

The symbology of the body and the resignification of power relations in the media with typologies *Plus Size*



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ABSTRACT

The representation of the body has always been associated with ethical and moral values determined

by social groups, such as society, religion, among others. The ephemeral social relations of contemporaneity have transformed the female body into an instrument of personal assertion. In this sense, the present research seeks to reflect on how the media have explored the female physical and bodily pattern, relating them to self-acceptance and social status, through the acceptance of the other. The objective of this research is to analyze the discourses of social media with Plus Size typologies, in order to evaluate how social media conveys information about the body, associating it with the identity of individuals. The methodology used includes a literature review and uses content analysis (BARDIN, 2010), aiming to understand the resignification of the power relations of the body in social media. Goffman (1988), Bourdieu (2000), Vargas (2014), Brunelli, Amaral and Silva (2019), among others, were used as theoretical frameworks. That said, issues related to beauty standards and some forms of media influences capable of creating, maintaining, or intensifying the resignification of the body are highlighted, as well as evidencing the difficulties of self-acceptance, considering the liquid modernity that transforms values into something transitory with the creation of active concepts in people's perception of themselves and of what is expected of society.

Keywords: Symbology, Body, Media, *Plus Size*.

1 INTRODUCTION

Currently, the body is understood as an object of power and its subjectivity is sustained by the identities that individuals assume and go through possible judgments, especially aesthetic. *Plus-Size* fashion is allied to discourses that spread self-acceptance and the inclusion of fat people in various gears of society. In addition, the symbolism of the body seems to question a certain ideal of beauty, even relativizing its direct relationship with thinness.

It is notorious that contemporary society creates body standards according to its culture, values, customs, and specificities, thus giving rise to standards of beauty, sensuality, health, and even posture,



according to what they assume to be the ideal.

The objective of this research is to analyze the discourses of social media with *Plus Size* typologies, in order to understand how social networks work with the identity of individuals, and also with their self-esteem in breaking paradigms.

The methodology used in this work includes a literature review and uses content analysis (BARDIN, 2010), aiming to understand the resignification of the power relations of the body in social media.

Thus, this scenario related to *Plus Size* fashion and its approaches to acceptance are analyzed in order to minimize prejudices and stigmas about the fat body in society, especially from the perspective of Goffman (1988), who points out that stigma affects a negative mark, which is capable of causing prejudice and other forms of social exclusion. Designating that individuals are considered sub-human, not belonging to the position of subjects of rights.

The first part offers reflections, in the light of the theoretical foundation, divided into three subtopics, with emphasis on the issue of the symbology of the body and the aesthetic standards required by society, in order to reflect on individual and social representations; followed by the stigma and the feeling of belonging of the person outside the standards established by society, *the Plus Size* models and, finally, the influence of the media and *the Plus Size* typology in the current context.

The second part contemplates the results achieved from the testimonies of non-standard people, posted on social media for content analysis. And finally, there are the final considerations and references.

Therefore, this research evidences the accentuation of the debates in relation to women's body idealization, warns about the influence of the media on the lives of individuals and society, which imposes an "ideal" body standard.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 THE SYMBOLOGY OF THE BODY AND AESTHETIC STANDARDS

Beauty has become something to be conquered by individuals, especially by postmodern women¹, those who accumulate victories with their insertion in the labor market, expansion of their sexual and reproductive freedom, achievement of financial independence and political rights, women who relate beauty with personal success and success in various aspects of life. This may be due to the fact that people submit to social standards that judge appearance to the detriment of essence, ignoring other competencies (BRUNELLI, AMARAL and SILVA, 2019).

According to Goffman (1988), as the rigidity of aesthetic standards intensifies, individuals are

¹ The postmodern woman in this study is understood in the logic of what Zygmunt Bauman (2008) sees as characteristic of our current society, which had a greater emancipation in relation to previous generations, affecting people's sense of individual freedom.



increasingly pushed into the condition of being stigmatized. Thus, there is a considerable increase in the number of individuals who become part of two groups: the discredited and/or the socially discredited.

It is necessary to consider that appearance is one of the forms of presentation or revelation of how each individual wishes to be represented in the world, because the way the world is represented probably impregnates patterns built from cultural values, established in society or in the social group.

It is possible that this representation is not limited to aesthetic appearance, but that, among other elements, it is influenced by the way one is apprehended by others, based on the impact that the visual impression causes in the first contact in everyday life, after all, it is common to hear from common sense that "the first impression is the one that lasts".

In this sense, there are the individual and social representations that others construct about the other, since they are not exclusively subordinated to the aesthetic aspect per se, but which, in the first contact, may be relevant.

The relationships that are made from the "body" tend to relate what is "beautiful" and "healthy" – often denounced as a common sense that is very present in the discourses of ordinary people, of various professionals who work with the "body", of health and beauty professionals, journalists and digital "influencers". This common sense is created, in large part, due to symbolic power (BOURDIEU, 2000) and the means of communication used in modernity to disseminate mass culture and establish social standards that permeate reality, influencing the formation of subjectivities.

For Tavares (2003 *apud* RUSSO, 2005), body image is the way the individual perceives and feels about his body, and is directly linked to the beauty standards imposed by the media, since women seek this social framework, often utopian for the majority of the population, but still Thus, they struggle to get close to them. The point is that every epoch, a new discourse is produced about the dichotomy of the beautiful and the ugly.

Throughout its trajectory, the body carries historical and cultural changes of a certain group or society, constructing certain specificities that lead to patterns. However, it should be noted that people, therefore, are literally influenced by what they see on the networks, by what is posted by celebrities or *influencers*, seeking to imitate what is presented as beautiful and ideal (SHOHAT; STAM, 1996).

In this way, studying the impacts of aesthetics on the perception of the female body can provide an understanding of the relationship that people have with their own bodies under the influence of thought and behavior models, since socially established beauty standards lead individuals to doubts, as well as can generate dissatisfaction in people with their own image and shake their self-esteem. encouraging a senseless pursuit of the bodily ideal.



2.2 THE STIGMAS AND THE FEELING OF BELONGING OF THE PERSON OUTSIDE THE STANDARDS ESTABLISHED BY THE SOCIETY OF USERS OF PLUS SIZE MODELS

Stigma focuses on a negative mark, which is capable of provoking prejudice and other forms of social exclusion, designating that individuals are considered sub-human, unnatural, pathological, among other negative characters. However, it is not up to them to be subjects of rights, on the contrary, various forms of violence are directed to this population as a form of punishment and/or punishment for their deviations and dissimilarity (GOFFMAN, 1988).

Goffman (1988) in his studies uses the word "stigma" to characterize the process that takes place between individuals or groups that differentiate themselves from the majority, creating "labels" exacerbating the difference.

The term stigma is an ancient concept, the Greeks created the word to refer to people who had bodily signs, with which they sought to highlight something different, extraordinary or bad about the moral *status* of the one who suffered the evaluation of being different (MATTOS, 2012).

Stigma induces a series of discriminations, prejudices, and feelings of not belonging due to the beliefs of people with certain characteristics Inhumane. These discriminations reduce individuals' relationship with society and hinder their life prospects. Goffman (1988, p. 13) states that this term,

(...) It will be used in reference to a deeply derogatory attribute, but what is really needed is a language of relations and not of attributes. An attribute that stigmatizes one may confirm the normality of another, so it is in itself neither horrible nor dishonorable. a stigma, then, is a special kind of relation between attribute and stereotype, although I propose to modify this concept, in part because there are important attributes in which almost all of our society is discredited.

Stigma, therefore, is a form of social control, in which there is a selection according to moral, religious, institutional, political, cultural and commercial principles, standardizing what is appropriate or not in our society. Those subjects who do not fit into the pre-established end up being stigmatized and then socially excluded, and can be literally eliminated from the society where they live. In this amplitude, Goffman (1988, p. 28) elucidates that:

(...) There could be a discrepancy between an individual's virtual identity and real identity. When known or manifested, this discrepancy spoils your social identity; It has the effect of alienating the individual from society and from himself in such a way that he ends up being a discredited person in the face of an unreceptive world.

Studies add that it is common for individuals to differentiate the process of group stigmatization from individual prejudice. This perspective is seen in such a way that a selective group can only effectively stigmatize the other when the latter feels in the superior position of power from which the other group is excluded. Elijah; Scotson (2000, p. 27) states that: "stigma is a paralyzing effect on groups with less power".



From Goffman's (1988) perspective, the idea of a group of discredited and/or discredited people seems conceptual in function of the problem of the emancipation of individuals in the face of the problem that involves the dictatorship of beauty. In the meantime, the stigmatized social identity destroys attributes and qualities of the individual, leading him to exercise the power of control of his actions in order to reinforce the deterioration of his social identity, emphasizing a series of thoughts and attitudes giving rise to stigmas.

It should be noted that another aspect highlighted by Elias and Scotson (2000) is the social stigma imposed by the dominant group that usually invades the self-image of the stigmatized group. In this way, Elijah; Scotson (2000, p. 24) takes the view that:

Affixing the label of "inferior human value" to another group is one of the weapons used by superior groups in power struggles, as a means of maintaining their social superiority. In this situation, the social stigma imposed by the more powerful group on the less powerful group tends to penetrate the self-image of the latter and, with that, weaken and disarm it.

Taken together, the evidence announces that society imposes rejection, leads individuals to lose self-confidence and reinforces the symbolic character of social representation. Finally, it is observed that these subjects, who are the minority, are often considered incapable, a situation that strengthens the social stigma, being internalized by the person, who often serves as a shield to overcome their difficulties.

2.3 THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA AND THE *PLUZ SIZE TYPOLOGY* IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT

Historically, it is possible to observe that the media exerts influences in relation to bodily changes, offering individuals aesthetic modeling tools at any cost. However, the use of aesthetic procedures without adequate guidance can lead to pedagogical, physical, psychic and social maladjustments.

Vargas (2014, p. 30) elucidates that:

The human body has, through its materialization, an image and content that communicates, conscious and unconscious, as a symbol. And it is through symbols that the different archetypes structure our consciousness, our ego, throughout our existence.

A few decades ago, the aesthetic standards imposed by the media dictated a thinness that was not in accordance with the reality of the vast majority of people. As everything has pros and cons, the media contributes to the exposure of individuals, causing a democratization of beauty standards in the media, influencing people's attitudes with prejudiced thoughts and attitudes.

However, as Ribeiro *et al.* (2012), the body has representations established by each one, in order to seek changes to obtain the ideal body, valuing their self-esteem in favor of self-acceptance.



Vargas (2014, p. 13) points out that:

(...) In his studies on corporeality, he taught that the human body has been considered a crucial factor for society since antiquity, whether in its use as an instrument of work and communication or aesthetic care in the tireless search for ideal beauty. The importance of the body has never been a matter of doubt, but over time, the search for beauty has led people to care more and more about it.

From the beginning to the present time, the body has been the target of several questions in order to have an ideal body. Often, the intentions to define the concept of corporeality dissociated its existence in a cultural and social sense.

Nowadays, the exposure of Plus Size models in the media is more frequent. The *Plus Size* movement began in the United States (USA), where the obesity rate is one of the highest in the world. Over the years, Brazil has been adhering to this body typology, with *Plus Size* models in its advertising campaigns, making the public trust themselves more and not looking for an "ideal" thin body.

According to the website Plus Size with Style (2013), "Plus Size is the name that was given by North Americans to the models of clothes above the conventional standard sold in stores. In other words, "Plus Size in English means bigger size".

This exacerbated concern with the body is influenced by the media that disseminate views on obesity, with this the so-called "Plus Size market" gains strength, which has been a reality for some time and has been breaking taboos, having an increasing prominence and with the significant changes in the modern world.

A survey conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) reveals that a person is considered obese when they have a body mass index equal to or greater than 30 kg/m². This calculation is used to classify the subject according to his or her body mass, and to reach this result, the following is done: weight in kg is divided by height in meters squared (weight ÷ height² = BMI²).

Betti (2014) in her dissertation, "*Beauty without measures? Body, gender and consumption in the Plus-Size fashion market*", exemplifies the value of the theme and the diffusion of health and well-being issues, with regard to physical and mental health, reflecting on the current appreciation of the body permeating aesthetics and its judgments.

Santos & Nicolau (2012, p. 03) state that:

(...) the emergence of the *Plus Size* trend, which comes to meet a supposed demand from a group that does not fit into the current fashion standards, is nothing more than an efficient strategy of the cultural industry to incorporate a new group of consumers, after all, what matters is that everyone is inserted in the consumer society, since prejudices must be overcome in favor of the objective gains that the capitalist system has.

It should be noted that despite the great achievements of plus-size people, many still have great

² Body Mass Index (BMI) is an international measure used to calculate whether a person is at their ideal weight.



difficulty finding pieces of clothing in popular stores where the size grid does not meet their needs. In this way, these people end up being forced to look for specialized stores, where often the pieces have a much higher value, and end up not being able to purchase the product.

Therefore, it should be noted that people are influenced by what they see on the networks, by what is posted by celebrities or *influencers*, seeking to imitate what is presented as beautiful and ideal, without taking into account the different types of stereotypes of those who are outside the standard imposed by the media.

3 RESULTS ACHIEVED

It is observed that the habitual thought that prevails in society in relation to fat people seems to be more linked to the issue of beauty than to the health of the body.

It is interesting to think about how the issue of aesthetics relates to the facts of everyday life, as for example, in the current cases of *bullying* in schools, in which the conflicting situation is usually related to the "body", which is the code for being prejudiced in the face of patterns present in subtle ways of one individual discriminating against another by physical characteristics considered as "different", "weird" and/or "non-standard". And, according to Goffman (1988), as the rigidity of aesthetic standards intensifies, individuals are increasingly pushed into the condition of being stigmatized.

The media reflect the non-acceptance of the real body, leading people to see imperfections and marks of time, thus giving rise to hate speeches with Those who expose their own bodies on social networks, these are called *hatters*, who mobilize on social networks to depreciate people's self-esteem, often leading them to depression and despair of doing aesthetic procedures abruptly to meet this demand of the "fashionable" society, even passing through already established principles.

The thin body was seen by the media as an interesting identifier for displaying the conceptual work of fashion designers, but industries, stores and designers are already looking at the "chubby" ones, as there are already *Plus Size* models in the fashion market, who stand out for a different aesthetic from what was seen on the traditional catwalks as shown in Figure 1:

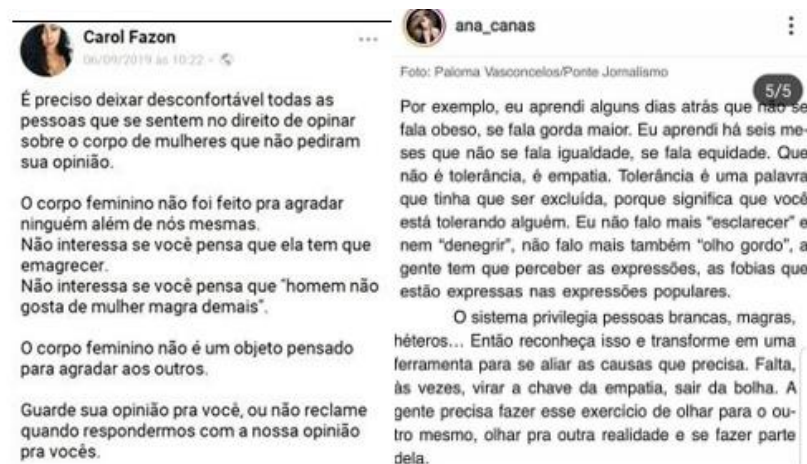


Figure 1: Fashion Week Plus Size (Fonte: <http://www.alllingerie.com.br/>)



It is observed that even the proportions of the mannequins in the store windows already contemplate the *Plus Size* size. This is a reality, the Brazilian body is already above the average of the ideal Body Mass Index (BMI).

Some testimonies were highlighted for analysis of content posted on social media:



In the testimonies analyzed from social networks, it is possible to observe the expression of a vision of valuing and devaluing the fat body in society. It can be inferred that the acceptance of *the Plus Size* body is changing due to the need to dress and please people who have the real body and not the ideal body desired by the media. Thus, it can be seen that society is reflecting on the symbology of the body and the resignification of power relations.

4 FINAL THOUGHTS

In view of the above, the research sought to highlight the challenges encountered by the *Plus Size* typology, focusing on several factors. Thus, in this relationship between health, aesthetics and the media, there are important elements to be punctuated, tensioned, reflected and criticized when thinking about issues related to the "body", especially when this search for beauty can reinforce identities and deepen stereotypes in relation to themes about health and aesthetics, because they are also products of



a time and a culture that reinforces such discourses and practices.

The present research achieved the objective of giving voice to a group of people who feel on the margins of society, who, based on the reports, exacerbated their feelings. The debate on this theme was broadened, bringing together theories and studies in order to reflect on prejudices and stigmas.

The results highlight relevant issues that deserve to be highlighted, such as the body being conceived as a symbolic way subject to conceptual changes. It is notorious that the media exert influence on the ideal body, and that its various forms have gained great prominence with *Plus Size models*, in search of demystifying the symbology of the body, which until then were considered ideal.

That said, it is considered that this research can serve as a theoretical basis for future studies and debates within this theme, which is little explored and known. The proposal of the study includes contributions that aim to demystify reflections that there is no ideal body, but a real body that should be accepted and respected as such in the media and outside of it.



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