

# ASHLEY GRAHAM ON INSTAGRAM AND THE REPRESENTATION OF LARGER WOMEN

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**Abstract:** This article aims to analyze the fashion, media and Instagram interactions of women that fall outside of beauty standards, which help influence other women's self-esteem, as well as what is considered the "perfect body" and how a model has worked to break this imposition. A case study of the American model and activist Ashley Graham displays a singular fashion trajectory throughout the years and how it broke paradigms, enabling the plus size market and motiva-

ting women around the world to share their own photos without filters and/or digital manipulation on social media.

**Keywords:** Plus Size. Representativeness. Fashion. Instagram. Body positivity.

## INTRODUCTION

With the development of the fashion industry in the globalized world, consumerism enhances the masses' needs to purchase

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beauty goods and products, and this urgency to mass production.

With the technological advances, the enhancement and scope of instant internet news contribute to the spread of fashion in connection to the media, especially on social media platforms that end up promoting false impressions that often affect women's self-esteem.

On social media, there is a large number of photos that are enhanced to make women look perfect. This practice corroborates the distortion of the image women have of themselves and others around them. The search for the "perfect body", commonly seen on Instagram, currently the most popular social media platform and considered harmful to mental health, becomes obsessive, according to a survey carried out by the Royal Society for Public Health<sup>1</sup> in the United

Kingdom in 2017.

However, as a counterpoint to the use of filters and digitally enhanced images, which emphasize thin bodies, there are countless profiles of women who do not hide their natural bodies or deformities which can be also in the online and social media.

This work will discuss how the media and fashion determines the society perspective of what a perfect body would be over the decades, as well as the transformations of the established patterns over the years. In this instance, it portrays a demonstration of how fashion and the media have built a preference for thin women for advertisements in detriment of the overweight female body, considered not ideal, weakening the self-esteem of women for centuries. The presentation and trajectory of model Ashley Graham, how she is seen

in the fashion world and what she did to reach this level, including her achievements and struggle for activism and body positivity will also be addressed in the third chapter. This article aims to explore the growth and improvement of plus-size culture influenced by Graham.

## OBJECTIVES

### GENERAL OBJECTIVES:

To explain the definition of semiotics to explore the comprehension of how the media affects minds, influencing thoughts.

### Specific Objectives:

- To make an inventory of visual and textual resources used by the Ashley Graham to demystify the “standard” body dictated by the media;

- To contribute to the discussion on the impact of media and fashion on women’s bodies;

- To analyze how fashion campaigns influence societal behavior and changes in the definition of the “perfect standard”, thus generating the consumption of products acquired in the expectation of achievement of the perfect body standard.

## PLUS-SIZE IN THE WORLD

According to Lars Svendsen in *Fashion: A Philosophy* (2010), fashion originated at the end of the medieval period, in the beginning of the European Renaissance, with the advent of capitalism. Even with clothing variations present, there was no autonomy in clothing choices. Clothing changes occurred in Europe at a time of economic de-

velopment. New colors, textures and clothes models started to be commercialized, emphasizing body shape. In this period, larger bodies were considered the beauty ideal because they were associated to good financial conditions.

However, it was only in 1920 that the term plus size was created, by the American brand Lane Bryant. In 1904, she opened a maternity clothing store and had a maternity dress as the best-selling item. Upon realizing that the market did not produce larger clothes, Lane created several models for women that fell outside the standard. To promote the collections, catalogs from the 20s used the plus-size term for larger clothes. Years later, several stores around the world started to sell larger clothes and adopted the plus-size term.

In 1930, the term beca-

me global, which was considered a landmark at the time, since, in the 18th century, the use of corsets was essential for the female body for waist reduction, breasts lifting and to maintain an erect posture.

According to researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in an article published in the Journal of Communication<sup>4</sup> in 1997, the 1920s held the record for the highest amount of eating disorders, in addition to being the period when the ideal woman had to be extremely thin.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), in a campaign carried out in 2018<sup>1</sup>, it was found that one in eight people are overweight. In 2019, 55.7% of the population was over-

<sup>1</sup> Data on the campaign: <https://exame.com/ciencia/um-em-cada-8-adultos-no-mundo-e-obeso-diz-oms-no-dia-mundial-da-obesidade>

rweight. By 2025, approximately 2.3 billion people will be above the considered ideal weight, according to Body Mass Index (BMI) standards.

To define an individual as obese, the Body Mass Index (BMI) must be equal to or greater than 30 kg/m<sup>2</sup>. This index is mainly studied in the age groups between 18 and 24 years old and from 55 to 64 years old. It is noteworthy that being overweight does not mean that the person is not in good health. According to Wolf (1992, p. 247), “when fat is associated with poor health in women, it is due to the habit of dieting and the emotional stress of self-hatred”. Considering that big bodies need a diet, especially women, is to imply that they are lazy and do not eat well, in addition to expressing judgment and inconvenient situations.

Because it is an aesthe-

tic standard that deviates from fashion trends, fat people find it difficult to find clothes that fit their physical type and the act of shopping act ends up causing discomfort. This situation generates psychological and social problems in these individuals, who see themselves in the margins of society and feel like an excluded.

In comparison, plus-size stores, with sizes 44 onwards, do not offer assorted prints and models as in standard clothing stores. This measure reinforces the stigma suffered by larger people, which are considered as non-standard in a way that affects their self-esteem. In some cases, people pay seamstresses to produce clothes in the measurements that fit them.

Fashion helps individuals build an identity and demonstrate their personality through clothes, despite the fact

that innovating trends define the clothing industry. As of this century, some brands started to include women with larger measurements in advertising campaigns, but the reception is not yet unanimous. Although the demand for larger clothes has increased, society sees this market development that seeks acceptance as something radical, exerting numerous negative criticisms on it. These reluctant positions with those considered outside the beauty standard demonstrate how society still maintains and tends to accept the “non-fat standard” more calmly. The stores work to suit all audiences; however, there is a lack of styles for the larger-sized community. Smaller mannequins are apparently more attractive, as they allow for more clothing options.

## THE FEMALE BODY IN

## FASHION

Victoria’s Secret (VS), a lingerie and cosmetics brand founded in 1977 in the United States, has been holding lingerie fashion shows annually since 1995 using the same body type. In November 2014, the brand produced and directed a lingerie commercial using only thin and tall models entitled “Perfect Body”. VS was considered irresponsible for affecting the self-esteem of women who do not have the thin and tall biotype as the models chosen to star the ad, leading to a petition with more than 16,000 signatures for Victoria’s Secret to publicly apologize for the commercial.

To demonstrate what the Perfect Body would be, unknown women with different physical shapes came together to make a satire of the aforementioned commercial. They reproduced

the photos in the same way as the brand, but showing various physical shapes.

Figure 1. Collage with the satire (above) and the Victoria's Secret 2014 campaign



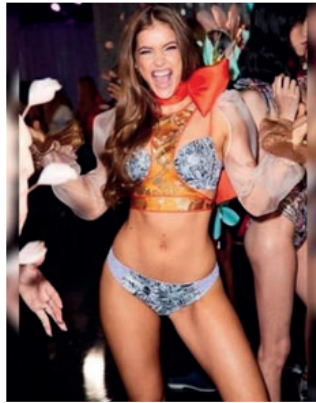
Source: Lingerie talk<sup>2</sup>

Another controversy compared to other models of the involving Victoria's Secret was related to the removal of the Hungarian model Barbara Palvin for being considered plus-size, that is, having a larger body size

compared to other models of the brand. Barbara, 26, is 1.75 m and 60 kg. After being removed from the runway show, people asked on social media what would be considered fat for VS.

Figure 2 - Model Barbara Palvin in the 2012 Victoria's Secret fashion show

2 Available at: <http://www.lingerietalk.com/2014/10/31/lingerie-news/25-tweets-that-explain-what-the-iamperfect-campaign-is-all-about.html>



Source: Rio Magazine<sup>3</sup>

Criticism and lack of representation financially affected the brand, that, in 2019 only, had to close 50 stores in North America and was considered a risky investment by Moody's Investor Service<sup>8</sup>, an agency that classifies debt and investments in various international market segments.

Another case of rejection of the curvy body happened with American singer Bebe Rexha, 31. Because she was considered overweight, many designers refused

to create clothes for her to wear at the Grammy Awards, as she was considered “too big”. The singer posted a video on her Instagram page reporting the difficulty she had in finding suitable clothing for the event, blaming clothing brands for making bigger women feel inferior. “(...) don't say you can't dress someone who isn't the size of runway models”, she said, out of breath on the social media platform.

<sup>3</sup> Disponível em: <https://www.rio-magazine.com/quem-e-barbara-palvin-a-nova-angel-da-victorias-secret/>



Figure 3 - Singer Bebe Rexha in an I Heart Radio music event in 2017



Source: beberexha<sup>4</sup>

Despite not gaining space in the standard market, plus-size clothing sales have grown steadily in Brazil. Clothes measurements that fit more than half of Brazilian women are still labeled as non-standard, suffering prejudice. However, in 2018, clothes sales starting at size 46 moved around R\$ 7.2 billion, according to data from the Brazilian

Plus Size Association (ABPS), this is a Civil association of plus-size fashion and clothing entrepreneurs, founded in July, 2016.

The Brazilian market also faces the lack of clothing pieces to produce larger sizes, which only correspond to 25% in retail in Brazil. However, in 2007, the percentage was even lower and corresponded to only

<sup>4</sup> Available at: <https://beberexha.com.br/bebe-rexha-quebra-recorde-no-iheartradio-music-festival/>

5%, according to ABPS.

Italian luxury brand Gucci, founded in Florence in 1921 by Guccio Gucci, is considered the second largest clothing brand in the world and the third largest international luxury brand.

With 425 stores across the globe and 9 of them in Brazil alone, Gucci was banned in April 2016 by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)<sup>11</sup> in the United Kingdom. The reason

for the ban is related to the use of very thin models at unhealthy levels in an ad for the brand's new collection. According to the Gucci statement, the reason for choosing thin models was to highlight the clothes, not the bodies. The case was considered serious for influencing anorexia and bulimia, eating disorders in which 95% of patients are women and about 5% to 15% cannot withstand the treatment (WOLF, 1992).

Figure 4 – Gucci collection campaign banned in 2016



Source: Dona Moda<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Available at: <https://gauchazh.clicrbs.com.br/donna/moda/noticia/2016/04/campanha-da-gucci-e-banida-por-ter-modelos-muito-magras-cjpl6mg5q008rwsn9m7ikxi4.html>

Another similar case is that of Yves Saint Laurent, a French fashion designer born in 1936. Between the 60s and 70s he became famous worldwide in haute couture for creating sophisticated clothes at affordable prices. One achievement of the stylist's career was creating the female tuxedo that revolutionized the era, as it was looked down upon by society that women wear long pants like men. Laurent managed to reverse the trend and his creation meant that, in fashion, there was less distinction between men's and women's clothes.

Yves Saint Laurent passed away in June 2008, but his creations continue to earn money. The stylist raised US\$ 350 million, around R\$ 609.8 million reais, after his death. Yves Saint Laurent's brand continues to be regarded as one of the most dazzling in fashion. One of his col-

lections, however, was also banned by ASA. The 2015 campaign was considered unhealthy and irresponsible for photographing a model thin to the point where her ribs were visible. After the controversy, the agency decided that the piece would have to be changed.

Figure 5 - Yves Saint Laurent campaign photo in 2015



Source: El País<sup>6</sup>

Fashion has followed society for many years, being present since the formation of people's identity, which is why the market is so vast. It is through the way one dresses that an individual communicates and expresses desires. Clothing styles will vary from time to time according to fashion, as clothes create an identity; this ended up becoming a way to demonstrate which social class the individual fits into (MORIN, 2001). Similarly, Maf-

fesoli (1996) points out that:

The language of the body that shows itself, that wears, and the fashion of clothing, of language and the habits that are served to a person in this sector has nothing of frivolous anymore...it can be said that this frivolity is the clearest indication of a new logic. (MAFFESOLI, 1996, p. 183)

Thus, clothes have a so-

<sup>6</sup> Available at: [https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2015/06/03/estilo/1433329335\\_684027.html](https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2015/06/03/estilo/1433329335_684027.html)

cial function, as individuals shall dress according to the social group to which they belong, since clothing and habits are connected (MAFFESOLI, 1996, p. 173). Clothes enable certain individuals to belong to a certain class, for example, gothic groups, who generally dress in black clothes, have lush haircuts or dye it in different colors, wear dark makeup and choose a style and behavior considered appropriate for that group.

There are those who like to follow what is trending, that is, what has been worn by celebrities, but celebrities do not only define fashion. There is also the desired female body, that body that shall fit the clothes that trending.

Morin (2001) affirms that fashion has two engines: the need to change oneself and attraction to the new, to be ori-

ginal, affirming the identity of the group where one is inserted. Svendsen (2010) expresses that there are three categories in fashion: luxury, which is tailored, has high prices and is haute couture; industrial, which is the mass production of expensive to cheap clothes in stores, and the streets, clothing created by cultures. Still according to Svendsen (2010):

Little by little, beauty leaves the stage as a central aesthetic norm, and the insistence on a new character of things becomes the most decisive factor: the logic of fashion has supplanted all other aesthetic conditions. This is particularly obvious in visual arts and similar forms of expression. (SVENDSEN, 2010, p. 29)

But why has fashion attracted and continues to attract so many generations? According to the author (2010), “people started to compete to display wealth”. In the past, as well as nowadays, the various classes wore certain costumes and objects identifying where they are from and sometimes trying to look superior.

Araújo and Leoratto (2013) report that clothing is the way individuals show themselves to the world and that the body follows fashion changes. According to the authors (2013),

The female form was, in fact, altered by clothes, as they were sometimes disguised by clothes that hid women’s forms (the 1960s and 1970s), and sometimes it became very evident (p.735).

Moreover, he states that

these garments “not only revealed female silhouettes, but also exacerbated certain body parts – long legs, swollen breasts (from the 1980s onwards)”. Fashion influences directly affect women’s bodies through the images that society imposes. The authors further say:

The female body is in evidence in society, in addition to being a vehicle of self-affirmation for individuals, who can use it as a passport for inclusion in social groups (ARAÚJO E LEORATTO, 2013, p.734).

Thus, the elaboration of an ideal female body receives influence of the fashion industry, which ends up dictating current beauty standards. Some designer stores, for example, only sell clothes in small sizes, considering these to be “unique”, thus contri-

buting to the crystallization of the thin beauty standard, as they only accept to dress this biotype. This makes women less accepting of the body they have because of the difficulty in finding clothes they like, affecting their self-esteem and leading to the search for aesthetic procedures and/or extreme diets to make adapt them to the clothes they wish to wear. In this way, the ideal body will be the one on which clothes will fit well.

### **THE FEMALE BODY IN THE MEDIA**

Every decade, a type of female beauty standard is defined. In the 1950s, the curvy body of American actress and model Marilyn Monroe, the most successful in Hollywood in her time, was considered the standard of beauty in society. Just a decade into her career, the fil-

ms she was part of have grossed more than two hundred million dollars.

The actress died in 1962 due to an alleged overdose. Despite her short career span, Marilyn became, and is still considered, the ultimate sex symbol of that time, in which women considered attractive by the media and fashion had slim bodies and slim waists. With 1.65 m and 54 kg, the actress stood out for being more curvaceous than the others.

Figure 6 - Actress Marilyn Monroe in 1951



Source: Pinterest<sup>7</sup>

The media, social media, fashion campaigns, TV shows and especially women's magazines influence social behavior. This is brainwashing, in a way that disorients the consumers (SVENDSEN, 2004). The media dictates aesthetic standards, causing society to consider and consume only what it shows, as in the case of the actress from Marilyn Monroe.

As a source of inspiration for people, the media ends up promoting both benefit and harm to society, such as changes

in appearance (MAFFESOLI, 1996), as if there were requirements for women to have a certain body type, and, in this way, reach the socially accepted beauty ideal (ARAÚJO E LEORATTO, 2013).

The female body's beauty standard starts to be represented by thinness, definition, smooth and firm skin, without body hair. It implies that this is the beauty that must be accepted by society, but the female body considered ideal has changed

<sup>7</sup> Available at: <https://br.pinterest.com/pin/567875834241336835/>



over time.

Overweight women were considered a sex symbol for the arts in the 40s and 50s. For years, the female audience has sought thinness to suit what the media calls the “perfect standard”. The demands for women to achieve a body considered beautiful affects physical and mental health (WOLF, 1992). The media, including fashion and television commercials are responsible not only for setting the aesthetic standard, but also for selling this standard through advertisement and services that promote the perfect body, offering attempts to achieve a biotype that is not possible.

According to a 2016 survey by the Patrícia Galvão Institute, around 65% of women did not feel represented by the media and 60% are frustrated for not seeing themselves within the es-

tablished pattern. It is persuasive, as advertisement exposes body modifications that contribute to the search for plastic surgery and beauty products, in an attempt by women to reach the ideal aesthetic standard.

In some campaigns, women are sexualized by appearing in short clothing emphasizing their toned bodies, as in alcoholic beverage advertisements, where female body exposure is used to attract consumers. In this way, the media builds consumerism for the product being sold and for the body type it exhibits. Therefore, the body becomes a product for fashion and the media, which ends up setting standards that define what is ugly or beautiful, what is and what is not accepted, thus awakening in women the desire to follow that standard (LIMA E SILVA, 2016).

Figure 7 - Alcoholic beverage advertisement photos



Source: Cachos e Fatos<sup>8</sup>

Consumerism of products that promise weight loss is caused by the beauty industry. Advertisements for modeling belts, shakes, lipsticks and chewing gum that make one resist sugar cravings, even without scientific proof, are abundant in all means of communication, whether it is radio, TV or the internet. On entertainment sites, advertisements with flashy titles like “Model drops 20kg in a few

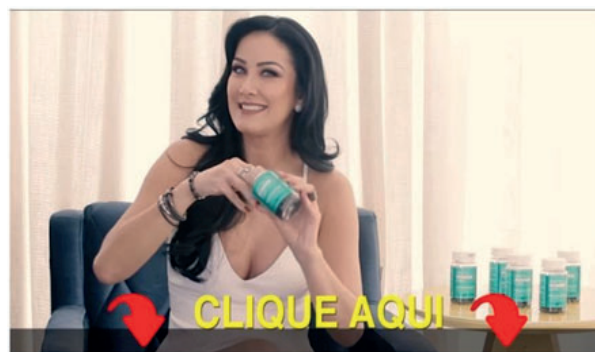
days” are shared. When checking the news, the Internet user is directed to a thermogenic product website (Food supplement aimed at burning calories).

The various images of thin women and reviews from other women about the product’s efficacy work and are quite convincing, making the narratives seem natural (MAFFESOLI, 1996). Just using models with toned bodies in advertisements,

<sup>8</sup> Available at: <http://cachosefatos.com.br/2012/08/a-mulher-amendoim-e-as-cervejas-que-descem-quadrado.html>

some with use of photoshop, contributes to sell a perfect appearance aimed at convincing customers that the thinness shown was acquired through the advertised product. The desire to acquire such items becomes stimulating, causes social inequality (SVENDSEN, 2004), and ends up inducing a delusional desire for a product (WOLF, 1992).

Figure 8 – TV show host Helen Ganzarolli in a thermogenic product commercial



Source: [noticiassegredosdesaude.com.br](http://noticiassegredosdesaude.com.br)

According to Wolf (1992), the mass consumption of goods used to reach the socially accepted standard generates billions of dollars every year:

The dieting industry generates 33 billion dollars a year; the cosmetics industry, 20 billion dollars; the cosmetic plastic surgery, 300 million

dollars, and the pornography industry, with its seven billion dollars, rose out of the capital generated by unconscious anxieties. Through their influence on mass culture, they manage to use, stimulate and reinforce this hallucination in an ascending economic spiral

(WOLF, 1992, p.21).

Nowadays, many of these advertisements are run by Instagram. The photos and short videos offer engagement and visibility for the public to purchase “miraculous” products promoted by an idol.

The beauty ideal has no limits. Changes are being made to women every year, whether through aesthetic procedures or manipulation through beauty products. According to Araújo and Leoratto (2013, p. 736), the ideal body is a “body manufactured and built by aesthetic ideals dictated by society itself.”

Maffesolli (1996) considers consumerism as an impulsive and irresponsible behavior to be introduced in an environment. Morin (2002) emphasizes that product consumption is pleasurable and ends up becoming

self-consumption and deprivation of leisure, which encourages the fashion universe to continue maintaining the standards it establishes.

## REPRESENTATIVENESS

According to Tomaz Ta-deu da Silva, in *A Produção Social da Identidade e da Diferença* (2008), identity is a construction marked by cultural and social differences, leading to inclusion associated to representation, in which, in its turn, is always visible and expressed by paintings, photographs, writing and voice.

Silva (2008) separates representation into two types: external, through signs and language, and internal, as consciousness. Representativeness serves as a basis for social existence, enabling self-knowledge (MAFFESOLI, 1996).

Creating a style or behavior generates imitation, displaying identity (MAFFE-SOLI, 1996) and, therefore, the aesthetic standards that innovate fashion and end up attracting consumers. Representing the highest standards, which differentiate people through the way they dress, generate appreciation within society, marking changes in fashion and defining a new way of being socially seen and valued.

Identity is a discursive process, that, through strength and inclusion, becomes a way of positively saying: this is how we are. Claiming to be “fat” or “big” is received as an influence for acceptance (TOMAZ, 2008) and it is through representation that identity creates meaning.

Kanavilli Rajagopalan (2003) explains that representativeness is understanding thought towards a desire, it is not some-

thing automatic, it is composed of society’s choices. It becomes debatable whether to accept or not what is being represented, presenting a new language, determining existence and enabling new ways of experiencing the world. Identities are always in transformation, adapting to the changes that appear.

A person who displays their identity and attracts a number of people who identify with it, looking from another perspective, influences the way they think and act. In a casual way, interpretation, whether by objects, bodies or words, creates representation and, consequently, the sensations arising from the new perspectives of observing others make understanding possible.

To highlight the representation movement in the fashion world nowadays, an

initiative that has been gaining market space can be cited: the lingerie brand Savage X Fenty, owned by the Barbadian actress, singer and businesswoman Rihanna<sup>1</sup>. The singer selected models of various body types, si-

zes and ethnicities for the runway shows, breaking the pattern imposed by the fashion industry.

Before the Savage X Fenty shows, the references found in the most famous fashion shows, such as Victoria's Secrets, were of tall and extremely thin women. Rihanna's brand intended not seek to promote a new beauty standard, but rather acceptance, helping women feel good about their bodies without having to worry about changing their appearance to fit a standard. As we can see in the following.

<sup>1\*</sup> Robyn Rihanna Fenty is 32 years old and began her singing career in 2003. Her album sales total 35 million. There were 120 million singles sold in the United States alone. Rihanna launched the Savage X Fenty lingerie line in 2018, with the purpose of encouraging good relationships between women and their bodies. The singer promotes diversity and thinks about the bodies her brand will dress.

**Figure 9** – Rihanna's Savage X Fenty December 2019 lingerie campaign



Source: Metropoles.com

The representativeness of the fat body in advertising campaigns influence body positivity. These actions improve female self-esteem, in addition to encouraging acceptance and space for larger bodies in the media and finally become a base for new standards gain space and become naturalized, as happened with thin standards. Fat body activism has become important for representation, especially nowadays, when social isolation made a large part of the world population overweight during the pandemic period.

After several controversies involving the Victoria's Secret brand and its slim body beauty standards, Ashley Graham questioned, on a 2017 Instagram post, where representation would be in the fashion shows, in a brand that does not even produce a bra over size

50. The model also asked the following question referring to other beauty brands:

If you ask any big girl what her favorite thing is in her closet, she'll give you one of two answers: accessories or makeup. This is because, traditionally, we never had clothes that were nice and affordable. The beauty of makeup, however, is that it's not about size – it fits into every person's makeup bag and should work for every face...There are no size requirements to fit a lipstick. So why have there been so few curvy models in beauty campaigns so far? (GRAHAM, 2018, via Instagram).

Although there still are comments related to health and non-acceptance, larger bodies have been increasingly present.

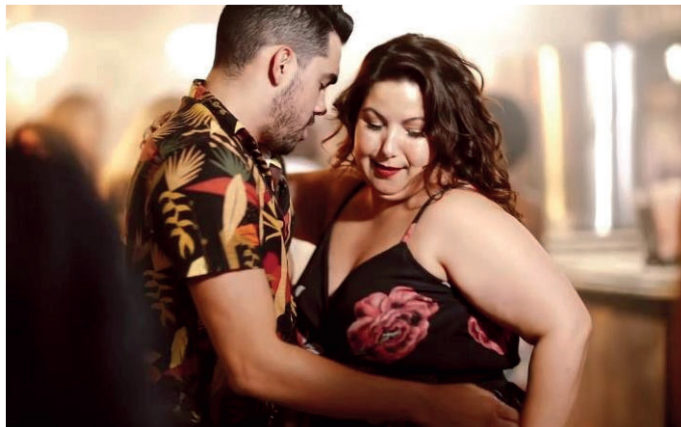
Representativeness has gained space in the media, such as in series, soap operas and music videos, which consequently generates a struggle for acceptance. We cite, as an example, the music video “O nome dela é Jennifer, released in September 2018 by Brazilian singer Gabriel Diniz<sup>2</sup>,

in which the attractive girl who wins over the singer’s heart is many pounds above what is considered “ideal”. The character is played by Mariana Xavier, a celebrity that we will address in chapter three.

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<sup>2\*</sup> Gabriel Diniz is a singer and composer from Mato Grosso do Sul. In 2010 and 2011, he sang in forró bands. In 2013, he started a solo career. The singer’s biggest success, ‘O nome dela é Jenifer’, has 330 million views on Youtube. Gabriel died in May 2019, at 28 years old, in a plane crash in Sergipe

**Figure 10** – Gabriel Diniz and Mariana Xavier in the ‘O nome dela é Jenifer’ music video



Source: Dica de Hoje



## **THE STORY OF THREE CURVY WOMEN**

Going against the standards imposed by the media requires self-confidence; accepting the type of body you have and sharing it on social media to inspire other women to accept themselves requires courage.

Currently, we find many profiles of curvy models who post photos and videos of their real bodies on Instagram. They have no fear of falling outside the imposed beauty standard, but very few know the struggle these models go through to accept themselves and to be in social media, encouraging well-being in other women.

Three women who have gained weight over the course of their careers face severe criticism for not meeting these standards. Their bodies weren't always large

and they had to work their minds to accept themselves and ignore the hurtful criticism they receive.

The positive image they convey supports the struggle against the imposition of the "perfect body" pattern.

## **DORA FIGUEIREDO**

Dora Figueiredo, born in 1994, is a 26-year-old YouTuber who lives in São Paulo. Her videos report situations she has faced, and among these reports, there is the static pressure for a body type considered ideal. In her YouTube channel, and in a January 2020 interview for Marie Claire magazine, Dora reported that her problems with self-image began at age 12. She reported that, at that time, she wanted to have silicone implants because she believed that it was attractive to men.

At age 13, she went on diets without prescription, setting a goal of not weighting more than 60kg because she wanted to be thin like the magazine models. At age 14, she had developed body dysmorphia, a self-image disorder in which Dora saw herself three times bigger.

In another video, Dora reports a period when she was in an abusive relationship and that her ex-boyfriend constantly criticized her body; these situations led her to develop disorders such as anorexia and bulimia.

**Figure 10** – The before and after of Youtuber Dora Figueredo



Source: Dona Gente

When her ex-boyfriend ended the relationship, Dora had to undergo treatment with a psychologist and a psychiatrist. She worked on her self-esteem to accept the large body biotype,

going from 49 kg to 75 kg, distributed over 1.70 m in height. Currently, the youtuber emphasizes the importance of acceptance on social media, with photos and posts about physical appearance,

emphasizing that thinness is not synonymous with beauty. According to the Youtuber:

Today, I look at myself in the mirror with affection. But it was a tough battle to arrive at this moment. From psychological and psychiatric treatments, being careful with my choices, thinking about myself as a priority. I stopped going to places that made me feel bad, following people that made me feel bad, talking to people who told me about diets. I walked away from most people I knew, simply because I needed to. I managed to do in a year what I had not been able to do in my whole my life: cure myself of an eating disorder. But I only managed to do this because I was single (FIGUEREDO, 2020).

## MARIANA XAVIER

Mariana Xavier was born in 1980 in Rio de Janeiro, is currently 40 years old and is an actress and TV show host. She is best known for the role of Marcelina in *Minha Mãe é uma Peça*, with national movies released in 2013, 2016 and 2019. In 2017, the actress revealed that she weighed 82 kg distributed over a height of 1.57 m. Mariana went through many changes in her body in an attempt to be thin. From age 18 to 26, she took medications to suppress her appetite in pursuit of her ideal weight for television shows. She then went through an accordion effect, when an individual loses weight, but has difficulties in maintaining the weight loss and gains it again, entering a cycle.

In a video for her You-

Tube channel, entitled Mundo Gordelícia, Mariana says that she dropped three kilos and, in a short time, gained six, changed medication, lost and then gained twice as much weight. The changes in her body made the actress gain 20kg in a year. When she started being called fat, she realized that the various medications

she was taking had changed her body in ways she didn't want.

From 20 to 40 years old, Mariana gained around 30 kg. It took her time to get away of the aesthetic pressures imposed by society and build her self-esteem. During this period, she worked her mind into looking at her body in a different way.

**Figure 11** – The before and after of actress Mariana Xavier



**Source:** Dona Gente

After accepting the curves, Mariana now works on acceptance themes on her Instagram page. With 2.2 million followers, the actress posts photos with no filter, representing a real body to encourage fans to show their

curves. The actress emphasizes that fat folds, cellulite and stretch marks are normal and there is no need to hide them. Every day she reinforces the message that acceptance is freedom. In a March 2018 post on her Instagram,

Mariana reaffirmed that self-love is a time-consuming process, but that investing in yourself is a worthwhile process.

The actress said the following for Quem magazine in 2018:

It's very motivating to know that my exposure is encouraging so many people to understand each other better, to love each other more. I really made a choice to transcend the role of an actress and show Mariana an individual. I think people are really longing for this type of representation (XAVIER, 2018).

## DEMI LOVATO

Demi Lovato is a singer and actress born in 1992 in New Mexico, United States. At 28 years old, she experienced a parti-

cular kind of growth. In the documentary *Simply Complicated*, released on October 17th, 2017, on her Youtube channel, Demi talks about her life, career, drug addiction, anorexia and bulimia (a practice in which one eats and induces vomiting to avoid gaining weight); at the time, she believed that she could only be beautiful if she were thin. For Demi, it was necessary to have a “perfect body” to be on stage.

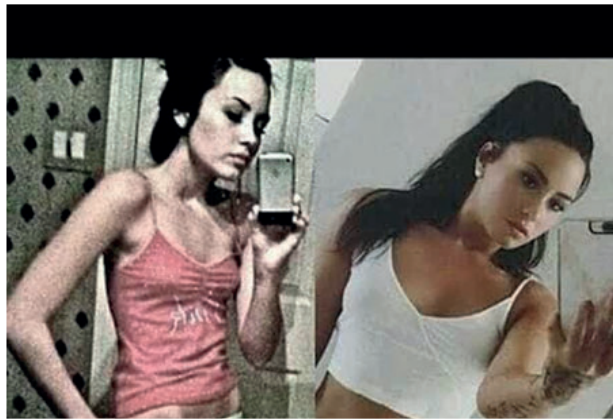
Between 2010 and 2011, Lovato was hospitalized for three months in a rehab clinic to treat depression and eating disorders. In the documentary, she points out that she was still dealing with problems involving food. On model Ashley Graham's *Pretty Big Deal* podcast, recorded in February 2020, Demi spoke candidly about what her body image was like years ago.

In 2018, the singer per-

formed extreme exercises and followed strict diets to lose weight. She struggled with something she didn't like, worsening her mental health situation, leading to fatigue and a drug over-

dose. After the incident, Demi was again admitted to a rehabilitation center and sought help from nutritionists and psychologists for treatment.

Figure 12 – The before and after of singer Demi Lovato



Source: Lifestyle<sup>9</sup>

As the singer herself says in the podcast, she went through a journey to accept the big and curvy biotype, abandoning the unattainable beauty standard. Demi says she feels free because she doesn't know her weight anymore, but that she

still doesn't wear jeans because she doesn't feel good in them. Demi works on gratitude and how to look at herself and affirm that she is strong, healthy and accepting of the body she has. Further, she stopped dieting to protect her mental health, and even

<sup>9</sup> Available at: <https://lifestyle.sapo.pt/fama/noticias-fama/artigos/demi-lovato-partilha-imagem-chocante-onde-aparece-com-bulimia>

having gained weight, she claims to be in her best phase:

I'm not going to worry about how I look or try to be something and fit into something. It's not what I am. I used to kill myself at the gym every day to maintain it [the body]. I don't want to destroy my mental health to try to fit into standards (LOVATO, 2020).

Dora, Mariana and Demi are examples of women that beat the stigma that to be beautiful one needs to be thin. They produce body positivity content and share photos of their bodily changes. Even with body changes experienced from the beginning of their career to the present day, these three women have become stronger and work for their social media followers to accept their

own bodies, no matter what size they wear.

## WHO IS ASHLEY GRAHAM?

Ashley Ann Graham was born on October 30th, 1987, in Nebraska, USA. At 33 years old, she is a model, entrepreneur and activist for Body Positive, in which she promotes acceptance of curvy bodies, working on improving the self-esteem of larger women.

At age 12, she started her career in the world of fashion when she was noticed by a model scout in a mall in her hometown. She signed up with an agency, but only at age 13 got a great modeling job for a lingerie advertisement.

As a teenager, because of her curves, modeling agencies asked her to lose weight and to stop eating chocolate; stylists

said they couldn't find anything in her size and Ashley had to work twice as hard to get jobs. In 2015, in a press release, after being chosen for the cover of Sports Illustrated, Ashley stated: "I know my curves are sexy and I want everyone else to know that theirs are, too." (GRAHAM, 2015).

Through her posts on social media and interviews to the press, Ashley always reinforces the importance of representing curvy bodies, stretch marks and cellulite. The model abhors the word plus-size because she thinks it causes a division between regular and other bodies. She often refers to herself as a curvy model. In an interview for People magazine, in the August 2017 edition, the model, who is 1.75 m tall, commented on the bullying she suffered because of her weight:

Nothing really surprises me. I lived through the torment of nasty nicknames, the torment of boyfriends breaking up with me because they were afraid I would gain more weight over the years. It's the same cycle, no matter what generation. Every girl will go through the same thing. (GRAHAM, 2017).

In 2016, Ashley was the first size-16 model (size 50 in Brazil) to be featured on the cover of the 52-year issue of Sports Illustrated, an American magazine that features models wearing swimsuits. In the same year, the model was called a traitor for posting a slimmer-looking photo on Instagram.



Figure 13 - Ashley Graham on the cover of the 52nd Sports Illustrated Swimsuit edition in 2016



Source: Swimsuit<sup>10</sup>

In the post, there are comments like: “fake fat model, where are your curves?”. An account administrator for Fashion Foie Gras, a London fashion blog, tweeted the comment: “When oversize models become famous, they quickly lose weight.”

Ashley commented on the episode in an open letter to Lenny Letter, a website that deals with feminism, politics and current affairs in the US, saying

she was never good enough as she was humiliated for being fat and was humiliated by a filtered photo on Instagram.

On May 19th of the same year, the band DNCE, led by American singer Joe Jonas, released the music video Toothbrush, featuring Ashley in the role of the singer’s girlfriend. The model stars in sensual scenes alongside Joe, who revealed to the American magazine Gla-

<sup>10</sup> <https://swimsuit.si.com/swimsuit/model/ashley-graham>

mour, after the release of the video, that he had no other model in mind to perform the role. He added that he admires Ashley's beauty and called personally to invite her. The video works as a break from Hollywood standards by placing a curvy model in the spotlight, paired up with the main singer.

Moving forward to June, 2016, Ashley launches a swimsuit and bikini collection in partnership with a swimsuit brand specialized in larger sizes, Swimsuits for All. The collection was named Ashley Graham x Swimsuits for Everyone, and made available sizes 10 through 24 in the US, the equivalent of 44 through 60 in Brazil, with prices ranging between US\$ 9.00 and US\$ 398.00, which correspond to values from 418 to 2110 Brazilian reais.

Due to the success she

had in 2016 for the media attention she received for starring in several body acceptance campaigns, Mattel, the Barbie doll industry, created in 1959 by American businesswoman Ruth Handler, who followed the same pattern of creating thin dolls and blondes for decades, held a tribute to Ashley.

After two years of doll sales declining all over the world, the brand launched new models of different body types and sizes, with seven skin tones and 24 different types of hair. It also created a Barbie with curves, thick thighs, wide hips, a protruding belly and dark hair, inspired by Ashley. Therefore, it redefined the image of beauty by launching a real plus-size doll. To promote the doll and boost sales, the model made a video for Instagram.

Figure 14 - Ashley Graham promoting the Barbie doll inspired in her  
body



Source: Swimsuit<sup>11</sup>

Ashley is the first listed in Forbes magazine's Art and Style category, in 30 Under 30. This list cites 30 personalities under 30 who had a remarkable career in the previous year. The magazine mentions the activism, the lingerie line and magazine covers in which the model starred in 2015 and 2016.

In 2017, Graham reappeared in Forbes' 30 Under 30, this time in the 10th position on the list of highest paid models

for accumulating a fortune of \$ 5.5 million dollars (equivalent to R\$ 29.2 million Brazilian reais), and as the first plus-size model to appear in the list.

Forbes highlights in the article that Ashley empowered women who were previously ignored by the fashion industry. In March 2017, she was the first plus-size model to appear on the cover of Vogue magazine, which commemorated the 125-year history of the American fashion and

11 <https://swimsuit.si.com/swimsuit/model/ashley-graham>

style magazine.

On May 9 of the same year, Ashley released a biographical book: *A New Model: What Confidence, Beauty, and Power Really Look Like*<sup>26</sup>, written and published in less than nine months, currently without a Portuguese version in bookstores in Brazil. Written in partnership with Rebecca Paley, author of biographies and memoirs of current and historical and figures for children and adults, among them, Hillary Clinton. The production brings Ashley's account of her experiences with bullying, racism, sexual abuse, relationship with food, family, men, life and career.

The model met her husband, cameraman and film director Justin Ervin, in 2009 and they got married the following year. In the book, she recounts her family's racism because he is

black. Ashley writes that he was treated badly and that her grandmother was acted with ignorance by avoiding talking to Justin. It took an effort to get them to accept him. On the same day, she heard from her husband that racism is never surprising, but it always disappoints.

In another chapter, she talks about self-esteem. Her mother, Linda Graham, helped in the process of accepting her body to continue working on her modeling career, even though she had cellulite. Her father, on the other hand, was verbally abusive, critical and told her to lose weight. From 19 to 21, her ex-boyfriend abused her mentally, physically and emotionally, to the point of running after her with a knife and throwing bottles at her. In an interview to *Cosmopolitan* magazine, in 2017, Ashley said she sought to be the inspiration she

didn't have as a child:

People want to know if there is anyone who looks like them. (...) If someone like me had written a book like this when I was growing up, my life would have been easier (GRAHAM, 2017).

In 2018, while doing the official photoshoot for Swimsuits for All, on a beach in Miami, several paparazzi began following her. Ashley came up with the idea of using the paparazzi's own photos, without retouching, to promote the new collection. In an interview for the May issue of the women's magazine InStyle, she called this instance the Power of Paparazzi, in order to show the authenticity of her body.

According to Ashley, responding via Instagram, "There's nothing to hide on skin, all

the female bodies are wonderful and they all have a beach body".

The model aimed to help women feel confident in their swimsuits.

For another Swimsuits for All collection, Ashley invited her mother, Linda Graham, 55, to participate in the photoshoot; in this occasion, she stated to Vogue Magazine in March, 2018 that there are no shapes, sizes and ages that are inadequate for bikinis. Her mother's selection was due to the support Linda provided since the beginning of Ashley's career, in strengthening her self-esteem, which is crucial not only in her curvy modeling career, but also in her work as an activist.

Figure 15 - Ashley and Linda Graham for the Swimsuits for All collection



Source: Swimsuit<sup>12</sup>

Like the body, a woman's age also becomes a reason for criticism and limitations that affect self-esteem. Being aware of this, Ashley repays Linda's support by empowering her through a participation in a bikini campaign, stating that there are no ideal ages or bodies to be at the beach (GRAHAM, 2018).

In an appearance in The Goop Podcast, which belongs to the American actress Gwyneth Paltrow, Ashley revealed that she

did not have sex with her husband until marriage due to the trauma left by her ex-boyfriend, for abusing her mentally and physically (GRAHAM, 2018).

In early October 2018, Ashley launched the Pretty Big Deal podcast on Spotify, a streaming service that allows users to listen to music and podcasts, showing real-time interviews in her own YouTube channel. Pretty Big Deal presents a series of conversations about fashion, fa-

12 A New Model: What Confidence, Beauty and Power Really Look Lik

mily and business with different guests. After each weekly episode, listeners can send voice messages sharing thoughts and questions for the model to answer on the next show.

Even with years in the profession, Ashley revealed for the June 2019 edition of beauty magazine Allure that her curvy body is still objectified and that there is still lots of fighting to be done for the inclusion of larger bodies in fashion (GRAHAM, 2019). As a famous person, she uses her voice to lead the self-acceptance movement and coordinates her career with only women on her team.

Ashley posed for the first time with her son in the June issue of British magazine Harper Bazaar, with images taken by her husband Justin in his home state of Nebraska. In an interview, the model admitted that the changes

in her body during pregnancy made her question the assertions of positivity she had made throughout her career. It took her a long time to accept her body changes, however, close friends always helped her strengthen her self-esteem (GRAHAM, 2020).

Since the beginning of the year, Ashley has been posting on Instagram, and sharing the changes her body has been undergoing with her followers, especially her increasing stretch marks. She has also posted photos and messages in support of the normalization and acceptance of the bodily changes women suffer during the gestational period.

### **ASHLEY GRAHAM'S INSTAGRAM**

Given all the history in the struggle for self-esteem

and people's acceptance, Ashley Graham is an example to be analyzed. Due to her worldwide fame, gained after an arduous journey, she came to be on the covers of the most famous and influential magazines in the world. The model accumulates a total of 11.7 million followers on Instagram and has shared about 3,297 posts, since the beginning of her page in 2012.

The first photos shared by the model are with family, friends and food. Some well-produced photos, but nothing setting her apart as a great model. The types of photos Ashley shares have changed over the years. Currently, she mostly posts photos from professional photoshoots, her natural body, avoiding filters in her photos and videos, exercising and / or doing her own makeup.

For the analysis of

Ashley's Instagram profile, some feed images which users are allowed to comment and share were selected. Right in the model's biography, the individual's description on this social media platform, the #beautybeyondsize hashtag is used.

The model emphasizes her involvement with the movement for the acceptance of the female body regardless of size, always seeking to break standards imposed by today's society in which it is necessary to be thin to be beautiful.



Figure 16 - Ashley Graham's post on Instagram on July 29th, 2020, for Swimsuits for All



Source: Graham, 2019<sup>13</sup>.

At the above photo, Ashley is wearing a bikini for the brand she promotes, Swimsuits for All. Graham displays the stretch marks on her stomach, resulting from her first and recent pregnancy. It is possible to notice that the publication reached a great number of people, managing to achieve the mark of 950,000 likes.

The photo description says: “Some things I love: a

cute bathing suit and a backyard photo with the family! [...] These bikinis made me feel great in my first summer as a mother!” (GRAHAM, 2019). The message and photo reinforce curvy beauty and the normality of skin marks, providing a clear example of representation by the display of a natural body, the type of image that is not commonly seen in magazines for the female audience. Ashley’s photo can be considered

13 Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDOxSASjN8Q>. Accessed on: September 28th, 2020.

as an ideative figure, motivating body positivity and acceptance by showing the model wearing a

bikini while overweight and with stretch marks.

Figure 17 - Ashley Graham's Instagram post on September 24th, 2020, at the Etro fashion show



Source: Graham, 2020<sup>14</sup>

At the above photo, Ashley appears in a fashion show for the Etro brand (Handmade clothing brand founded in Italy in 1968). Her participation demonstrates a greater representation of large bodies on runways, since,

in reality, not all people are thin and toned as the most prominent models in fashion. Larger bodies on the runway encourage the appreciation of new societal standards. By showing that, despite not fitting into the ideal standard,

14 Available at: <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CFhwxQljAfA/>> Accessed on: September 26th, 2020;

she managed to find market space as a model, Graham seeks to break this pattern so the fashion industry makes room for bigger women and strengthens the idea that various body types can be featured on runways and demonstrate beauty. The image, which is ideational and logical, associates the idea of motivation for more plus-size inclusion in fashion.

Figure 18 - Ashley Graham's Instagram post with her son Isaac on October 7th, 2020



Source: Graham, 2020<sup>15</sup>

In the figure above, Ashley poses holding her son Isaac. Although the caption does not carry the #beautybeyndsize hashtag, the photo itself integrates the movement by showing the model with her real body, without retouching or corrections, wearing only underwear and a cropped t-shirt, showing the cur-

15 Available at: <[https://www.instagram.com/p/CGDs33LD\\_I8](https://www.instagram.com/p/CGDs33LD_I8)>. Accessed on October 14th, 2020.

ves and stretch marks. Ashley represents the reality of many mothers, but unenhanced photos of women in the postpartum period are not often seen on social media. The image is an emotional interpreter, for conveying the message of motherhood and men-

tioning a children's song in the legend. (Baby Shark (doo doo) is a children's song that became widely popular throughout the world, with over 1 billion views on YouTube.)

**Figure 19** – Instagram post made on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019 to promote the *Addition* lingerie brand



**Source:** Graham, 2019.

In the figure above, with a sexy pose, the model exposes her body without retouching or filters. The image represents a logical interpreter for making a connection between the natu-

ral body and sensuality, without photographic effects to reduce imperfections. The idea of the post questions the plasticization of female bodies represented in fashion and in the media, as mo-

dels often do not display body marks in the campaigns they work in, especially in advertisements aiming to explore sensuality. They appear “unreal”, as if they were dolls.

When confronted with reality, one can see how real

bodies can be charming. Since the campaign aimed towards the female audience, Ashley’s followers can compare their own body with that of the model and realize that excess fat and cellulite do not make them any less beautiful.

Figure 20 - Selfie published on Instagram on October 18th, 2020



Source: Graham, 2020<sup>16</sup>

In Figure, the caption “naked big girl” connects with the photo, becoming a logical interpreter. This post generated a bigger interaction by people and

got 1,507,433 likes. Even explicitly, Ashley shows off her natural body with stretch marks on her belly, fat and big breasts.

This photo is a clear

16 Available at: < <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGfQ89Yjbc5> >. Accessed on October 22nd, 2020.

example of the model's struggle for self-acceptance and to demonstrate that large bodies can also be considered beautiful without the need to fit the standard required by the media. A photo taken with a cell phone, inside a bathroom, without fear of demonstrating imperfections, reinforces that social stigmas cannot interfere with self-esteem, as change is something natural to bodies, especially weight changes resulting from childbirth.

The photograph studied is shown as a great example of representation, due to its body positivity and the courage to expose its curvy sensuality.

### **SHARING THE #BEAUTYBEYONDSIZE HASHTAG**

Since 2014, Ashley uses and shares the #BeautyBeyondSize hashtag. The model adopted

the meaning behind the hashtag as a mantra, which made her activism grow and caused her to become the spokesperson for body positivity in and outside of Instagram.

So far there are 627,000 shares of Ashley's hashtag that combine photos and videos from several large women around the world. There are even posts from plus-sized women wearing the bikini brand that Graham promotes.

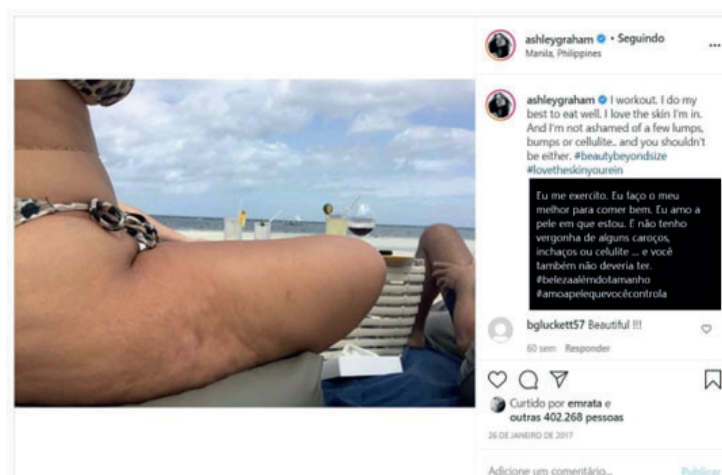
Ashley Graham promotes body liberation through messages, photographs, videos and Instagram stories<sup>36</sup>, encouraging her followers to do the same. The difference between photos with and without Graham's hashtag is representation. Publications that display curvy bodies, marks and spontaneous moments that carry the hashtag are intended to show normality, spontaneity and

empowerment. If a model has a non-standard body and accepts it, women from other parts of the world will be encouraged and will start to accept their own bodies, precisely as has been happening. In response to the fashion magazine *The Edit*, in its 2015 January issue, Ashley responded that the goal of spreading the #BeautyBeyondSize hashtag is to try to change the existing beauty and body standards in the fashion industry, while promoting body acceptance. According

to Graham in an interview given in September 2018:

I am proud to be a Body Positive activist, to promote and represent the diversity of bodies: beauty has nothing to do with weight and it is important that we teach the next generation to feel comfortable in their own skin and to celebrate differences rather than wanting to erase them (GRAHAM, 2018).

Figure 21 – Instagram post made on January 26th, 2017



Source: Graham, 2017<sup>17</sup>

17 Available at: <<https://www.instagram.com/p/BPthBsNAK8O>> Accessed on October 17th, 2020.

Ashley's publications that carry the hashtag, mostly, are natural photos that show the reality of women with ordinary bodies, that, because of the oppression, avoid showing their bodies to hide excess fat, marks, cellulite, stretch marks and scars. The hashtag helps to spread body positivity on Instagram; when we click on it, it is possible to view several posts where #beautybeyondsize was mentioned. The many photos of women with larger bodies who use Ashley's hashtag in their posts inspire and strengthen body acceptance, as well as motivate other women to post photos with the clothes, bikinis and lingerie they want.

Figure 22, for example, is ideal for motivation and the expression of acceptance for the logical interpreter, as well as to connect the image with the legend the model wrote:

I work out. I do my best to eat well. I love the skin I'm in. And I'm not ashamed of some lumps, bumps or cellulite... and you shouldn't have, either. #beautybeyondsize.

Through use of the hashtag, the post is shared and spread throughout the Instagram community, reaching even those who don't follow Ashley's page; that way, this public can start to view her posts and, from there, start to follow and use the hashtag.



Figure 22 – Instagram post on May 4th, 2017



Source: Graham, 2017<sup>18</sup>

In this other example, Ashley writes: “be comfortable in your OWN skin... #beautybeyondsize”. The legend and image shared by Graham can be defined as an emotional interpreter. Even in shades of gray and black, the image is considered more of an artistic production than a photograph expressing naturality. It is clear that Ashley is accepting of her curves, and even though she does not express the

naturality she appreciates in this photograph, she continues to inspire other women to accept their own curves, by emphasizing that larger bodies are also beautiful when sensualized and, like any other, it can also be seen artistically.

## CONCLUSION

The speed with which the media disseminates digitally enhanced images to promote a good appearance makes us ques-

18 Available at: < <https://www.instagram.com/p/BTrarCAFU73> >. Accessed on October 17th, 2020

tion how much the fashion and media influence women to seek an unreal body. The fashion industry, for a long time, has sold only one female body type: the silhouette corresponding to tall and thin women, who rarely correspond with the reality of the regular woman and cause various disorders in the female audiences that try to fit this pattern.

The fashionable body became more provocative with modeling agencies trying to show how beauty is related to thinness, generating a toxic environment, especially for new models. Many times, agencies have been responsible for defining which models were selected, choosing only by body size.

Therefore, it is clear that an idea of a blemish-free body and an unachievable thinness is constantly being sold. This ends up influencing people to want

to fit into the image promoted by the fashion and/or movie industries. The need to fit into the defined standards, in addition to self-esteem problems that may be developed, can lead to real health problems, such as eating disorders and even depression.

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