand. There are, however, a number of images that highlight Aerie’s relationship with the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA), and the awards it has won for its lack of photo editing tactics from this organization. During the National Eating Disorders Awareness Week 2018 run by NEDA in late February-early March, the Aerie website featured a section on the front page highlighting eating disorders and providing information on NEDA – also highlighting Aerie’s relationship with the organization.

Aerie often releases material concerning its relationship with NEDA, and occasionally features some information on its website and social media channels about eating disorders and how they are influenced by advertisements that use photo editing techniques. However, its actual advertisements almost never address mental health beyond eating disorders, and rarely address eating disorders beyond its association with NEDA or accolades given to it by others.

Semiotic Analysis

In this section, I analyze ten images from my dataset discussed above in an in-depth, semiotic style, to explore what these images signify and present as Aerie’s ideal female body and woman. Please note that throughout this section, the term ‘copywriting’ refers to text superimposed on the image in question, while the term ‘caption’ refers to the text accompanying the image post that is not part of the image itself, or the comment that Aerie has chosen to present with the image.

Image One: Sun's Out, Buns Out, Depersonalization's In



The image above features the panty-clad rear end of a model with visible stretch marks and cellulite. The copywriting included with the image reads “Sun’s out bun’s out! [sic] Show off your cutie booty even more with the new mini cheeky!” (American Eagle Outfitters, 2014). The ‘mini cheeky’ refers to the cut of the underwear the model is wearing, which reveals most of her rear end. She has visible cellulite and stretch marks. Across the bottom of the image, there is a white banner reading “P.S. THE REAL YOU IS SEXY. THIS GIRL HAS NOT BEEN RETOUCHED. #aerieREAL”³ in dark grey text (American Eagle Outfitters, 2014). The background of the image is blurred and indistinct; all focus is on the body of the model, which takes up over half the frame of the image. The model is referred to in the copywriting as a ‘girl’

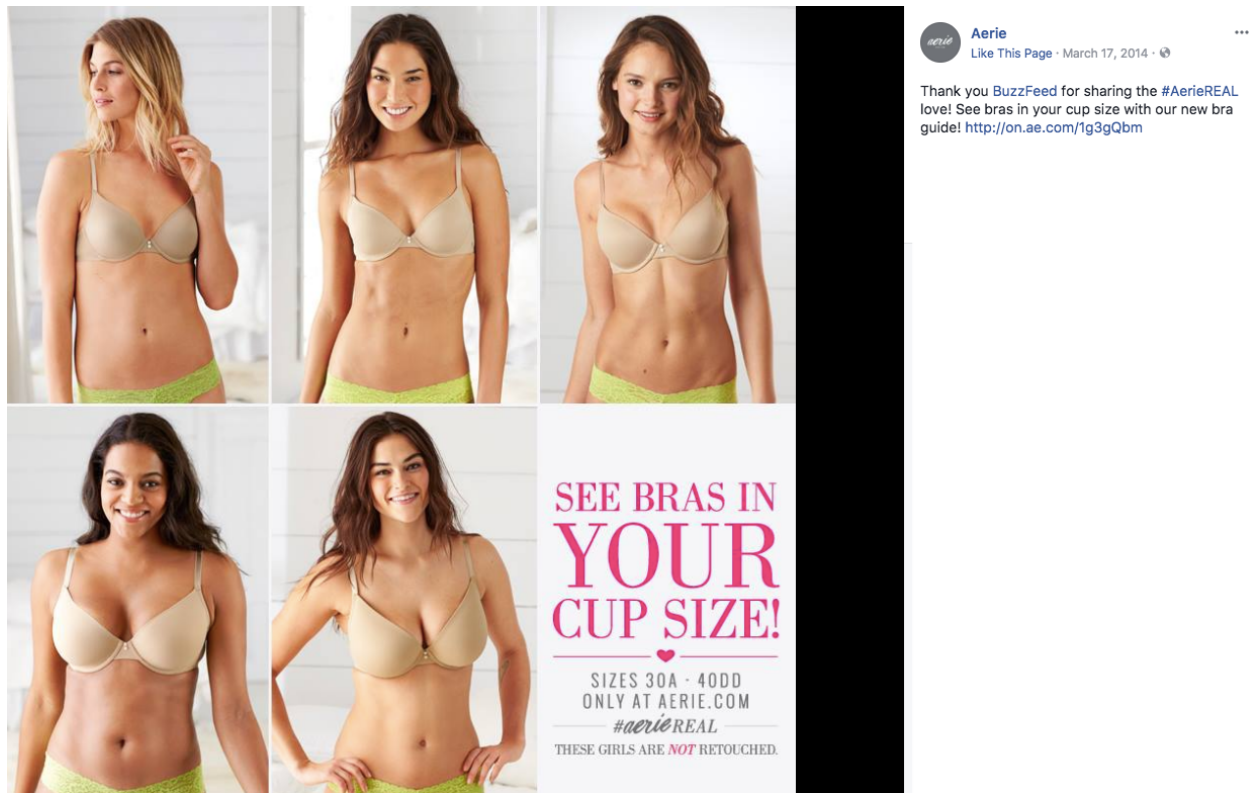
³Capitalizations and emphasis of copywriting and captions is found in the original text unless otherwise stated.

rather than a woman, although the vast majority of models featured in Aerie advertisements are women in their early to mid-twenties.

The model's face is not shown in this image, and there is no indication of her identity or personality in the caption of the image. In addition, the race of the model is unclear, though her skin tone is perhaps best described as tanned, which is a reading encouraged by the words "Sun's out" set beside the model. This lack of individuality in the photo depersonalizes the model, and presents her as a mannequin rather than a model. In addition, the reduction of the model's and consumer's body parts to something 'cute' to be 'shown off' serves to objectify both model and consumer. This objectification and depersonalization is contradictory to the Aerie REAL campaign's goals of celebrating individuality in women and authentic beauty, whether it edits the image or leaves it unedited. The use of the phrase "show off" in the image implies to the consumer that their body is an important asset to use to attract others, who will see the viewer's body at its best in this new style of underwear. By placing the phrase "cutie booty" and "show off" directly beside the rear end of this particular model, the image might present the idea to the viewer that this body is one that should be considered desirable to have and show off.

While the woman in this specific image has visible stretch marks and cellulite, which are typically removed in image processing, she is still very obviously very thin, approximately the same size as a typical model. Her right hip bone is visible even though she is facing away from the camera, which is indicative of her small size. In addition to her small size, the model has a very conventionally attractive rear end with very little flatness or dimpling. While this woman may not have been retouched, she is essentially no different in size or shape than a typical model.

Image Two: Our Bras Fit Everyone, Kind Of



The image above is an example of an advertisement featuring multiple women, with the purpose of illustrating how Aerie’s products fit different sized people. In this photograph, three of the five women shown appear to be close to a typical model body type – extremely thin, with small waists, hips, and breasts. Two of these women are white, and one is Asian. The second and third women on the top row have the bones of their rib cages and hips showing and extremely prominent collarbones visible. Of the two women on the bottom row, who are slightly larger than the women on the top row, one is white and one is black. These women could be considered larger than the typical fashion models. and have less muscled abdomens, no visible rib cages, and larger breasts. However, their waists are still small, and their bodies still fit in the idealistic ‘hourglass’ figure type (with their waists being smaller than their busts and hips). In fact, all five models have this body type.

In addition, all of the models have conventionally attractive facial features. While one of the women is Black and one is Asian, they both have the same smooth, wavy hair and light skin as the White models featured in this image. Every one of the women in this image is smiling, and only one is looking away from the camera. Their direct gazes, smiles, and posture (open, with their arms at their sides) gives an impression of comfort in the bras they are wearing. No stretch marks, scars, or disabilities are visible in any of the women in this image. As mentioned below, the copywriting in this image refers to the models as girls.

The copywriting on this image reads “SEE BRAS IN YOUR CUP SIZE!” in pink, with the word ‘your’ being larger than the rest, emphasizing the personalization of Aerie’s products and the wide range of sizes offered by Aerie. The next level of copywriting reads “SIZES 30A – 40DDD ONLY AT AERIE.COM / #aerieREAL / THESE GIRLS ARE *NOT* RETOUCHE” (American Eagle Outfitters, 2014), with the ‘not’ written in pink and the rest of the text in grey for emphasis. Not all of these sizes are stocked in physical stores, as indicated by the caption referring to them being only at aerie.com. From personal experience shopping in Aerie and American Eagle brick and mortar stores, it is the sizes on each end of the range that are not stocked, particularly in the larger range. All bras featured in this image are the same colour; however, one of the selling points of Aerie’s ‘Real Me’ line is that the pieces come in different colours to match different skin tones.

Aerie advertises on its website that it carries bra sizes 30A to 40DD (ae.com, 2018a), while some of its bra styles start at a ribcage size 28. This means that Aerie bras will fit women with 26-36 inch rib measurements, and 27-41 inch bust measurements (Wizard of Bras, 2018). This is a fairly similar size range for standard North American lingerie stores – for example, Victoria’s Secret’s PINK line, marketed to a similar age group as Aerie, carries sizes 30AA to

38DDD (victoriassecret.com, 2018). European lingerie brands tend to carry a wider size range than North American brands; Freya, a Wacoal brand based out of the United Kingdom, offers sizes 28B-38GG (freyalingerie.com, 2018). Freya's products would then fit women with 26-36 inch rib measurements, and 28-46 inch bust measurements. Specialist lingerie stores carry even wider ranges of bra sizes, with AAA to J sizes available on some boutique webstores.

Aerie's wireless bras (typically called 'bralettes') have a size range of extra small to extra-large (ae.com, 2018a). According to Aerie's size chart, these bralettes will accommodate a wider size range than its traditional wired bras; from 30A to 40D (ae.com, 2018a). These products are given names like "Play", "Chill", and "Boho", which implies to the consumer that they are a more casual, laidback option. The text accompanying almost all of Aerie's products emphasizes that its products are the 'real' or 'authentic' choice in terms of lingerie purposes; the brand has an entire line called the "Real Me" line, feature bras, bralettes, and underwear. The "Real Me" bralette features the text "[t]oday and every day, let the REAL you shine. This bralette feels like a second skin" (AE.com, 2018c). The phrase 'second skin' implies to the consumer that this bralette is basically like wearing nothing at all. Combined with the phrase 'REAL you', and the advertisements in which the models featured look entirely comfortable, as discussed the above, position the Real Me line as the authentic choice.

Images Three and Four: Iskra Lawrence, Brand Ambassador

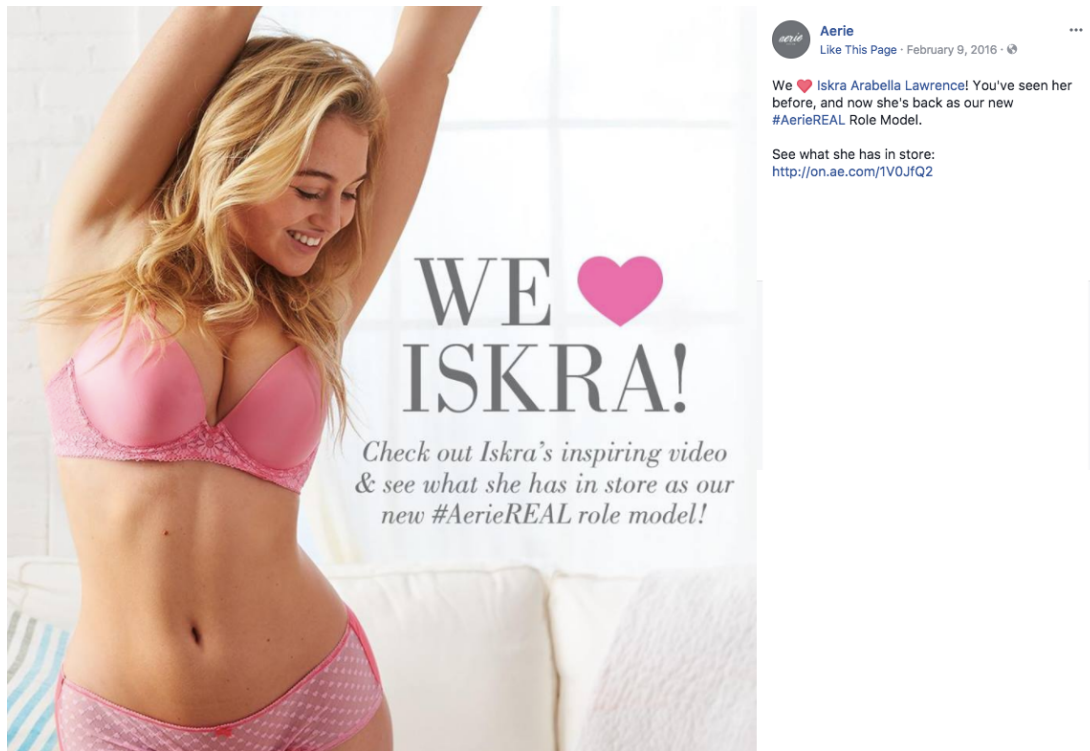


Image Three

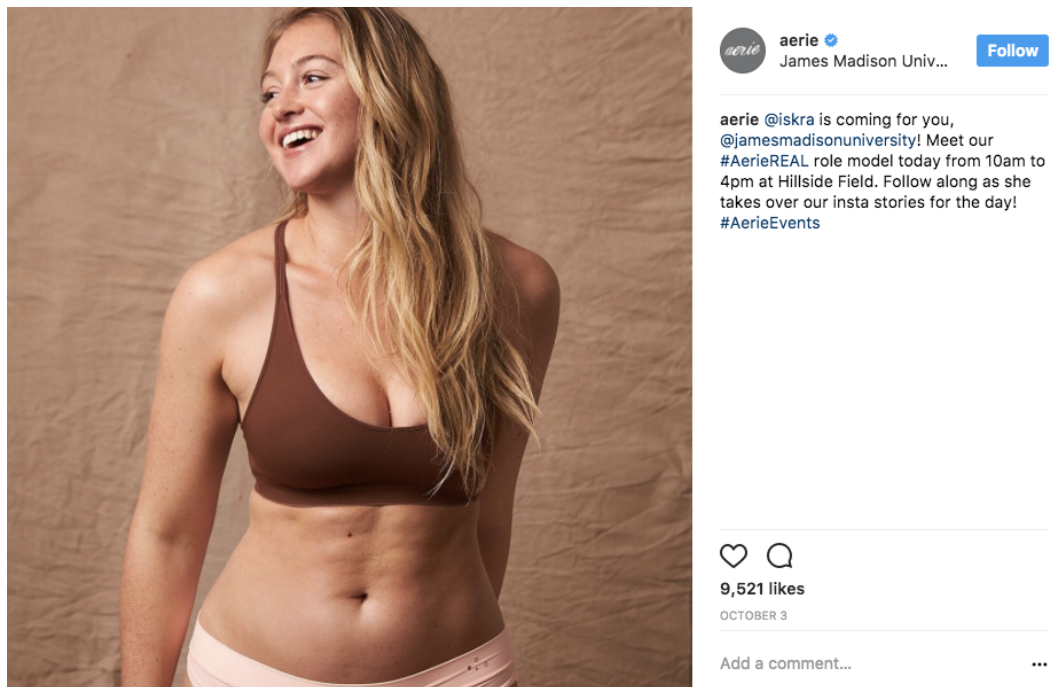


Image Four

In this section, I will be describing and analyzing two images featuring Iskra Lawrence, a White British model who is the brand spokeswoman for Aerie and the Aerie REAL campaign. She is called an ‘Aerie REAL role model’ by the company in much of the materials featuring her. Lawrence is also an ambassador for the National Eating Disorders Association, which is a cause that Aerie promotes and runs campaigns with (and has been given awards by). While Lawrence, as a US size 10-12, technically fits the specifications of a plus size model by industry standards, she prefers not to be referred to as such. Lawrence does not allow photographs of herself on her own social media channels to be edited, and advocates for body positivity on her website and in her posts. She also runs her own body positivity campaign called “every BODY with iskra [sic]” on her website, which uses the hashtag #everyBODYisbeautiful to promote body positivity on social media platforms.

The first image of Lawrence was posted on Aerie’s Facebook account on February 9th, 2016. This image is the announcement of her partnership with the brand, and features Lawrence standing dressed in lacy pink (presumably) Aerie brand lingerie, stretching her arms over her head and looking towards the ground, smiling. The copywriting reads “WE ♥ ISKRA” in grey, with a pink heart vector. The next level of copywriting reads “Check out Iskra’s inspiring video & see what she has in store as our new #AerieREAL role model!” (American Eagle Outfitters, 2016). The background of the photo is primarily white, and appears to be a window and couch, although it is fairly indistinct and blurred. In this photo, Lawrence does not have any visible cellulite or fat on her abdomen, due to her stretched posture. However, there is a very small bit of fat visible on her left elbow. By stretching upwards, Lawrence’s hourglass figure is emphasized; her left hip is also cocked, which makes her waist appear smaller. Her cleavage is significant, and emphasized by her raised arms and the choice of bra in the image, which is one of Aerie’s

push-up models. This is aligned with typical lingerie model photographs. Her hair is long, wavy, and worn down over her shoulders, which is typical of Aerie's models. She is clearly larger than a typical model, and just as clearly is not truly plus-sized.

In this image, Aerie is announcing Lawrence's relationship with the brand as a 'role model'. This language choice is significant; rather than calling her the brand spokesperson or even the 'face of the brand', as Aerie occasionally refers to other models, with these words the company could be positioning her as someone for its consumers to emulate. By calling Lawrence a role model, Aerie makes a value judgement on her work as a model and spokesperson. This makes her work more than just modelling; Lawrence also speaks on behalf of the company, both on her own social media (for example, her YouTube channel *iskra*), and at events like the one discussed in the analysis of the next image. The copywriting on this image uses the word 'inspiring' to describe Lawrence and her story, again positioning her as someone its consumers might look up to and emulate. The brand uses all of these factors to create a mythos around Lawrence. Choosing someone larger than the average model serves to underline and emphasize the Aerie REAL campaign goals of accepting individuality and redefining what might traditionally be considered a flaw as physical beauty; however, in all other aspects (including her conventionally attractive facial features, lack of scarring or disability, and the way Lawrence poses in photographs to highlight her traditionally attractive body type), Lawrence is no different than a traditional model.

This is not to say that Lawrence's choice as role model is not significant. She is larger than the typical model, and a more realistic weight for consumers to see modelling Aerie's clothing; based on the average size of the North American woman, Lawrence is closer to an average size than a typical model. In her video about her role as Aerie role model, Lawrence

discusses her own journey and insecurities; at one point, she cries, saying that other companies made her feel “less than” for her weight, while Aerie told her she was beautiful as she was, and empowers her in her work (Iskra Lawrence, Our New #AerieREAL Role Model, 2016). She ends the video by calling on the viewer to challenge the idea that they “aren’t good enough”, and see themselves as beautiful the way they are (Iskra Lawrence, Our New #AerieREAL Role Model, 2016).

The second image of Lawrence was posted on October 3, 2016, on Aerie’s brand Instagram account. In this image, Lawrence is posed against a plain brown background, smiling or laughing off to the side at something not in range of the image. She is wearing a brown sports bra/bralette, and plain pink underwear. Lawrence is not stretching upwards in this image; she appears to be a more ‘natural’ pose, with her shoulders rolled slightly forward and her arms by her sides. This posture results in some fat being visible on Lawrence’s stomach, as well as under her right arm. The bra she is wearing also visibly cuts into her ribs around the bottom band, rather than lying flush against her ribcage, illustrating that her ribcage is not directly under her skin. Her bra, even though it is a sports bra (meant to minimize breasts for physical activity), shows significant cleavage. Her collarbones are visible on the right side of her chest, as her (again, long and wavy) hair hangs down over her left shoulder.

This image was posted to promote an event Lawrence attended at James Madison University in the United States. This event consisted of her visiting the school and taking over Aerie’s Instagram account for the day to post her own images and thoughts on the then-recently launched Stories feature. Although there is no copywriting directly on this image, the caption of the image again refers to Lawrence as the Aerie Real “role model” (American Eagle Outfitters, 2016).

This photograph of Lawrence is very different in some ways to her announcement post – she has some visible fat, she is not wearing lingerie but instead basic undergarments, and she is not posed carefully to show off the conventionally attractive aspects of her body. However, she is still smiling and laughing in this photo, presenting an image of Lawrence as eternally happy carefree, and comfortable. This image uses Lawrence’s blond hair, big smile, and average body as signifiers for the myth of the all-American college co-ed (especially as the event referenced is taking place at a large American university), a myth which might be emulated by Aerie customers (even though Lawrence herself is British). Aerie uses Lawrence, the embodiment of this archetype, to appeal to it. While she does have a less carefree moment in her introductory video, essentially all of Lawrence’s subsequent Aerie materials and imagery present her as the myth of average, happy girl next door. By using language such as ‘inspiring’, ‘empowering’ and ‘role model’, Aerie implies that Lawrence as the girl to be, and positions her as someone its customer base might wish to emulate.

In positioning Lawrence as its brand role model, and the embodiment of the Aerie REAL campaign, Aerie also makes her the embodiment of the brand’s personality, and allows the brand’s personality to be influenced by hers. Lawrence is down-to-earth and honest – she cries in her Aerie videos and speaks frankly about her past body-image issues. Almost every picture of her presents her as cheerful, smiling, and carefree (and she is certainly young; Lawrence is 28 years old, and appears younger in many of her photos). When she first started speaking as Aerie’s brand ambassador, she was a somewhat daring choice, as she is larger than past models used as lingerie brand ambassadors (for example, Victoria’s Secret and Miranda Kerr). Lawrence both embodies and influences the sincere and exciting aspects of Aerie’s brand personality.

Image Five: The Women Behind the Brand



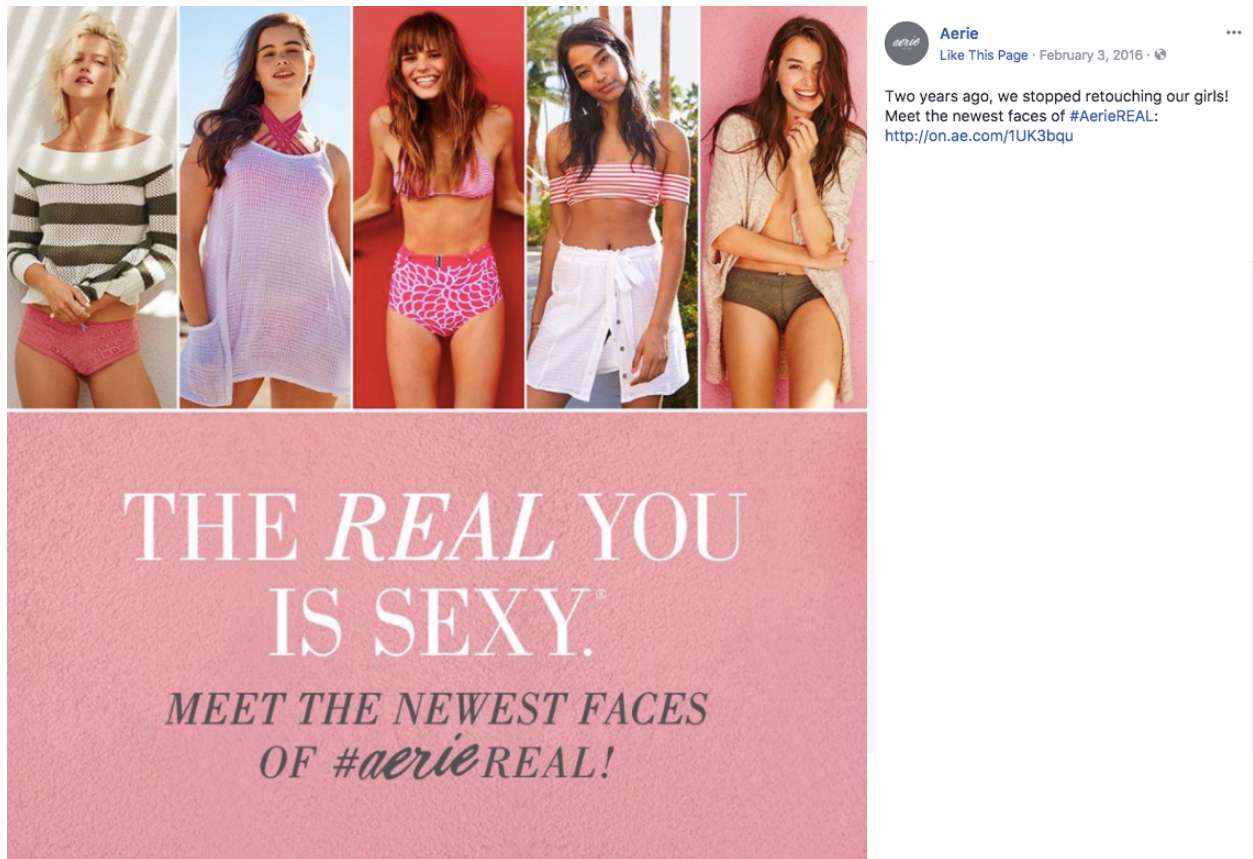
This image was posted on the Aerie Facebook on September 26, 2016. It features five Aerie employees – not models, but rather employees of the brand itself, who work behind the scenes. All five women are wearing light blue shirts printed with “no makeup, no problem #aerieREAL”, and the caption attached to the image reads “#NoMakeupNoProblem, aka [sic] just another day in the Aerie office! #AerieREAL” (American Eagle Outfitters, 2016). The women have their arms around each other’s shoulders or waists, and are all smiling directly into the camera. Four of the five women pictured are above average attractiveness, and one is of average attractiveness; all of the women are fairly thin, equivalent to the larger than average models featured in the Aerie posts analyzed in the previous section of this paper. All five women are White. Four of the five women have a conventionally feminine appearance with long hair and groomed eyebrows. The fifth has very short hair cut in a more masculine style, rather than a

feminized “pixie cut” style. All five women appear to be very young, likely under thirty. None of the women have scars or acne.

This image presents Aerie employees as the typical, average woman working in an office. It could be using these women to show that Aerie as a brand is consistent in its ethos; it does not retouch its models because women are beautiful the way they are, and its employees don’t wear makeup to work, because they are beautiful the way they are. It is clearly not an advertisement in the traditional sense. The brand is not selling a product in this image, but it is selling itself. Using non-models on its official accounts between pictures featuring professional models allows Aerie to personalize its brand for consumers. Four of the five women are more attractive than average, but in a more accessible way than non-edited professional models. This could allow consumers to see themselves represented on Aerie accounts, in the same way that the composite images of consumers’ pictures that Aerie posts might.

There is no copywriting or captions posted with traditional Aerie advertisements stating that its models are not wearing makeup, only that they are not digitally retouched. In this sense, this image is related to an entirely different issue than the Aerie REAL campaign’s stated non-usage of photo editing techniques. The caption attached to the photograph does not identify the women or make any mention of what duties and tasks they actually perform at Aerie; as much as models, in this image they are being presented as an idea to be consumed rather than as people. While these women are being shown as average women working in an office, four out of five of them are far higher than the average in terms of attractiveness. The fact that as non-models, the employees’ appearances are irrelevant to their work is not addressed.

Image Six: The Women In Front of the Brand



In contrast to the previous image of behind-the-scenes Aerie employees, the image displayed above shows five Aerie models. All of the models are pictured wearing at least one piece of lingerie; one model is in a bra and panties with her hair mostly covering her chest, while two others are wearing panties and a shirt. Another model is wearing a bra and skirt, while the final model appears to be wearing a bathing suit or lingerie set and a sheer dress that covers her from shoulders to thighs. Four of the women are White, and one is either East or South East Asian. Four of the five women are very thin, essentially typical sized models. The other woman, while somewhat larger, is still not plus sized and is the only model wearing a piece of clothing that covers both pieces of her lingerie, and blurs the outline of her body.

The copywriting on this photo reads “THE *REAL* YOU IS SEXY” in large white print, and “MEET THE NEWEST FACES OF #aerieREAL!” in smaller grey italicized text below. The caption attached to the post reads “Two years ago, we stopped retouching our girls! Meet the newest faces of #AerieREAL” with a link to a page that, at time of writing, no longer exists. However, upon review of the comments, it is clear that this page contained videos by each of the models, introducing them by name and addressing the reasons they chose to work with Aerie and their own body insecurities. While the models are not named in the picture or post, they were named in the subsequent videos about them.

While the images of each model within the larger image are small, there are still no visible imperfections or flaws on any of the typically sized models, including cellulite or minor visible fat. The larger model does not show any signs of either, though it is possible that she has some cellulite or visible fat under the dress she is wearing. Four of the five models shown have long, wavy hair, as is typical for an Aerie image; the fifth model has shorter, shoulder length straight blond hair. This long, wavy hair has a connotation of being untamed and not overly groomed; the style is often referred to as “beachy” or “beach waves”, as if the person has just finished swimming in the ocean. This implies a low-maintenance, authentic style to viewers of the advertisements (though in practice, this kind of waved hairstyle is actually fairly difficult to style on most hair types).

These five women are the women that Aerie has chosen to represent its products and brand to its consumers, and the advertisement refers to them as the “faces” of Aerie’s REAL campaign. In this vein, Aerie has chosen five conventionally attractive women, four of whom are also extremely thin; in essence, the models themselves are no different than models for any other

lingerie or women's clothing brand. The only difference is the lack of photo editing techniques on pictures of the women themselves.

Image Seven: Three's a Crowd



This image features three women dressed in bikinis in the foreground with waves and a beach visible in the background of the image. It was posted on the Aerie Facebook account on May 10, 2014. All three women are wearing very small, low coverage blue bathing suits. One woman is Asian, one is White, and one is Black. The two women on the left have their arms around each other's waists, while the third woman on the right is reaching out with her hand behind the middle woman's back. All three women are smiling; the Asian woman is looking into the camera, and the White and Black women are looking out of frame to the left of the image. All three women have long, wavy hair that is wet and styled away from their faces, implying they have just come out of the water behind them. The overall effect is an image that looks like the subjects are having fun, and the advertisement is incidental; the camera has simply caught three friends playing around. All three women are very thin; they would all be classified as

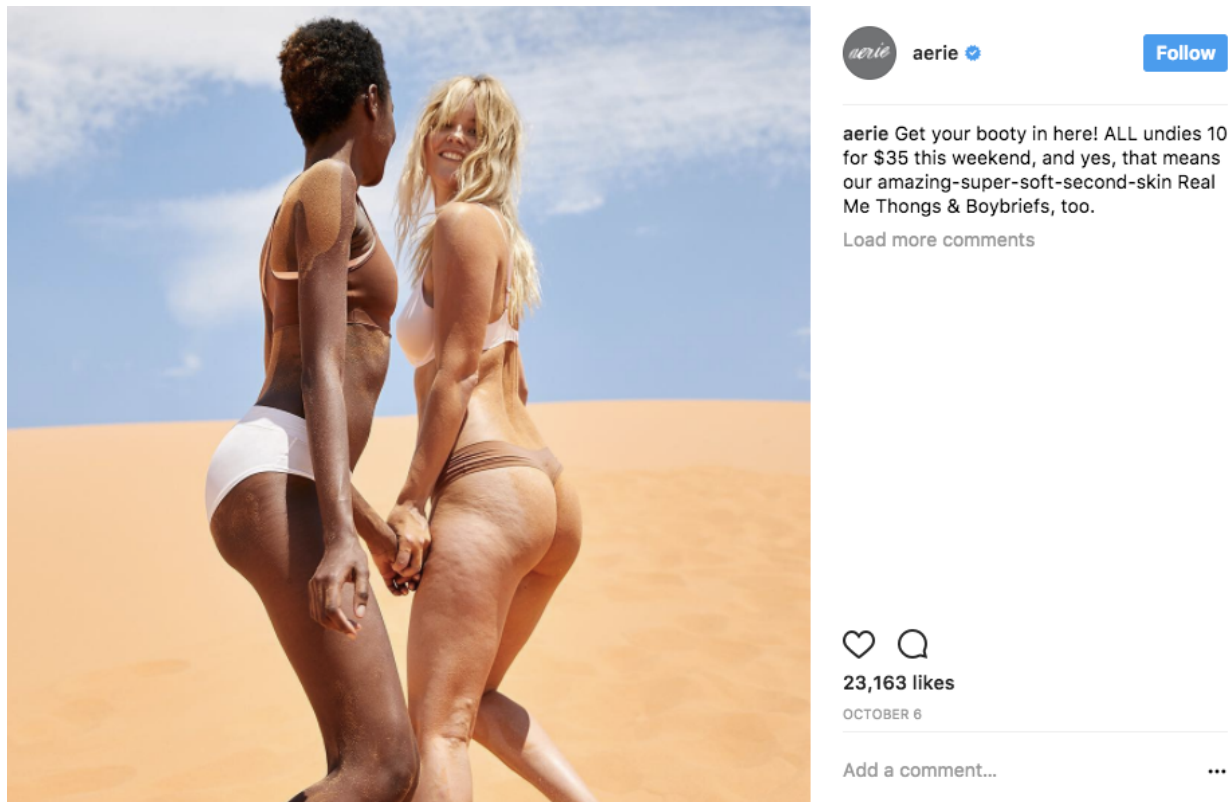
typical model sized, and all have hourglass figures. The Black model has larger breasts than the other two models, but that is the only way any of these women differ from the typical model body type.

The copywriting on this image reads “THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS A PERFECT BEACH BODY. FREE SWIM BOTTOM WHEN YOU BUY ANY SWIM TOP” (American Eagle Outfitters, 2014). There is a white banner underneath the image, as featured in Image One, that reads “P.S. THE REAL YOU IS SEXY. THESE GIRLS HAVE NOT BEEN RETOUCHEd. #aerieREAL” American Eagle Outfitters, 2014). As in the previous image, the ‘not’ is emphasized in pink, while the rest of the text is grey. The caption of the post reads “Salty hair, don’t care!” and proceeds to advertise a sale on bathing suits on the Aerie website.

All three of the models featured in this picture are extremely thin, with bones visible in their rib cages, hips, and shoulders. In addition to their thinness, all three women have hourglass type figures, with small waists and larger busts and hips. While this is a body type that many women have, there is no variety of body types presented in this image. Even in terms of their hair, all women adhere to the feminized ideal of long, wavy hair that Aerie tends to present in its posts and photographs. When taken into consideration with the copywriting on the image, “there’s no such thing as a perfect beach body’, the dissonance in this post is significant. The words attached to the photo say one thing – that all beach bodies are valid and beautiful – while the image itself implies another by presenting three effectively identical body types. This image does not present any alternative to the typical, mainstream model body type. In fact, none of the women pictured have any visible cellulite, scarring, or acne, which are other flaws that the Aerie campaign expressly attempts to redefine as beauty.

In addition, and more subtly, the Asian and White models are interacting with each other in this photograph as well as with the camera. The Black model is on the outside of the photograph, reaching towards the other two models, and facing indirectly away from the camera with her eyes closed, not interacting with the viewer. The other two models are not interacting with the Black model in any way. This serves to separate the Black model and distance her from the other women and from the viewer, a phenomenon that is repeated in Image Eight.

Image Eight: Naked in the Desert



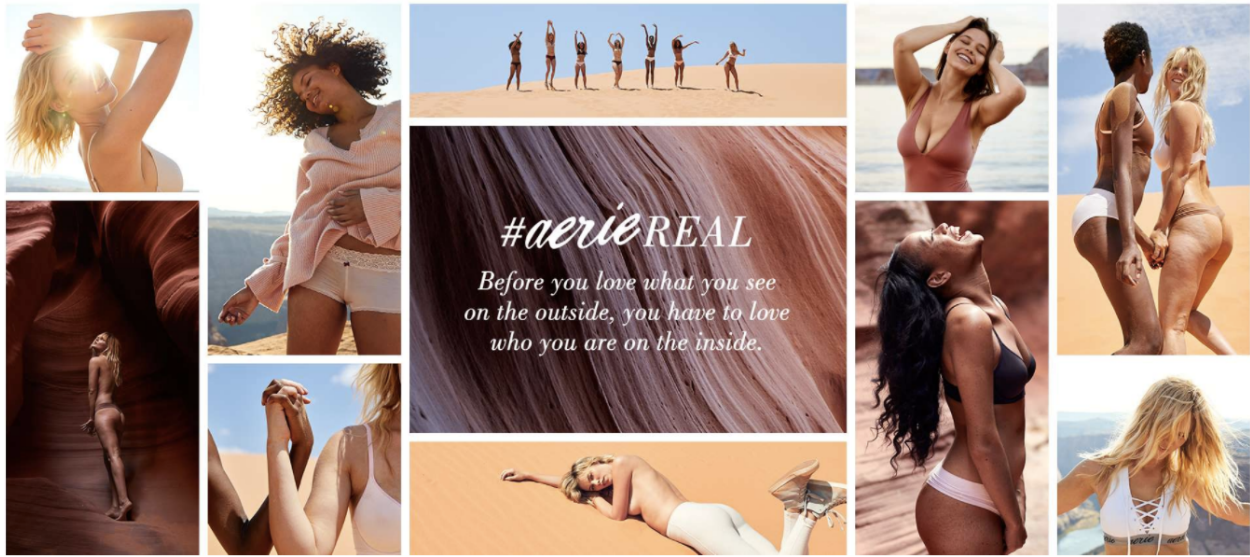
This image features two Aerie models in a desert environment. Half of the background is taken up by blue sky; the other half is yellow sand, and it is bright and sunny in the environment. This image was part of a campaign Aerie shot in the American West; other images from this campaign feature slot canyons found in Utah. The model on the left is Black and facing away from the camera; she is wearing a brown sports bra that matches her skin tone, and full coverage white underwear. Her hair is short and naturally kinky, unlike almost every other model featured by Aerie. She is holding hands with the other model featured, a White woman who is facing the camera and smiling. The White woman is set behind the Black woman in terms of distance from the viewer, but appears to be leading her through the desert. She is wearing a white sports bra and beige underwear that matches her skin tone. Her hair is long, wavy, and blond.

While both models are thin – the same size as typical models – the White model has visible cellulite on the sides and backs of her thighs. The black model also has some visible dimpling under her right arm. Only the White model is facing the camera, but it is clear from the position of her jaw that the black model is also smiling. This image was posted on Aerie's Instagram account on October 6th, 2017. The caption posted with the image reads "...Get your booty in here... and yes, that means our amazing-super-soft-second-skin Real Me Thongs & Boybriefs [sic], too" (sale information omitted; American Eagle Outfitters, 2017). The Real Me line of products comes in a number of different brown, beige, and white colours, and is meant to match many shades of nude for multiple skin tones. Again, Aerie uses the phrase "second-skin" to describe its Real Me line – this can be taken as referring both to the comfort of the fit, and the potential to match the wearer's skin tone. Each model has only one piece of lingerie that somewhat matches their respective skin tones, and the Black model's lingerie covers significantly more skin than the White model's. The White model's underwear is slightly too dark to match her skin, while the Black model's bra is slightly too light to match hers.

This photograph positions the White model as the person in control; she leads the Black model further into the environment, and looks back to make sure that the Black model is following along with her. Her hand is placed over the Black model's, again leading the Black model into the photograph. The Black model, though physically closer to the camera, is distanced from the viewer because her back is towards the camera and her face is turned away, looking at the White model instead of towards the viewer – none of the Black model's facial features are actually visible at all. The White model's hair covers her face to some degree, but her eyes, nose, and smile are all still visible, allowing her to connect with the viewer. Both

models appear relaxed, again seeming as though the camera has captured a pair of friends who are frolicking through the desert in their underwear, rather than modelling a product.

Image Nine: Love Who You Are, If You Look Like Us



This image was gathered from the front page of Aerie’s website in October of 2017. It features seven different models from the campaign that Aerie shot in the desert of the Western United States, as discussed above. The copywriting on this composite reads “#aerieREAL / Before you love what you see on the outside, you have to love who you are on the inside” (American Eagle Outfitters, 2017). Some of the photographs featured in this image were used as product photographs, while others were posted on social media. Some are unique to this image itself. The top right piece of the composite image has been discussed in depth above, and so will not be addressed in this section.

Of the seven models featured, six appear to be of a typical model size. One appears to be larger than the typical model, but still not plus sized. The top left model is White, very thin, and has the typical Aerie wavy hair (although it does appear to be shorter than most other models’ hair). Her face is obscured by a lens flare. Directly below her, a White model poses in a slot cavern. Her body is facing away from the camera, displaying her rear end as she stands on her toes, mimicking the effect of high heels. She is looking upwards out of the cavern, and her long

wavy hair is flowing down her back. Her arms are extended straight down in front of her.

Overall, this model's posture suggests sexualization and helplessness – that she is trapped in the cavern. She is wearing only beige underwear with no bra.

The second left-most model is Black, and is wearing a pink sweater with a pair of short white shorts. She is one of the larger models featured in the group shot. Her hair is kinky, like the other Black model featured in this campaign. She is looking away from the camera and, from the tilted position of her body and the movement of her hair, appears to be dancing. Below her, a light skinned model is holding hands with a dark skinned model; both seem to be very thin, but it is difficult to determine as only their arms are shown. They are holding hands with their elbows towards the ground and their fists in the air with their wrists crossed over each other; more a symbol of power and solidarity than comfort or friendship.

Directly to the right of the models holding hands, there is an image of a model lying on her stomach in the sand, wearing white leggings, running shoes, and no bra or shirt. She has her right arm extending and is laying her head on it, covering her nipple with her bent left arm. Her knees are bent and her feet are in the air, with her ankles crossed. The overall effect of this pose is extremely sexualized; the model is looking towards the camera with a sultry expression. She does not have any visible fat or cellulite, despite her twisted and highly posed position, indicating how thin she is.

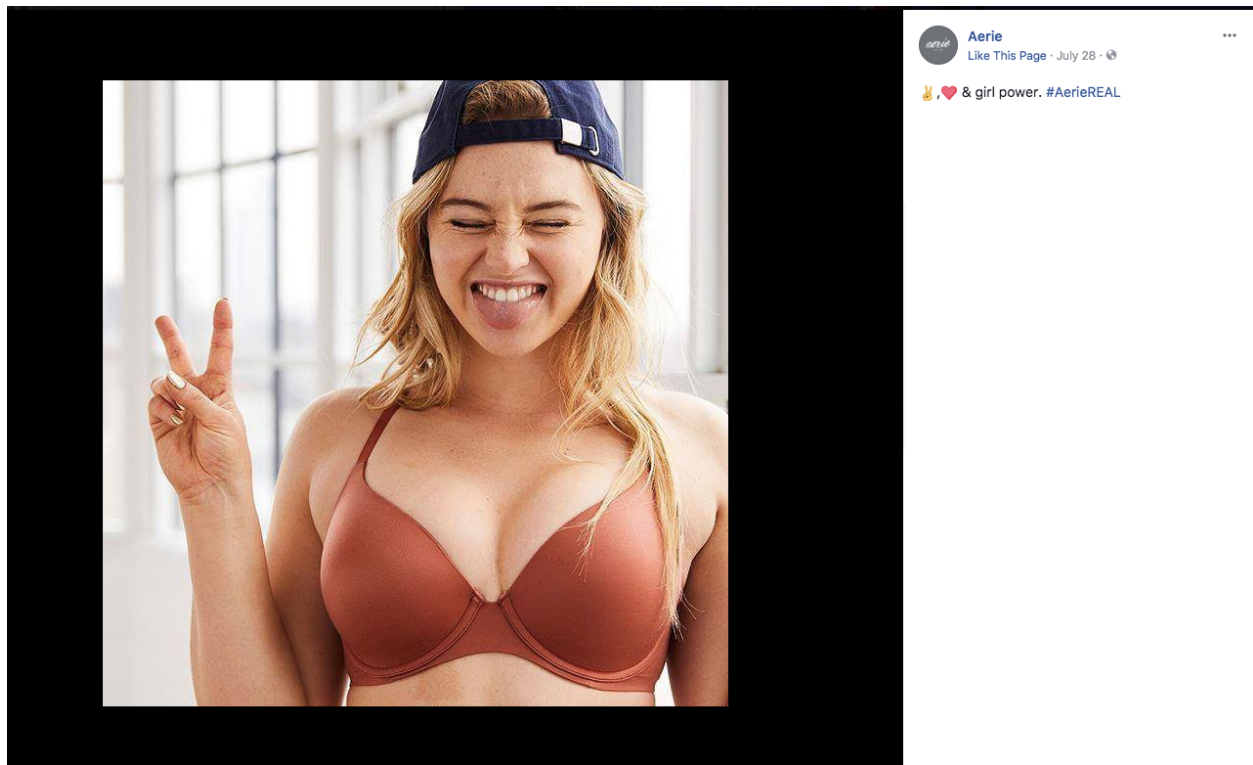
The final three images are all very similar; they feature two White models and a Black model smiling happily. One woman has much larger breasts than the typical model but is still thin with a small waist. She is featured from the waist up in a tight red shirt, pushing her hair back from her face and smiling into the camera. The Black model featured is of a typical model size, and has long, wavy hair; she has her head thrown back as if she is not aware or does not

care about the presence of the camera, and is laughing into the sky. The third model is one of the larger models from the group shot; she is featured from the breasts up, and her long, wavy hair is covering her face.

The variety in skin tone and hair type among the models is certainly a step beyond traditional advertising, and promotes the REAL campaign's implicit goal to feature more diverse models. This image was posted in 2017, and two of the three Black models have obviously kinky hair types, which is different from the 2014 images, where Black models have almost exclusively treated, straight hair. However, all but one of the models featured has the traditional, extremely thin model body type. In fact, even in this composite, the larger women from the group shot are covered up in full clothing or only photographed from the waist up, unlike the thinner models who are photographed in full body shots.

Seven of the ten images featured in this composite present models in extremely sexualized poses, as discussed above, or obscure their faces – or both. These sexualized and faceless images only serve to further objectify the women featured, and seem to contradict the copywriting on the main post itself. There are no elements within these images that prioritize the model loving themselves “on the inside”; the sexualized models are not smiling or giving the appearance that they are enjoying themselves.

Image Ten: Even When We're Ugly, We're Cute



The final image in this in-depth analysis features a blond, larger than average (but not plus sized) model wearing a backwards baseball cap and full coverage red bra. She is shown from the ribcage up, and is giving the peace finger sign while sticking out her tongue, smiling, and closing her eyes. She has long, wavy blond hair, in typical Aerie model fashion, and is not given a name or backstory, although this model is often featured in Aerie social media posts and product images. This image was posted on Aerie's Facebook account on July 6th, 2017. Her face is mildly freckled across her cheeks and nose, and she has visible lines from her facial expression around her eyes and across her nose. The model also has a perfect manicure, visible due to the positioning of her hand, and is clearly very conventionally beautiful despite her 'silly' expression. Aerie presents a carefully curated example of unconventional beauty in this photograph that is not actually unconventional at all; while the woman featured is making an

unattractive face, she is still doing it in a ‘cute’ way with her hands in a peace sign, and is a conventionally attractive woman.

There is no copywriting directly on this photograph, but the caption posted with it reads “[peace sign emoji], ♥ & girl power. #AerieREAL” (American Eagle Outfitters, 2017). This caption is read as “peace, love, and girl power”. The model’s eyes are closed, however, rather than having her interact with or confront the viewer. In addition, while it is obvious that this woman is larger than the typical model, she is shown only from the breasts up. This is an aesthetic choice that makes some sense in this image, as it allows for a focus on the model’s hand gesture and facial expression, but it is also a tactic that Aerie seems to use often with larger models and rarely with thinner models, as discussed throughout the section above. Aerie has not, however, put more clothes than lingerie on this model, as it often does with larger models.

Including the phrase “girl power” with this image and the AerieREAL hashtag connects all three elements; the larger than average model, the campaign, and the concept of women’s empowerment. This connection is explicit in many ways, since the “girl power” phrase is common and is generally understood to be about women’s empowerment. Presenting it with Aerie’s own hashtag connects the concepts in the consumer’s mind, especially for consumers who are aware of the campaign and its lack of photo-editing. Presenting the phrase “girl power” with an image of a larger model also serves to imply that the choice of a non-traditional model is empowering for women.

Main Points

The Aerie REAL campaign has both explicit and implicit objectives. The explicit objectives are, of course, the stated objectives of the campaign. These are found throughout campaign and brand literature, and are summarized below.

1. Aerie will not use photo editing techniques on any female (or, as of 2016, male) model in its advertisements, product photos, or social media posts.
2. The REAL campaign will encourage women to think of themselves as beautiful, even if they are larger than the typical lingerie model.
3. A woman's flaws make her unique, and flaws should be redefined as beautiful.

In terms of these explicit objectives, the REAL campaign is reasonably effective. None of the photographs or images of models show any visible retouching, and enough show flaws like skin rolls, stretch marks, and minor fat deposits to make the lack of editing obvious in comparison to other traditional lingerie brands that do edit images of their models. In addition, a great deal of the copywriting and captions presented with the model images encourage women to think of themselves as beautiful, no matter what they look like. However, there is little diversity in the body types of the models featured. Nearly every model featured has a traditional hourglass figure; perhaps some of them are slightly larger hourglasses, but no model is truly plus sized.

However, the Aerie REAL campaign also has some implicit objectives that are not obviously stated in any materials, but should be considered in the context in which it is operating and running the campaign. Although it never states anything about race, Aerie implies that women of all races should feel beautiful by advertising its nude coloured line of lingerie with tones from pale beige to dark brown. However, there is a lack of non-White models throughout the images on all of the studied platforms. The non-White models that are featured are the same size as traditional models, rather than larger or plus-sized; even the truly plus-sized consumers featured are almost all White. In addition, none of the non-White models had significant flaws (such as stretch marks) other than one Black model with freckles. Aerie has particularly limited representation of Asian models; on one channel, it featured ten distinct photographs of the same

East Asian woman, and only two other unique East Asian women, while there were several unique Black and White women. South Asian women were nowhere to be seen in any materials.

One of the campaign goals falls under both explicit and implicit. Redefining flaws as beautiful is something that the Aerie REAL campaign addresses often. And it is true that campaign images feature models with stretch marks, freckles, and visible skin and fat rolls. However, there are no models with significant scarring or even acne. The brand materials then present some flaws – minor ones – as beautiful, while ignoring other physical ‘flaws’ common in its target audience of young women. In addition, the brand does not actually feature any models who are not conventionally beautiful – there are not even models who could be considered unconventionally beautiful (for example, FKA Twigs with her large, gapped teeth, or Tilda Swinton with her protruding eyes and lack of eyebrows). Even the in the photograph of the non-model Aerie employees, four of the five women featured were above average attractiveness, and all were well below the size 14 of the average North American woman.

Another aspect not addressed in the early campaign is disability. One social media post (on Facebook) showcases a woman who is missing one arm and is an academic athlete. This post has an inspirational tone, and is a way for the company to promote acceptance of disabilities. However, the woman featured is not a model, but rather an Aerie customer. As discussed above, this has less significance than featuring a paid, disabled model, since models are the women Aerie presents as its brand representatives that its consumers might emulate.

Aerie has, however, recently expanded this aspect of the REAL campaign. More recent product photos on the Aerie website, such as those from December 2017, show models who are amputees and have colostomy bags. The photographs are also featured in stores (I have personally seen them in the Aerie Ottawa location at Bayshore mall), prominently displayed as

large posters over racks of clothing. These visible representations of disability are a step forward for the campaign and company, and should not be minimized, though they did come over three years after the start of the campaign.

There are a number of themes that characterize the Aerie REAL campaign. Some of these themes are explicitly stated in copywriting or captions, and some of them are presented more subtly in images and graphics. Two of the most obvious themes that characterize the campaign are that being ‘real’ (or authentic) is ideal, and that women should accept and redefine their flaws as beautiful, individual quirks. Individuality is a theme often emphasized in copywriting and captions on images featuring both of themes; the campaign suggests that the way to be unique is to be authentically yourself, while accepting your own flaws. This concept ties directly into all of the explicit campaign objectives discussed above. The fact that Aerie does not use photo editing techniques on its models creates a real, concrete, and consistent acknowledgement of these objectives and this campaign theme. This is true both for images in which the lack of editing is explicitly stated and images in which it is not; because all of the branding material focuses on the lack of editing, a majority of even casual consumers visiting the Aerie website will be aware that the models featured in advertisements and product photos on the website are unedited. This is particularly true for images that show obviously unedited features that are typically removed in image post-processing, like stretch marks and skin rolls.

The other main theme that characterizes the Aerie REAL campaign is the importance the company places on the redefinition of flaws as beautiful. Aerie places great emphasis on this redefinition throughout campaign materials, both in its officially produced copywriting and in the quotes it pulls from social media users and consumers of its product. The company presents this redefinition of flaws as the path to the acceptance of flaws; before a flaw can be accepted, it

must be considered beautiful. This theme is less in line with the goals of the campaign, and again emphasizes physical beauty above all else. There is no room, in Aerie's brand, to recognize a flaw as something that a consumer could want to change for any reason. Instead, flaws must be considered beautiful and must be accepted. This theme again places emphasis on physical beauty as the most important factor towards body acceptance; there is almost no room in this campaign for a consumer to recognize that their physical appearance is not the most important part of themselves. The few posts that discuss the importance of non-physical aspects like a person's actions and personality still refer to these as "beautiful" or "inner beauty".

Chapter Five: Conclusion

There are a number of themes that characterize the Aerie REAL campaign, including authenticity, individuality, and the redefinition of flaws as beautiful being the ideal. The text based posts that Aerie creates underline and embody these themes. In its text based posts, Aerie makes statements that support the explicit and implicit goals of its REAL campaign; emphasizing the lack of photo editing on their models, the redefinition of flaws as beautiful, and celebrating individuality. Aerie uses these themes to create a specific way for their consumers to be authentic. In the explicit statements of the REAL campaign, the ideal woman is one who recognizes her uniqueness and accepts her own perceived physical flaws as physical beauty.

Through its explicit statements regarding the use of photo editing to alter images of women's bodies, as well as its copy writing and comments on images that encourage women to accept their own perceived flaws as beautiful, Aerie creates an idea of authenticity that defines its personality as a brand and company. Aerie does, to some degree, recognize that it focuses heavily on physical aspects of beauty, with several posts and images mentioning the importance of 'inner beauty'. The overwhelming focus of the campaign, though, is focused on the redefinition of perceived physical flaws as physical beauty. Even a campaign promoting non-traditional ideals of beauty is still promoting ideals of physical beauty. While it is important to recognize the academic significance of Aerie's positioning itself as a champion for the authentic woman and non-traditional body shapes in the market, and the positive effect that this seems to have on young women, it is equally important to recognize that at a deeper level, the campaign is not much different than traditional advertising. While the REAL campaign creates a specific idea of authenticity for its consumers, it is still an advertising campaign designed to sell products and presenting images of women that its consumers might emulate in their own lives. The REAL campaign may well work towards the explicit and implicit goals outlined above; however,

Aerie's ultimate goal as a company is to make a profit.

However, the majority of the images that Aerie presents in its branding materials do not feature women that are very different from typical models. The majority of the women featured are still thin and conventionally beautiful, and while their flaws are occasionally highlighted (such as stretch marks), there are not many of them. In contrast to this, Aerie chose a spokesperson for its brand who embodies the themes of the REAL campaign in Iskra Lawrence. She is vocal and unapologetic about her body and being larger than the typical model. She both embodies and influences the brand's personality, as it is developed through the rest of Aerie's branding materials.

The 'real world' impact of the REAL campaign itself is obvious. Aerie is not the first company to position itself as the 'authentic' choice for fashion consumers, and it certainly will not be the last. However, it was one of – if not the – first companies to make a concrete commitment to authenticity in its images of models through the consistent lack of photo editing techniques. By doing this, Aerie makes a statement on women's bodies, and each of its model choices says something important about what the company might consider to be the ideal female body that it wants to present its products to consumers. Consumers do see themselves in these models; that much is obvious with a glance at Aerie social media comment sections, in which commenters overwhelmingly praise the brand and its choices of slightly larger than average or 'flawed' models with stretch marks and skin rolls.

By using the idea of authenticity to frame their branding materials and activities Aerie positions itself in a very specific market niche. The company uses explicit statements in their branding materials (through text superimposed on their advertisements, quotes from celebrities, and quotes from their consumers) to create this specific idea of authenticity in relation to

women's bodies and lives. This idea of authenticity involves the redefinition of flaws as beautiful features, and women giving themselves license to be their true self. The company supports these explicit statements about authenticity with explicit statements about photo editing techniques, namely its rejection of these techniques on images of its models. This rejection of photo editing is obvious in many of Aerie's brand images and advertisements, typically by visible stretch marks, skin rolls, freckles, and small amounts of visible fat on models' bodies. Often – particularly in the early stages of the #aerieREAL campaign – these aspects are the primary focus of the image (for example, in the Sun's Out Buns Out image discussed at length in the semiotic analysis section above).

Aerie also chose a brand “role model” who embodies its more implicit idea of authenticity in Iskra Lawrence. She speaks often about her negative experiences with other companies shaming her for her natural body type and features, and about coming to accept her body and beauty as she is. She also does not allow photo editing techniques to be used on any of her social media accounts, similarly to Aerie's explicit policies. Her association with the brand helps to align its brand personality with her own, and her status as a larger than average model underscores the brand's statements about authenticity in terms of redefining traditional beauty. Lawrence appears in official Aerie advertisements, as well as branded content not strictly for advertising purposes (such as introductory videos, public speaking engagements, social media posts, etc.).

While it makes many of these explicit statements on photo editing techniques and encouraging women to accept themselves as beautiful regardless of physical flaws, Aerie does not necessarily reflect this in the models the company uses in its advertisements. The majority of the models the company hires are thin and conventionally beautiful; no models (in the images studied) have acne, significant scarring, or disabilities. They present images of women with

minor stretch marks, fewer visible ribs and collarbones, and small skin rolls without editing out these flaws. Almost all of the women in the advertisements and product photos analyzed have similar long, wavy hair and hourglass body types. By making explicit statements about authenticity, Aerie appears to be giving women license to be themselves; with its actual advertisements, posts, and branding materials, it presents only a slightly less limited idealized version of women's bodies and beauty than traditional retailers. This allows Aerie to position itself in its market as the authentic choice for its customers, while remaining appealing on a mass level by still using conventionally beautiful models in its advertising materials.

As mentioned previously, there are signs that this is changing in the REAL campaign. Posts and physical materials in store that have been put out recently (and thus are out of scope of my data collection) portray disabled models using similar techniques as non-disabled models. It is not out of place to consider that this may be one of the first times that a woman with, for example, a colostomy bag, has seen someone like herself portrayed in a sexualized context. These newer materials also include a model with Down's Syndrome, a model who uses a wheelchair, and a plus sized woman much larger than their previous images of plus sized women. However, all of these models have only one unconventional facet to their appearance; they are still conventionally beautiful, young and generally speaking thin (unless their weight is the unconventional facet of their appearance). This shows some limitations to what the brand will consider an acceptable model.

Of course, given that this paper is the result of master's degree research, there are some limitations inherent in the study and possibilities for future research that should be addressed. I will address the limitations of the study first. The most significant limitation of this study is one inherent in the methodology used, and is the lack of generalizability of my results. Essentially,

because I chose to use semiotic analysis of specific advertisements published by one company, it would be difficult to apply the specific results of my analysis to other cases. However, the broader trends and information about the concept of ‘authenticity’ may still be used.

Another issue with this study is the lack of available information on consumer perceptions of the lack of photo editing techniques and the use of ‘authenticity’ as a means to sell products to young women. This issue is the result of my choice not to interview participants or conduct focus groups, and opens an avenue for future research into this topic. While there is some limited information on consumer perceptions available in the form of social media comments (and I have considered some these comments in my overall analysis), the usefulness and rigor of this information is limited by the lack of anonymity and depth inherent in the platforms it is hosted on. I believe that future research on consumer perceptions of these techniques, especially in the age group catered to by Aerie, would be useful and legitimate.

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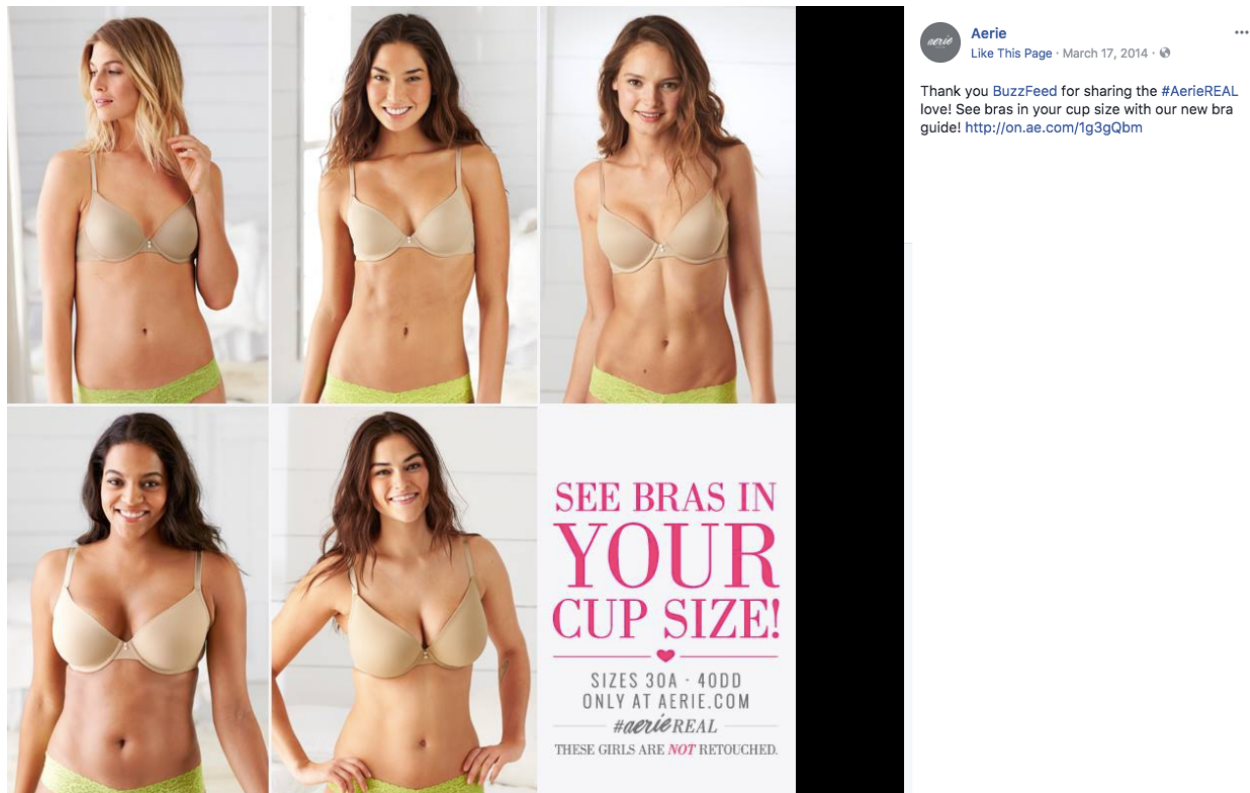
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Appendix One: Example of Race Categories



This image was classified as having three White women (the first and third women on the top row, and the second woman on the bottom row), one Asian woman (the second woman on the top row) and one Black woman (the first woman on the bottom row). These determinations were made through visual analysis of the women's skin tones in combination with their facial features.