

**When Retailers Target Women Based on Body Shape and Size:  
The Role of Ethical Evaluation on Purchase Intention**

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### **When Retailers Target Women Based on Body Shape and Size: The Role of Ethical Evaluation on Purchase Intention**

It is important for marketers to know whether a consumer's ethical evaluation of a company based on the company's targeting strategy impacts the consumer's purchase behavior. To compete more effectively, many companies focus on those consumers they have the greatest chance of satisfying (Kotler & Keller, 2006). This practice of target marketing (also known as targeting) is the intentional pursuit of exchange with a specific market segment through advertising or other marketing activities (Ringold, 1995). This practice "provides greater profit potential for the firm" (Perreault, Cannon, & McCarthy, 2015, p. 101); however, targeting may be an ineffective strategy when it results in controversy.

This study aimed to assess consumers' ethical evaluation of a company's practice of targeting to women based on body shape and size in the clothing retail industry and its impact on the consumer's planned purchase behavior with said company.

A web-based survey was conducted via an electronic questionnaire. Female consumers on a web-based research panel were invited to participate. Qualtrics, provider of online survey software and panels, collected 421 responses from females living in the United States, ages 18-29, with a household income level of at least \$20,000.

Two scenarios were provided for respondents to evaluate. In both scenarios, the companies are targeting women, ages 18-29. Size charts were provided in each scenario. The scenarios were not primed with possible risks. In both scenarios, respondents were informed of the average waist circumference for U.S. females within the 18-29 age range. In one scenario, the company offers a wider range of sizes available demonstrating a company not targeting based on body shape and size. In the second scenario, the company limits its size options to demonstrate the use of targeting based on body shape and size.

In the context of this study, ethical evaluation was shown to have a statistically significant influence on attitude. Attitude refers to the degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation of the company (Ajzen, 1991). This finding reinforces Folkes and Kamins' results that firms' ethical actions influence consumers' attitudes toward firms (Folkes & Kamins, 1999).

When retailers target women based on body shape and size, ethical evaluation has a statistically significant influence on subjective norm. Subjective norm represents the perceived social pressure to consume (or not consume) products from a company (Ajzen, 1991). In Dove's Global Beauty and Confidence Report (Etcoff & Paxton, 2016), researchers report that women are increasingly feeling intense pressure regarding their appearance.

According to Solomon (2015, p. 279), “our desires to match up to these ideals – for better or worse – drive a lot of our purchase decisions.” Consistent with Solomon’s stance and Petroschius and Crocker’s (1989) study, the findings of this study demonstrate that the perceived social pressure plays an impactful role on the likelihood a consumer will purchase a product.

In the study, perceived behavioral control was shown to have a statistically significant influence on intention. Perceived behavioral control is the extent to which people believe that they can perform a given behavior if they are inclined to do so (Ajzen, 2012). This finding is consistent with extant Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) literature. The easier a business makes it for a customer to purchase (such as short lines in physical retail stores, an easy online checkout process, stored credit card information, two-day shipping, etc.) the more likely a consumer will purchase.

Perhaps the most interesting finding of this study was related to the influence of ethical evaluation on intention. Despite the difference in overall ethical evaluation of the two scenarios and the lower mean score for ethical evaluation in Scenario 2 (representing disagreement with ethicality of the business), ethical evaluation was not a significant predictor of intention to buy. This means that while the consumer believes the business to be unethical, it does not influence their intention to buy from that business.

The findings of this study could possibly be explained by the fact that only 21.3% of the female participants in the study reported wearing a size XL or XXL and above. This could have led to a minority of the participants feeling excluded by the size options offered by the company. Whereas 78.8% of the female participants reported a size L or smaller, which could have led the majority of the female participants to feel included by the size options offered by the company. The company in Scenario 2 targeted consumers based on body shape and size by only offering sizes below the average waist circumference of 33” (XL or size 16) as reported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for females aged 18-29.

Marketing managers have been encouraged to behave in an ethical manner because a firm's ethical behaviors have been thought to influence consumers' image of the company, thus product sales. This study reflects that other factors including social pressure and the ease of buying are more important to females ages 18-29 than the ethicality of the company.

Marketing managers should be aware of how the public perceives the ethicality of certain targeting strategies, such as targeting women based on body shape and size. In the context of this study, consumers evaluated the company targeting women based on body shape and size as less ethical in comparison to the company who did not target women based on body shape and size.

In the context of this study, young women (ages 18-29) have grown up with the beauty pressure imposed by women's fashion and beauty magazines. With the long-term exposure to idealized images shown in advertising, it is possible that these young women have accepted this as a social norm and therefore is less of a personal deciding factor in their purchases. A possible reason for this might be that clothing is a publicly worn and visible product to others. The results could have been different if the product was used in private. This is a suggestion for future research.

The present study provides evidence that a person may evaluate the actions of the company as unethical, yet express an intention to purchase due to the significant influence of the subjective norm. The dilemma the consumer may be experiencing subsists within the perceived social pressure of subjective norm. The social pressure from their referent groups to buy from the company may be great and influence the consumer's intention to purchase congruent products. Reference group influence can profoundly impact on behavior (Gupta & Ogden, 2009). Some consumers will develop aspirations of belonging to a reference groups such that peer pressure may override their own personal ethical beliefs about a company.

The findings from the present study conflict with the results of Jin Ma et al. (2012) who posit that the influence of subjective norm on purchase decision making may be less prominent among the younger consumer cohort. "This young consumer segment likes to learn about benefits of products and services through their own experiences" (Jin Ma et al., 2012). In the present study though, subjective norm was a significant indicator of purchase intention. A possible reason for this might be that clothing is a publicly worn and visible product to others. The results could have been different if the product was used in private. This is a suggestion for future research. A second reason might be the social dilemma experienced by the consumer. Social dilemma, under the auspices of social exchange theory, whereby the anticipated benefits and costs of engaging in ethical purchase behavior are weighed (Gupta & Ogden, 2009).

Ideally, moral norms should have an important influence on behaviors with moral or ethical dimensions, and work in parallel with attitudes, subjective norms, and PBC (Conner & Armitage, 1998). The results of this study provide evidence that exceptions to Conner and Armitage's ideal may exist. This study suggests that a consumer's ethical evaluation of a company can be overridden by other factors such as the pressure to conform to the ideal norm. In today's society, extreme thinness is a social and cultural ideal, and as a result women often feel great anxiety and pressure to measure up ("Body Image: About Body Image," 2009).

When making decisions in this study, the belief about what social referents (e.g. a spouse, close friends, or colleagues) thought was more important than their own personal ethical evaluation.

The media's coverage and criticism of unethical business practices may generate buzz, sell newspapers, and increase program ratings, but this study showed that consumers did not include the ethicality of the retailer in their purchase decision-making process. However, criticism from media could also influence public perception and ultimately social norm, which did have significant influence on purchase intention.

Criticism could surprise marketing managers if the public perception differs from the marketer's perception of product harm and targeting strategy. It is also worth noting that ethical evaluation differs among customers. While some customers may view a firm as ethical, others could still view it as unethical.

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