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RESEARCH

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**PLUS-SIZE WOMEN'S REPRESENTATIONS IN ADVERTISING:  
FOREVER 21 CASE**

*Las representaciones de la mujer de talla grande en la publicidad:  
Caso Forever 21*

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**ABSTRACT**

The physical representation of women is a major issue in advertising. Some brands have opted for atypical models, which show what seems different but is common and real. Among them are the plus-size models and this piece of research analyzes their representations in the advertising of the American brand Forever 21. The goal is to determine if the concept of large size has been promoted, accepted and valued as a new representation of beauty. We proceed with a two-phase piece of research. The first identifies the general representations of plus-size women in advertising, explaining how new roles have been incorporated. For this, various documentary sources are used to observe how advertising promotes stereotypes and lifestyles. The second part explores Forever 21 advertising, on its official Instagram account, with a hermeneutical analysis based on Julio Amador Bech model, to which typography, shots, angles and takes are added. The images published for three months, from March 1 to May 30, 2018, were taken into account, noting that only 26 images out of the 682 published included plus-size models. This represents 3.8% of posts. Only the images where the models La'Tecia Thomas (plus size) and Fiona Barron appear at the same time were chosen. This allows us, at first glance, to make a comparison and suggests to us a very rich, unpublished and original analysis.

**KEYWORDS:** advertising - woman - social networks - Instagram - representation - stereotypes - plus size - beauty canons - Forever 21.

**RESUMEN**

La representación física de la mujer es un tema trascendental en la publicidad. Algunas marcas han apostado por modelos atípicas, que muestran lo que parece diferente, pero es común y real. Dentro de ellas se encuentran las modelos de talla grande y esta investigación analiza sus representaciones en la publicidad de la marca

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estadounidense Forever 21. El objetivo es determinar si se ha promovido, aceptado y valorado el concepto de talla grande como una nueva representación de belleza. Se procede con una investigación en dos fases. La primera identifica las representaciones generales de la mujer de talla grande en la publicidad, explicando cómo se han incorporado nuevos roles. Para ello se recurre a diversas fuentes documentales para observar cómo la publicidad es promotora de estereotipos y estilos de vida. La segunda parte indaga en la publicidad de Forever 21, en su cuenta oficial de Instagram, con un análisis hermenéutico basado en el modelo de Julio Amador Bech, al que se agregan cuestiones de tipografía, planos, ángulos y tomas. Se tomaron en cuenta las imágenes publicadas durante tres meses, del 1 de marzo al 30 de mayo de 2018, observando que sólo 26 imágenes de las 682 publicadas incluyen modelos de talla grande. Esto representa un 3,8% de los *posts*. Sólo se eligieron las imágenes donde aparecen, a la vez, las modelos La'Tecia Thomas (de talla grande) y Fiona Barron. Esto permite, a simple vista, hacer una comparación, y nos sugiere un análisis muy rico, inédito y original.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** publicidad - mujer - redes sociales - Instagram - representación - estereotipos - talla grande - cánones de belleza - Forever 21.

## **AS REPRESENTAÇÕES DA MULHER PLUS SIZE NA PUBLICIDADE: CASO FOREVER 21**

### **RESUMO**

A representação física da mulher é um tema transcendental na publicidade. Algumas marcas tem apostado por modelos atípicas, que mostram o que parece diferente, mas é cotidiano e real. Dentro delas estão as modelos plus size e esta pesquisa analisa suas representações na publicidade da marca estadunidense Forever 21. O objetivo é determinar se tem promovido, aceito e valorizado o conceito de plus size como uma nova representação de beleza. Se procede com uma pesquisa em duas fases. A primeira identifica as representações gerais da mulher plus size na publicidade, explicando como tem se incorporado, novos papéis. Para isto recorreremos a diversas fontes documentais para observar como a publicidade é promotora de estereótipos e estilos de vida. A segunda parte investiga na publicidade da Forever 21, na sua conta oficial de Instagram, com uma análise hermenêutica baseada no modelo de Julio Amador Bech, no qual se adicionam questões de tipografia, planos, ângulos e tomadas. Foi levado em consideração as imagens publicadas durante três meses, de 1 de março a 30 de maio de 2018, observando que somente 26 imagens das 682 publicadas incluíram modelos plus size. Isto representa um total de 3,8% dos *posts*. Somente foram escolhidas as imagens onde aparecem, ao mesmo tempo, as modelos La'Tecia Thomas (plus size) e Fiona Barron. Isto permite, à simples vista, fazer uma comparação, e nos sugere uma análise muito rica, inédita e original.

**PALAVRAS CHAVE:** publicidade - mulher - redes sociais - Instagram - representação - estereótipos - plus size - cânones da beleza - Forever 21.

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

The concept of feminine beauty has had different approaches through the years, depending on the historical context in which women find themselves. For a long time, it has been strictly linked with characteristics such as thinness and youth. However, women have gone through many social changes that led them to demand real representation. They went from appearing completely dependent on men and focusing their aspirations on the family sphere to being independent, with real participation in the educational and labor sphere, to achieve a more favorable context and deserved empowerment.

Specifically, in advertising content aimed at women, "they should not only look young and radiant, but they should also be up-to-date in terms of their appearance, be it haircut or clothing" (Hernández Suriano, 2003). Fashion is a key factor in the perception of beauty and, in advertisements, the purchase of products covering clothing, accessories, makeup, etc. is often advised. Although many women imitate models, "they also limit themselves to choosing what suits their personality, they select the type of makeup, the hairstyle model, the dress, they choose, eliminate, retain what corresponds to their personality, their expectations, their tastes" (Lipovetsky, 1999, p. 155). This implies that not all women agree with the ideals of beauty represented in the media, largely because they consider them unreal and do not identify with them (Mora and Padilla, 2018; Padilla and Oliver, 2018).

The idea of idolizing someone who is considered a reference is shown, with all its dangers, in the adolescent stage. At this stage, people are searching for their identity, and it is gratifying to look like someone you admire. When age gives maturity and women accept themselves as they are, other real qualities stand out, such as intelligence, talent or resilience. Therefore, the current ideal of female beauty represented by advertising has diversified, showing different women who no longer meet aesthetic features such as thinness, height and youth (Pellicer, 2018; Tapia, Rajas and Martin, 2018; Tapia and Del Toro, 2019) . The central value is to show that there are different types of beauty.

The ideals of feminine beauty represented in advertising are changing; or at least, positive steps are being taken towards breaking traditional stereotypes. An example of this is the inclusion of atypical models, among which are the plus-size models: a form of female representation that fits the physiological context of many Spanish women. With the opening-up to new feminine representations, many brands have

seen the need to show beauty from a different and at the same time real perspective, according to the woman's body. This way they obtain some benefits, such as being empathetic with consumers and monopolizing an attractive segment for purchases.

Common representations of *mother, wife* and *homemaker* have been fragmenting like the stereotypes of female beauty represented in advertising and other media (Padilla and Semova, 2014; Padilla, 2016; Bernardez and Moreno, 2017; Espizua and Padilla, 2017; Jivkova, Requeijo and Padilla, 2017; Ortiz García, 2017; Bernárdez and Padilla, 2018; Bernárdez and Serrano, 2018). Other representations that are more suited to the sociocultural context of women have been created. Precisely, the search for advertising with atypical models gave rise to the existence of plus-size models. Many brands began promoting their products with this type of women and the purpose of generating more direct contact with their customers, increasing their sales and showing an inclusive image; Among them, the American textile brand Forever 21.

For many brands, creating a link with their consumers has become a fundamental aspect. The fact that consumers feel identified with a much more real pattern of beauty, adjusted to their physical characteristics, can help to increase sales. Likewise, in the fashion world there are changes and questions to beauty standards, and plus-size models are nothing more than a diversification of the beauty representations issued in advertising. The inclusion of the representation of "plus-size" women in advertising was created a few decades ago by the American textile industry. "From the late 1800s to the early 1900s, there were representative actresses in this industry, for example, Lillian Russell and Elsie Scheel, who were far from the ideal of beauty that exists today" (El Mercurio, 2015).

However, the concept has not been as important until a few years ago. In large measure because it was used to refer to clothing, to finish them as large sizes; but not to indicate that it was a model or an ordinary person. Today, the concept has been customized to such an extent that plus-size models are common to some brands: "It was in the early 2000s when some brands began to more clearly develop women's fashion with more lifelike figures, with a large body, such is the case of the Forever 21 clothing store" (El Mercurio, 2015).

Even, there have been some important events where the main theme is the representation of this new concept. "In 2016, an event called "Full Figured Fashion Week" was organized in parallel to New York Fashion Week, which featured fashion shows with fashion collections in which the garments exceeded size 46" (Economy and Business, 2015). Although the stereotype of female beauty continues to favor slender bodies, acceptance of such models has been such that, during 2017, "Ashley Graham became the first plus-size model that pushed in on the list of the 10 best paid in *Forbes* magazine" (Milenio Digital, 2017).

Likewise, in recent years, plus-size models have caused a very strong media turn, thanks partly thanks to social networks, where most women reflect acceptance and demand the integration of this type of model. Generally, they have a size ranging

from Spanish 40 to 48 (American 8 and 16) and have an average height of 1.72 meters. The novelty does not lie in talking about plus-size women and brands that integrate plus sizes into their catalogs, but rather about plus-size youth and plus-size youth clothing. It is socially accepted that an adult woman with children can be overweight. Pregnancy will be seen as a justification. Much on the contrary, a young and childless woman should be slender and, unfortunately, society condemns her not being like that.

Women with normal and robust bodies also want to look good, dress in style and according to their age. Many times they find clothes of their size, but with ladylike, outdated, aged designs. Forever 21 wanted to break this trend, offering the same clothes in all sizes. There were no “normal” designs and “plus-size” designs; instead, it proposed offering the same garment for all types of women. Thus, it launched the large-size or plus-size category in 2009. Since then, it has proposed important advances, adding accessories and lingerie. However, it was not until a couple of years ago, when it began to give more importance to this category by promoting its garments with plus-size models through its social networks. Through its official Instagram account @forever21, the brand published, during the spring-summer season of 2018, a series of photographs where the plus-size model La'Tecia Thomas and the conventional model Fiona Barron appeared together, wearing the same clothes.

The brand created by the Korean Do Won Chang and his wife Jin Sook Chang leads them to number 222 on the *Forbes 400* list of the richest persons in the United States, with assets close to 3,000 millions (Álvarez, 2016). Forever 21 is characterized by offering fashion products, most of them clothing, but also accessories and beauty products. The store offers casual clothing such as blouses, T-shirts, pants, shorts, etc.; and you can also find elegant clothes such as dresses, skirts or blazers. Both in the search engine and on its social networks, the brand is inclusive in publicizing garments aimed at large-sized women. In its official search engine it has a section directed specifically for women with these characteristics.

Forever 21 *fanpage* as well as its Instagram account have been a key factor in publicizing the integration of plus-size models in the dissemination of the brand's products. Users can easily interact because these sites invite to know the product in a more subtle way, without being directly looking for a product, but being aware of any novelty.

Likewise, it is important to mention that a large number of researchers have been interested in advertising with an egalitarian vision of gender and in recent years on aesthetic references. It starts from the 19th century, a time when femininity was directly linked to consumption, as it was a feminine habit to buy things that expressed the husband's social status” (Cuevas Barnerousse, 2009).

For his part, Lipovetsky (1999) narrates and analyzes the processes of transformation and confluence of traditional and modern gender roles in the lives of

women today, using the term *third woman* to refer to the new female figure that expresses a substantial progress in different areas, among which education and work stand out, in such a way that “from the 20th century onwards, the great feminine revolution began” (Camps, 2000).

The 21st century is a century of great perspectives for women, so it is important to know how it is reflected in the media, “as it is an indicator of their social reality” (Martín Casado, 2009). Sociocultural changes are reflected in the way women are represented in advertising, creating new representations that reflect a woman with equal opportunities with respect to men.

“Stereotypes have been reconfigured and along with traditional figures others are generated” (García Calderón, 2015, p. 166), now they not only represent a motherly woman but also a professional woman, with work and power in decision-making. For this reason, new content arises that adapt to the current context of women. Carola García (2015) mentions that the image of the modern woman is presented as the protagonist in the ads, creating the term *alpha woman*: an economically independent woman, self-assured, successful and dedicating her time to seek her professional fulfillment.

A multitude of authors have focused their research on analyzing how women are represented in the various media. Berger (1975) explained about stereotypes that “what we see is within our reach, although not necessarily within our arm's reach”, that is, not because there is something we can all have it.

Likewise, the concept of beauty is also part of the topics to be researched in the advertising field. This has had different approaches through the years since “aesthetic values are closely related to historical, social, economic and cultural configurations” (Walzer, 2008, p. 18), for example, “during the Renaissance a beautiful body was the one with a round and exuberant shape, a powerful belly and voluptuous hips” (Cabrera García-Ochoa, 2010).

Currently, the concept of beauty is often linked to clothing. Suriano (2010) mentions that “women should not only look young and radiant, they should also be up-to-date in terms of their appearance, be it the haircut or the clothes”. For his part, Bernárdez (2000) mentions that advertising is an amoral medium, which endlessly uses the representation of the body for anything (Bernárdez, 2000). In this process, it de-corporealizes it, de-humanizes it and de-sexualizes it, bringing it closer to being an object, valued for its aesthetic qualities (Bernárdez, 2000).

Ruth Gómez de Travesedo-Rojas and Ana Almansa-Martínez (2017) analyzed the way in which women are represented in advertising included in high-end commercial magazines for women in Spain. The study applies the content analysis approach of the top four titles in 2014: *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Elle* and *Vogue*. The data showed that the female body is primarily used as a mannequin in the window of a fashion store. Mendoza Cuellar (2012) also studied advertising and its role in the

formation of gender stereotypes and concluded that laws can condemn illicit advertising, but they do not replace cultural values, which are equally dangerous. Shortly after, Carretero (2014) assimilated sexist advertising, from passivity and social tolerance in front of ads that objectify women and threaten their dignity.

Along the same lines, Bernárdez (2009) studied women in advertising, like dolls, between artificial matter and flesh. This author explained that the stereotype of the *doll woman* and the idealization that this model has entailed an unattainable model for real women in personal life and has become the workhorse of feminist thought, for the sake of thinking about the identity of women from the corporality and materiality of the body (Bernárdez, 2009 and 2015).

These types of unattainable models, with unusual, but completely aspirational beauties, have caused many women to only take into account the ideals of beauty presented in the media and intend to fulfill them regardless of resorting to cosmetic surgeries. "In recent decades, beauty has also been dealt with from a medical perspective: news on skin care, topics such as Botox, anti-cellulite treatments, body shaping and plastic surgeries are presented" (García Calderón, 2015, p. 157).

However, other women challenge the unattainable model that advertising tries to convey, they disagree and demand much more realistic representations that fit their physiognomy. Advertising does not create social behaviors, but rather goes to the forefront of fashion, new ideas and new customs, and the only thing it does is propagate them (Ferrer Roselló, 1994; Philips, 1997), so it adjusts to these requests by showing empathy with consumers.

That is why this piece of research focuses on describing and analyzing one of the new representations seen with increasing frequency in advertising: the representation of large-sized or *plus-sized* women, promoted from 2000 when some brands began to more clearly develop fashion for women with plus-size figures (Economics and Business, 2017).

On the other hand, it is important to mention that currently "the digital world affects all areas of work and human activities" (Padilla and Semova, 2014) and it is essential to take into account advertising broadcast over the Internet. Within the Internet, "social networks have transformed forms of interpersonal communication and consumption habits" (Padilla and Semova, 2014).

## 2. OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of this piece of research is to analyze the representations of plus-sized woman, issued in the advertising made by Forever 21 brand, to determine whether it has promoted, accepted and valued this concept of plus size as a new representation of beauty.

This main objective covers the following secondary objectives:

- 1) Analyze the sociocultural context of urban women.

- 2) Identify the different representations of women in advertising, especially the plus-sized woman.
- 3) Analyze the relationship of digital advertising made by Forever 21 brand focused on plus-sized women.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This piece of research contains two phases. The first is to identify the representations of plus-sized women in advertising, explaining how new feminine roles representing women in accordance with the sociocultural modifications they have undergone have been incorporated. In order to identify these representations, various documentary research sources will be used to observe how advertising promotes stereotypes and lifestyles, transmitting canons of feminine beauty through the media.

The second part refers to the inquiry on advertising made by Forever 21 brand on its official Instagram account. This advertising integrates the plus-sized models. To determine the relationship between the advertising of Forever 21 brand focused on large-sized women with reality, we carried out a hermeneutical analysis based on the model of Julio Amador Bech, which he proposes in his book *The meaning of the work of art: basic concepts for the interpretation of the visual arts*. To the model some questions regarding typography will be added, as well as shots, angles and takes, since they are considered appropriate for an identification analysis in the image. This model is proposed as follows:

#### FORMAL DIMENSION

- 1) Identify beings and objects.
  - a) Form.
  - b) Color.
  - c) Hue or luminosity.
  - d) Material qualities.
  - e) Composition.
  - f) Typography.
  - g) Shots, angles and takes.
- 2) Identify the expression of the elements.
  - a) Physical appearance of the body, movements and body gestures.
  - b) Aspects that make up the atmosphere and scenery.
- 3) Identification and classification of motifs. Identify the forms.

#### SYMBOLIC DIMENSION

- 1) Symbolism of form.
- 2) Symbolism of color.
- 3) Symbolism of light.
- 4) Symbolism of matter.



## NARRATIVE DIMENSION

- 1) Image, elements, themes.
  - a) Define if it is a figurative or abstract image.
  - b) Distinguish elements: characters, actions, situations.
  - c) Recognize a topic.
- 2) Analysis in three steps.
  - a) Structural analysis (actions and situations of the characters).
  - b) Historical-cultural analysis (when the campaign comes out).
  - c) Analysis of mythical narrative social functions.

It is also important to mention that the images published for three months, from March 1 to May 30, 2018, were taken into account, observing that only 26 images out of the 682 published in the brand's official account include plus-sized models. This represents 3.8% of posts. Likewise, images with similar characteristics were chosen for the hermeneutical analysis, where the models La'Tecia Thomas (@lateciat, of Australian nationality) and Fiona Barron (@fiona.bl, of Mexican nationality) appear; and only the first one is considered large-sized. The brand presents them with similar clothing and similar positions. This makes it possible, at first glance, to make a comparison, and suggests a very rich, unpublished and original analysis.

Forever 21 brand was chosen because it has developed marketing strategies aimed at women who break with the stereotype of traditional beauty. In other words, they are not small, slim or slender. Also, Instagram was chosen, taking into account the relevance and use of social networking among young and *millennials*, which makes it necessary to research the interaction that brands generate with consumers: "Social networks rise themselves up as the ideal space to observe, to research the market, to know the concerns of users" (Fernández *et al.*, 2018, p. 25). Instagram, the social network for photographs, is the third most used network in Spain, only after Facebook and WhatsApp (Sánchez, 2018) and "it has had greater growth, doubling the number of users in just two years" (Mejía, 2019). In addition, the age range from 18 to 34 years is the one that prevails in users and adjusts with the target the brand is aimed at.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Hermeneutical analysis of Forever 21 advertising on Instagram

In this section, the hermeneutic approach of the image is applied to the analysis of the advertising message, taking into account the model proposed by Julio Amador Bech (2001), who in turn takes up the methodology of Erwin Ponofsky for the study of the work of art. An image is a symbolic construction created by the human mind to represent things that are not present. To interpret these messages, Amador (2001) proposes three dimensions of the meaning of the image: the formal dimension, the dimension of the visual sign and the narrative dimension; all being complemented by historical-cultural analysis.

Based on the three dimensions proposed by Julio Amador (2001), as well as the contributions of Dr. Verónica Servín (2002) and some questions regarding shots takes and angles, the hermeneutical analysis of some images published by Forever 21 brand on its Instagram account is carried out, during the spring-summer season of 2018. It is important to mention that in this section technology is seen as a reliable ally for both the brand and the segment, since social networks have played a key role in the revolution of the plus size fashion industry.

In the following lines, one of the photographs is presented with its hermeneutical analysis, taking into account the items included in the methodological framework. Subsequently, the remaining four photographs appear without hermeneutic analysis since, by extension, it is not possible to reproduce the complete analysis, but the final results of all the photographs.



*Photo 1:* photograph and advertising message published on March 27, 2018, on the official Instagram account of Forever 21 brand.

**Source:** <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bg1yclal7Yx/?hl=es&taken-by=forever21> (accessed 20.10.2018).

#### 4.2. Formal dimension of the message

**Identification of beings and objects.** Two women appear in the message. Both wear blue shorts and a white blouse with yellow decorative motifs. Also, the branches of a tree appear as a background.

- a) Form. No points are observed, only some horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines appear that form the pockets of the shorts for both women.

- b) Color. The background green color predominates, which is part of nature; later, the flesh color of the women's skin, the blue of the shorts, the black of the hair and the yellow with white of the blouses. Yellow can connote energy and attracts attention because it appears in small quantities, but it manages to stand out.
- c) Hue or luminosity. Certain luminosity is perceived in the women's skin, especially on their face, left arm and legs. The light is directed downwards and inwards, like the gaze of the females, this causes those parts of the body to attract attention.
- d) Material qualities. It can be seen that the advertisement is made through photography and published on a digital medium. It is also elongated, in the form of a horizontal rectangle. As for the material qualities perceived within the image, it is possible to distinguish the smooth skin of both women that connotes subtlety and, in some elements of the clothing, there are textures with volume, such as the hanging strips of the blouse of the woman on the left side, or the whiskers of the shorts of the woman that appears on the right, which can cause some royalty.
- e) Typography. In the phrase "Turn 'up the heat with @lateciatl & @fiona.bl check out our stories for a lil' tease of what's to come! Xo" there is a typography in high boxes, belonging to the Sans serif font group, uniform lines without skates. Line spacing is minimal, but allows readability. The color of the typology is black, with which elegance is represented. The font is readable, with an approximate size of 11 points.  
It is also important to mention that the text is accompanied by *emojis* (ideograms or characters used in electronic messages). In this case, in the middle of the text, an *emoji* appears with a face sticking out its tongue and, next to it, hearts. This may represent charm for the product the brand offers.
- f) Shot, angles and takes. The image has a medium wide shot (full shot) because it encompasses the entire human figure with space above and below, from a low angle to represent a psychically strong, dominant or superior character.
- g) Composition. The two women are dressed in shorts and a blouse, superimposed on a background of leaves. All are elements that make up the image and that can be measured in a weight category to generate balance.  
Regarding the balance of the form, the weight is in the central part of the image with vertical figures, which have more weight than the horizontal ones. In the balance of color and hue, there is more weight in the lower right and upper left, where lighter shades appear.  
In the balance of location, what is on the top and what is on the right is heavier. Therefore, the face of the model on the right has more weight in the image. In size balance, the largest figure is the woman who appears on the left side and therefore has more weight. Finally, in balance by direction, the centripetal forms (from the outside inwards) weigh less than the centrifugal

shapes (from the inside outwards) and, in the image, the two women are placed centrifugally.

With the above, a composition with adequate balance can be perceived, since the woman on the right side has prominence by location, but the one on the left side has it by size. It can be said that the components are handled harmoniously and give the idea of equity between the models.

On the other hand, and according to Peninou's classification (1976), the composition is axial since the promoted object, in this case clothing, occupies the central place of the image.

**Identification of the expression of the elements.** In the image we can see the two women with attractive faces, so they will be the object of high influence in the perception of credibility. That is, their words will be more valid than those of an unattractive subject. Likewise, and according to Mark L. Knapp's classification of temperamental physical stereotypes to identify personality with respect to physical appearance, the woman on the left side is endomorphic because she is the thickest one. It implies that she can be more conservative, kinder and nicer, of a better nature and more pleasant; but more dependent on others and more confident in the others.

The woman on the right side is mesomorphic: strong and better looking, young and tall. It implies that she can be more mature in her behavior and more self-assured. On the other hand, stature is associated with power and the woman who appears on the right side has more power in the image because her tall body covers more space. The skin color of the two women is similar: a light skin shade, with their face made up to highlight their eyes, cheeks and lips in a simple and natural way. The hair of both is completely black, long and straight, which represents femininity and it can be deduced that they are women with Latin physical characteristics.

The clothing of the two women is analogous: blue shorts and a white blouse with yellow decoration, differentiating that the woman on the left side wears less low-cut clothing and earrings, which may indicate a greater degree of femininity. In the first instance, the clothing communicates femininity, then youth, middle socioeconomic status, daring personality, garments to wear in hot weather, in an informal situation and in a modern era. Being presented in a tight fit for both models, but the model on the right side showing most of her body, the image can represent the correct way to dress depending on the type of body of a woman.

Within the body movements, postures and body gestures, it can be seen that the woman on the right side puts her hand on the waist of the woman on the left side to express companionship and empathy. Similarly, the right arm of both is at their waist to indicate femininity and try to please. The two women have a sideways posture, but they direct their intense, somewhat provocative and sensual gaze forward, with a straight face and a slight smile. It indicates that they are posing and looking at the camera with sensuality, femininity and extroversion.

The image seems attractive due to the posture of the models, at first glance their position connotes security and firmness. Their body expression communicates a sexy personality through their intense gaze. Finally, another characteristic of this section is to define the aspects that will configure the atmosphere or scenery: the environment is natural because the characters have tree branches as background.

**Identification of motifs:** The central motif of the ad is to show that two women with different bodies can dress in similar clothing and look fashionable. The only physical contact that exists between both entities is through a hand. However, they transmit equality and complicity because the clothes are very even, with different measures adapted to each body type, but with similar colors and textures. The visual syntax refers us to feminine vanity, the desire to look good in modern clothes.

### 4.3. Symbolic dimension of the message

This analysis belongs to the second dimension proposed by Julio Amador, which implies that primary forms can be translated into linguistic signs. Taking into account only the figures as signs, we can say that women, tree leaves and clothes appear in the image. Now, taking into account these same elements, but as symbols, then it can be pointed out: the women are models, the tree leaves are the natural background represented in photography and the clothes (shorts and blouses) are the product that the brand wants to publicize.

Taking into account that the allegories refer to spiritual and moral qualities that are difficult to express, it can be mentioned that a slender model and a thick model with the same clothing would be equality, inclusion, security.

- a) Symbolism of form. As we saw in the analysis of the expression, the form of the clothes can indicate who, how and when a certain garment can be worn. For example: shorts and a tank top during the spring, and very low-cut shorts for slim women.

The models have different physical characteristics regarding their body. The one on the right side is slim, tall, and pretty. The one on the left side is pretty and tall but not slim; it symbolizes that the brand is being inclusive with plus-sized models that do not meet all the usual beauty standards currently in place.

- b) Symbolism of color. In the image you can find primary colors such as blue and yellow, which are equivalent to emotional primary phenomena.

On the other hand, yellow and white are advancing colors that, although not very abundant, stand out for the same reason. Blue and black are cold and withdrawing colors that correspond to processes of dissimulation, passivity and weakening. Finally, green is the color of plants and represents the function of perception, stimulation of the senses, vitality.

- c) Symbolism of light. The light is identified with the spirit and the faces of the characters have a certain degree of luminosity that makes them fresh, youthful, substantial.

- d) Symbolism of matter. In the image, materials such as denim, a fabric that has had significance in fashion due to its great importance in breaking social status barriers, are perceived. Regardless of socioeconomic status and age, everyone has a piece of denim in their wardrobe, and somehow, jeans have been seen as a symbol of comfort.

In recent years, some elements have emerged to classify denim garments not only by gender, but also by age. For example, the appearance of being torn or broken symbolizes modernity.

In general, low-cut clothing connotes wearing it in hot weather. However, in recent years, it also represents modernity and sensuality. Let us think that, a hundred years ago, women could not wear clothes as low-cut as those shown in the image.

On the other hand, we can translate the symbols into statements to make the message clearer:

- The models have different physical appearance, one is slim and the other robust.
- The models wear clothes with similar characteristics.
- The models look confident and sensual.
- The models wear the brand Forever 21.

In summary, symbolically, it can be evaluated that two models appear in the image. One of them is plus size, but the two wear similar clothing of Forever 21 brand, and show a self-assured and sexy appearance. The brand intends to make consumers of the product (clothing items) feel identified with both models and generate some empathy with plus-sized women, describing that the garments are also made for them and look good, appropriately, accurately and youth.

#### **4.4. Narrative dimension**

The image is figurative and has:

- a) Characters. Women who are models.
- b) Actions. They are modeling.
- c) Situations. In an attractive way.

To carry out the narrative analysis, the following analytical perspectives must be taken into account:

- 1) Structural analysis. The model that appears on the right side is standing with her body sideways, her right hand on her waist, her left hand on her partner's waist, turning her gaze forward and tilting her face a little towards her left shoulder.

The model on the left is standing with her body sideways, her right hand on her waist and her left hand dropping on her left leg, bringing this leg forward a little, with her face leaning towards her left shoulder but her gaze forward.

This analysis also takes into account what is characteristic of culture. So, it is important to remember the multiple social campaigns that have been carried out to combat sexual harassment and that one of the main reasons is women's low-cut clothing. This does not imply that they should stop wearing this type of clothing. However, this situation, many times, can influence the purchase choice.

2) Historical-cultural analysis.

- Forever 21. The brand was created in the United States by the Korean Do Won Chang, in 1984. It quickly expanded throughout the country and the rest of the world. Currently, it has more than 800 stores, with Mexico being the third country with more branches: more than 150.

The brand is characterized by offering fashion products, mostly clothing, but also accessories and beauty products. Forever 21 launched the plus size category in 2009 and since then, it has had important advances, adding accessories and lingerie, in addition to promoting it through all its social networks.

- Characters.



La'Tecia Thomas is a model recognized for changing the paradigm of modeling photographs that show a before and an after. Whenever we think of these types of images, we refer to changes that go from slender to muscular, or from fat to slender. However, this 27-year-old Australian model uploaded photos on her Instagram account where her transformation from being size 6 to size 16 is described. She also argues that this has helped her to be happier, have more self-esteem and fight to empower other women. La'Tecia is one of the plus-sized models who decided to change the concept of beauty, inspired by the model Ashley Graham, highlighting that mental health is as important as physical health. The model that appears on the right side is the Mexican Fiona Barron, who is also an influencer of social networks by having more than 800,000 followers on her Instagram account, where her sensual photos with a sculptural body stand out.



- Image. This image was inserted on the official account of the brand Forever 21, on March 27, 2018. It does not have elements that distinguish or prove where it was taken. It may have been made in the United States, the brand's country of origin, perhaps also because the text is in English. However, it does have an approach with the Mexican reality, because the model Fiona is of Mexican nationality and both models have distinctive physical characteristics of this nationality, such as brown skin and thick lips. It is also true that many other women do not meet established beauty standards such as thinness, which is why the model La'Tecia refers to the image of many plus-sized Mexican women.
- 3) Analysis of the social functions of narratives. This advertising message has been published four other times on Forever 21's Instagram account, not with the same garments, but with the same models and other characteristics that will be described later.

#### **4.5. Reflections of the hermeneutical analysis**

With such information, it can be concluded that the image is illustrative since it represents the integration of a new representation of beauty in advertising: plus-sized models. The brand aims to communicate to consumers the acceptance and integration of this new concept, comparing stereotypical beauty with beauty that is close to many Mexican realities.

When carrying out the cultural historical analysis, it is also important to know the perception of urban Mexican women in relation to this advertisement. Said perception can be obtained by evaluating the comments of the users with Mexican characteristics, if they are positive, negative or neutral; the most outstanding topics; and some physical and biographical characteristics of those who commented.

In the first instance, it is important to mention that there are very few men who published on this post, most of them are young women between 20 and 35 years old; Those who have photos of their face and body on their Instagram show that not all of them have a plus-sized complexion and appear to be of middle socioeconomic status. Highlights include comparisons, where users identify with models, some even tag another woman and mention that the two may have similar characteristics to the models. There are also positive comments with approval for the brand for having included the plus-sized model, praising mainly the model. Very few users write about the product, but the few references that appear are positive. It is important to mention that many of the comparisons are classified as neutral since users use a sarcastic tone to make fun of themselves when comparing themselves, especially with the plus-sized model.

Among the negative comments, there are those who disagree with a plus-sized woman being a model, thus she is discriminated. There are also negative comments for the brand, with claims for showing false equality and promoting obesity.



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Photo 2: photograph and advertising message published on April 03, 2018, on the official Instagram account of Forever 21 brand.

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BhHWApaFEUn/?hl=es&taken-by=forever21> (accessed 20.10.2018).



Photo 3: photograph and advertising message published on April 04, 2018, on the official Instagram account of Forever 21 brand.

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BhHWApaFEUn/?hl=es&taken-by=forever21> (accessed 20.10.2018).

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*Photo 4:* photograph and advertising message published on April 06, 2018, on the official Instagram account of Forever 21 brand.

**Source:** <https://www.instagram.com/p/BhHWApaFEUn/?hl=es&taken-by=forever21> (accessed 20.10.2018).



*Photo 5:* photograph and advertising message published on April 08, 2018, on the official Instagram account of Forever 21 brand.

**Source:** <https://www.instagram.com/p/BhHWApaFEUn/?hl=es&taken-by=forever21> (accessed 20.10.2018).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Through the images, it is possible to reach the minds and hearts of consumers, to subsequently obtain brand recognition, which is technically called positioning. That is why in advertising it is important to carry out studies on the interpretation of the image. As Romero (2002) indicated, "in visual communication, the understanding process implies decoding to extract the conceptual meaning of visual communication structures". This process is culturally conditioned. For example, the meaning of colors depends entirely on culture.

As general conclusions of the hermeneutical analysis, it can be mentioned that the role of the plus-sized woman in the Instagram advertising made by Forever 21 brand, symbolically represents a type of change that goes hand in hand with empowerment acquired by women. It is no longer just about demanding products with which they are satisfied; they also care about content with which they feel identified. Forever 21 has advantages that prompt immediate acceptance by plus-sized women of middle socioeconomic status: it offers a variety of design, sizes that resemble the figure, as well as fashionable and youth clothing at affordable prices. However, the brand wants acceptance and positioning, transmitting equality and inclusivity, showing two models with different physiognomies in a similar way.

The main reason for the brand is not to show that it sells clothing for plus-sized women, but to show two female bodies with similar clothing to convey equality and complicity. This way, consumers should feel that these clothes fit well on all bodies and can feel identified. Sympathy and empathy can be generated with the brand, because the garments look good, in an appropriate and youthful way. Forever 21 announces that it sells plus size clothing, giving a message with which women can feel self-assured, comfortable and feminine. At the same time, the brand tries to eliminate to some degree the cliché that robust women do not like to show off their flesh, exhibiting plus-sized models with plunging necklines.

As the elements of the composition, it should be noted that when the plus-sized body appears on the left side and balance and most suitable composition is generated. As Instagram is a social network with stipulated typographic characteristics, all the text elements are the same. The only thing that is modified is the *emojis*. Another important feature is that the brand does not use hashtags, as other brands do, but it uses *emojis* as visual, eye-catching and fun elements to complete the message.

The shots are general and American because they cover the whole figure or only from the legs up; while the low angle appears in the images to represent a psychically strong, dominant or superior character. On the other hand, clothing, which in this case is the main product, communicates femininity, youth, socioeconomic status, personality, in what climate it can be worn and in what situation. However, what generates conversation in the comments is not the product, but the models, specifically the plus-sized model, who gives recognition to the brand



for being inclusive, and who at the same time is criticized positively and negatively for her physical appearance.

The two models that appear in the images try to demonstrate full inclusion through clothing, because the garments are very even, with different sizes adapted to each body type, but with similar colors and textures. However, the comments of the users reflect that, although many women feel identified when commenting that they have similar bodies, the acceptance by the followers of Forever 21, and potential consumers, is not as serious as the brand needs, the users accept that they have bodies similar to that of the plus-sized model, but in the form of mockery or sarcasm.

To conclude, it is reiterated that the advertising made by Forever 21 brand is trying to transmit equality and integration through plus-sized models, but, above all, a new representation of beauty that corresponds more with the physiognomy and reality of women that are not only Spanish but also American and Latin.

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