

A MARKETING INTERVENTION  
FOR INCLUSIVE PRODUCT LINES

by  
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FOR INCLUSIVE PRODUCT LINES

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**ABSTRACT**

Recent market trends around diversity and inclusion have pushed many companies to deliver inclusive products to their consumers. There is, however, a lack of research on how consumers are responding to these new inclusive product line launches. Thereby, the purpose of this thesis paper is to identify consumer responses to companies that are expanding their pre-existing product lines to be more inclusive. This research examines how feelings of representation and product fit skepticism affect brand attitude, specifically for skin-tone inclusive products. It also tests the impact of a product sampling marketing intervention on increasing brand attitudes for those who feel less represented. The results found that those who felt less represented in the market had a higher level of product fit skepticism which yielded lower brand attitudes. Lastly, the marketing intervention of product sampling proved effective in increasing brand attitude, particularly for those who feel less represented.

## INTRODUCTION

“Fair,” “light,” and “whitening”.

This language has been commonly utilized in cosmetic product advertisements, alluding to the lack of skin-tone inclusivity within the cosmetic industry in the past. Perhaps motivated by the rising consumer trends of diversity and inclusion, companies such as L’Oréal, Unilever, and Johnson & Johnson have started changing their marketing by removing such exclusive words in advertisements when rebranding and repackaging their products (Omokha 2021). Furthermore, a survey on Facebook ads found that 71% of consumers expect brands to promote diversity and inclusion through their advertisements (Kelly 2021).

But consumers are expecting more from brands beyond advertising inclusivity. There is a growing consumer base that holds higher expectations for brands to be inclusive, including the expectation that brands have inclusive product lines (Esposito 2021). Many companies are responding to the pressure of changing consumer trends by redesigning and releasing inclusive products to address a wider range of consumers’ needs. For example, in July 2020, Crayola launched a 32-count crayon pack named “Colors of the World” containing various skin tones to increase representation and create inclusion (Rivera 2020). Relatedly, Salon Monet created a range of skin-tone inclusive nude shoes, promoting the notion that “nude is not a color.”

These new launches of inclusive products from companies reflect the efforts of the discussions in our communities to establish better representation and fairness to all people groups in society. It seems important, therefore, to measure if companies are actually creating better representation through extending their existing product lines to be inclusive. How are consumers responding to these inclusive products based on their feelings of representation in the market? And in turn, how do these responses influence the brand attitude of a company?

Little research has been conducted on how consumers are responding to these new inclusive product lines, perhaps due to the recency of such initiatives. To address this gap in the literature, the present research aims to identify consumers' responses to companies who are expanding their pre-existing skin-tone product lines to be more inclusive. Specifically, I examine consumers' brand attitudes toward a company following an inclusive product launch.

The research I have gathered shows certain consumer groups are disproportionately represented in products, and not all feel represented by the current products available in the market. However, I argue that simply creating inclusive products may not be enough to resolve prior insufficiencies in product lines. Skepticism as to whether a product will fit consumers' needs still lingers for those who traditionally are underrepresented. Therefore, despite the launch of an inclusive product line, these individuals may have lower brand attitudes toward a company than those who feel represented. As a result, companies need to be attentive to how they are marketing their inclusive product lines to previously underrepresented groups. They must market in a way that communicates a product's ability to meet the needs of those who feel underrepresented.

I conduct two studies to examine the relationship between feelings of representation and product fit skepticism and its effect on brand attitudes. Additionally, I examine whether a marketing intervention, namely product samples, can be an effective way for a company to decrease consumer's product fit skepticism, thus improving brand attitudes toward those who feel less represented.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive products need an inclusive design process. Susan Goltsman, the co-author of *Play for All Guidelines*, explains that “inclusive design doesn’t mean you’re designing one thing for all people. You’re designing a diversity of ways to participate so that everyone has a sense of belonging” (Malfetano 2021). When designing a product line to be inclusive, a company needs to look at the need of various users and “the degree to which a user is matched to a product” (Patrick and Hollenbeck 2021). Therefore, the first step to making a product that works for different users is to make the best possible match between the user and the environment they are in. Patrick and Hollenbeck suggest that users of inclusive products do not all respond the same to these products, and the experience of mismatch can create negative emotions (Patrick and Hollenbeck 2021).

Brand attitudes, which are the feelings and opinions consumers have about a company, are created as consumers process through the appraisal and response of a particular product. While Patrick and Hollenbeck speak about inclusive product lines more generally, I build on their framework when formulating my predictions about inclusive skin tone product line extensions.

### ***The Relationship between Representation and Brand Attitude***

It is highly plausible that the varying consumer’s feelings of representation will have an impact on brand attitude. Brand attitude refers to the emotional feeling consumers associate with a product or service. Emotional responses are what shape consumer experiences, and it influences what decisions they made. The consumer’s experience of a brand is closely related to the “sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses” from the product’s features, and direct and indirect communication of the brand through marketing (Patrick and Hollenbeck 2021). Another study looking at consumers’ emotional responses found that these factors can be a primary “determinant of brand attitude’ (Rizvi and Oney 2018). Hence, negative emotions can directly

impact the consumer's overall experience with the brand, and I reasonably connect that a consumer's attitude towards a brand can be developed through prior experience.

Within the cosmetic industry, there has been a lack of representation historically that consumers express. For a long time, society's definition of beauty has been influenced by mass media and advertisements, contributing to the lack of diversity (Milkie 1999). There are 54% of consumers do not feel represented in Facebook advertisements (Kelly 2021). "Two in five consumers feel that they are not fully represented by the people they see in adverts" (Kar 2021). Today we see that most consumers are more favorable to brands that care for diversity and inclusion in their advertainments and are more likely to buy from those brands (Kelly 2021). Therefore, "Rihanna's launch of Fenty Beauty in 2017" which holds products of more than 50 skin-tone shades was identified as a challenge to other beauty brands to be more inclusive (Walters 2018, Werle 2019). Ultimately, it has only been two to three years since companies have started to move away from non-inclusive advertisements of cosmetic products (Omokha 2021). There are still many consumers who voice a hard time finding the right foundation that matches their own skin tone, expressing an overarching theme of product misfit can be identified. This product misfit leads to skepticism toward new inclusive product lines.

### ***Product Fit Skepticism***

Product skepticism is the "doubts, disbelieves, and distrust" consumers have during the consumer decision-making process (Morel and Pruyn 2003). There is, to an extent, always consumer product skepticism that exists when a new product is introduced in the market.

There have been prior studies speculating the reasons for how and why product fit skepticism happens. One study conducted research and found that consumer skepticism can come from deceptive advertisements (Khan, Fatima, and Hussain 2020). The historical experience some

consumers might have had of companies not meeting the claims they make in product advertisements could be a main factor in product fit skepticism.

Another research has found that a customer's attitude towards a product category affects their attitude of an individual brand in that category (Posavac et al. 2014). That is, "what customers think generally" translated to the associations of an individual brand. The difficulty underrepresented individuals encountered in finding a skin-tone product that works well in the past are a negative experience that led to general skepticism towards the skin-tone product category. This skepticism can remain despite the launch of an inclusive product line. Inclusive product line extensions have been a fairly recent phenomenon, gaining momentum around 2017 when Fenty Beauty by Rihanna introduced a broad range of foundation shades (Salpini 2019).

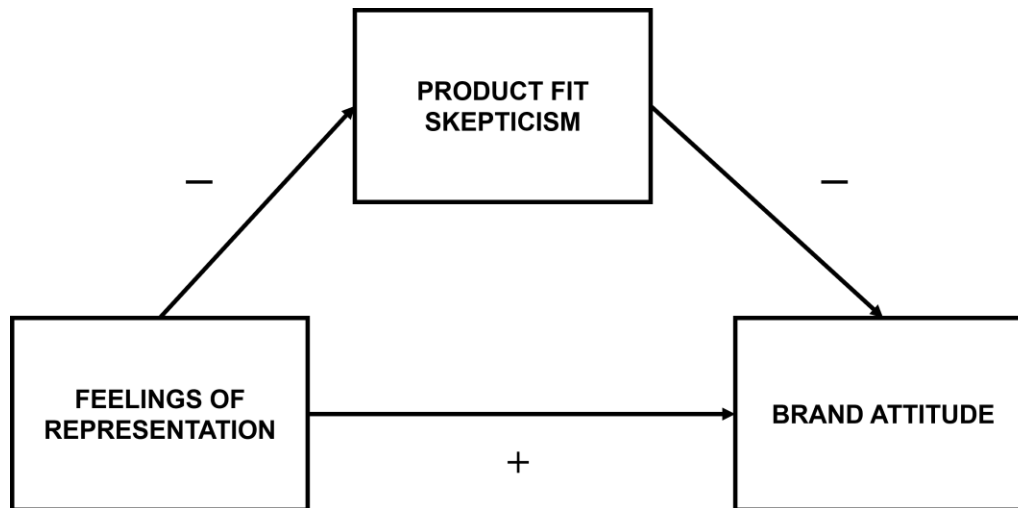
Furthermore, customer perceived value is derived through customers' belief in the ability of the product or service to meet their needs and expectations (Brudner 2020). If a consumer does not believe a product can match their specific skin-tone, it can create skepticism towards the product and result in a lower perceived value prior to actually using the product (Dolan and Gourville 2014). Underrepresented individuals may be skeptical of the product fit to meet their needs and lack complete trust in the claimed product benefits (Foreh and Grier 2003). Therefore, I argue that product fit skepticism may lower a consumer's impression of a brand as the consumers lack trust in the company's ability to create a product that fits their needs. Taken together, my predictions are as follows:

H1: Feelings of representation have a positive relationship with brand attitude

H2: I argue that product fit skepticism is the underlying reason that explains the relationship between feelings of representation and brand attitude.



**Conceptual Model: Product Fit Skepticism as the Underlying Driver of Feelings of Representation on Brand Attitude**



***Marketing Intervention: Product Sampling***

Inclusive design aims to decrease the mismatch that exists between the user and the product (Patirck and Hollenbeck 2021). I predict that the perceived mismatch a consumer thinks towards a product creates product fit skepticism. Marketers need to address this product fit skepticism, lowering it as much as possible.

A specific marketing intervention worth exploring is product sampling. The benefits of product sampling to marketers can be found through prior research. Firstly, an experiment on the effects of free samples found that providing free product samples had a positive correlation with incremental sale increases. The researchers confirmed that free samples are “highly effective in increasing sales over a long period” (Bawa and Shoemaker 2004).

Secondly, findings from the experiments on a free product sampling for a mobile newspaper product suggested that consumers modified their beliefs about the product while using the trial. This research paper on mobile newspapers also found that consumers “will not risk

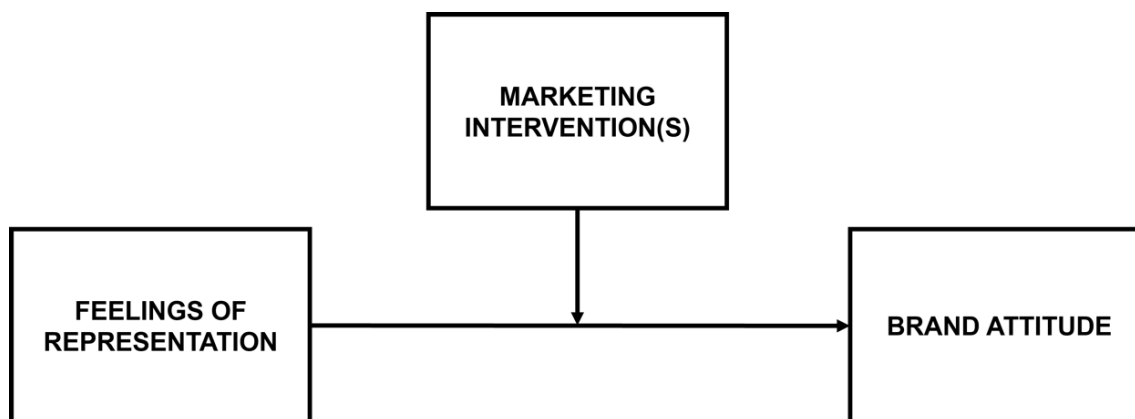
committing time, effort and money” towards new technology without having the confidence in the benefits it can bring (Wang et al. 2012). Perhaps this is a reason product sampling may be a strong solution for companies as they can give consumers a way to confirm the benefits of a product with low risk. I build on this reasoning to see if the same accordance happens with skin-tone products.

Moreover, the perception of a brand can be changed through product sampling (Peekage 2020). Studies have shown that users who sampled a product had a positive effect on brand image (Amor and Guilbert 2007).

Based on these prior findings, the marketing intervention of product sample trial could be effective as a promotion for new skin-tone product line launches. Product sampling may help mitigate the skepticism consumers may have about product fit as these samples allow consumers to experience the products first-hand. Consumers’ will then have confidence that the skin-tone product will match them. When consumer skepticism is lowered, the brand attitude expressed by consumers will improve.

H3: Product sampling will moderate the relationship between feelings of representation and brand attitude.

### **Conceptual Model: Introduction of Marketing Intervention(s) to Boost Brand Attitude**



## **SUMMARY OF STUDIES**

Two studies were conducted for this thesis paper. Study 1 will sample 400 female-identifying participants to observe the relationships between feelings of representation, product fit skepticism, and brand attitude. Drawing on the results of Study 1, Study 2 will sample another 400 female-identifying participants. Study 2 will determine if the marketing intervention of sample trials is effective in increasing brand attitude, particularly among those with lower feelings of representation.

### **STUDY 1: PRODUCT FIT SKEPTICISM DRIVES LOWER BRAND ATTITUDES**

The study aims to test whether feelings of representation in skin tone inclusive products affect brand attitude. More importantly, it examines whether product fit skepticism is the underlying driver of lower brand attitude among those who feel less represented. The reason for testing product fit skepticism is because of the lack of positive experience consumers have had with brands in providing satisfactory skin tone products. Indeed, before 2017, there were not many cosmetic companies that held a diverse skin tone product line, and for those who did, consumers were largely unsatisfied with their products.

#### ***Method***

I recruited 401 female-identifying participants on Prolific, a market research platform that connects researchers to participants for conducting social experiments. All participation in the study was voluntary and monetary compensation was based on the federal minimum wage. I excluded 35 responses due to these participants not meeting the recruitment criteria of being female-identifying, leaving a sample of 366 responses ( $M_{age} = 39$ ).

Females have always been the dominant group that purchases and searches for cosmetic products. Although users of make-up draw from diverse groups, I decided to collect data for my study from only female-identifying participants due to time and resource constraints.

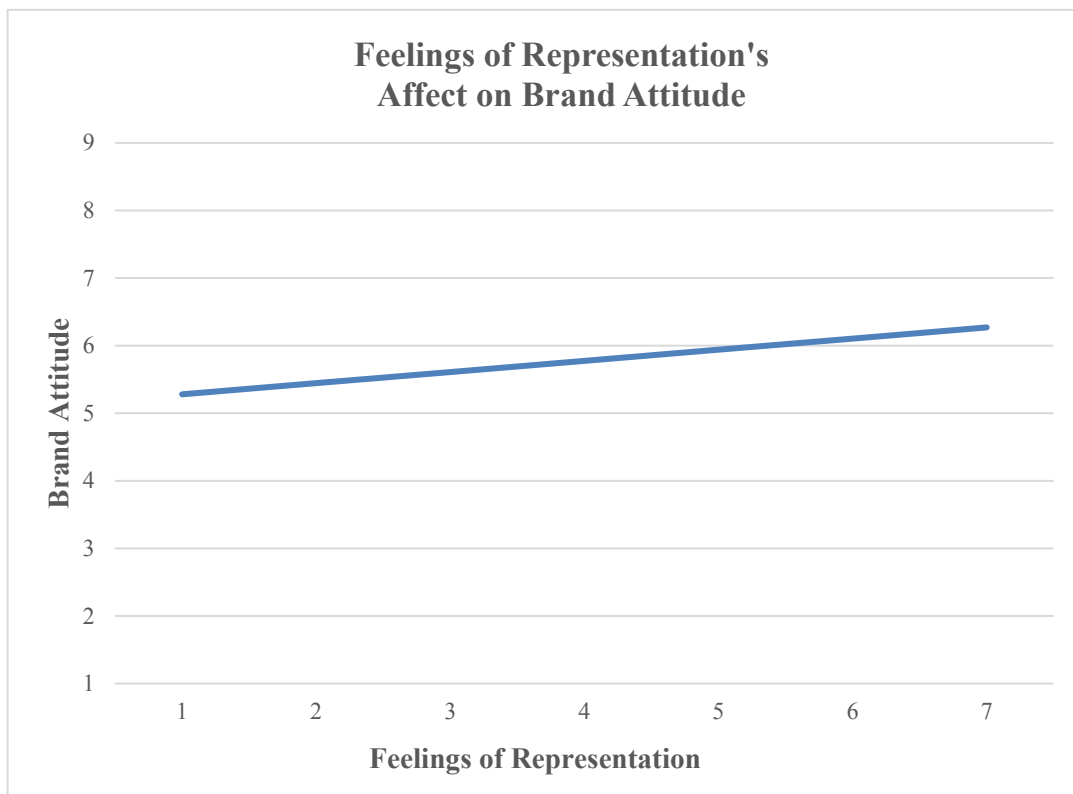
First, in the study, participants were asked to rate their feelings of representation after reading “Many consumer products, including makeup, undergarments, and bandages, are produced in colors intended to match one’s skin tone. To what extent do you feel your skin tone is represented in these kinds of consumer products?” (1 = Not at all represented, 7 = Very represented). Participants then proceeded to read a scenario where they browsed an online beauty store selling CAM Cosmetics. The scenario explained that the participants stumbled upon an advertisement about how CAM recently extended its foundation line to include a broader range of skin tones as part of its initiative to be a more inclusive brand.

After reading the scenario, participants were asked three questions related to product fit about the newly extended foundation line: “I do not believe that CAM Cosmetics’ new line extension will have a product that matches the skin tone.”, “Even with the new line extension, I am unsure I will find a product for me.”, and “Even if the product quality is high, I do not believe CAM Cosmetics’ product will fit me”, on a nine-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree).

Participants were also asked to answer three questions on brand attitude: “How much do you like CAM, the cosmetics brand?”, “What is your attitude towards CAM, the cosmetics brand?”, and “How do you feel towards CAM, the cosmetics brand?” on a nine-point scale (1 = Not at all, 9 = Very much).

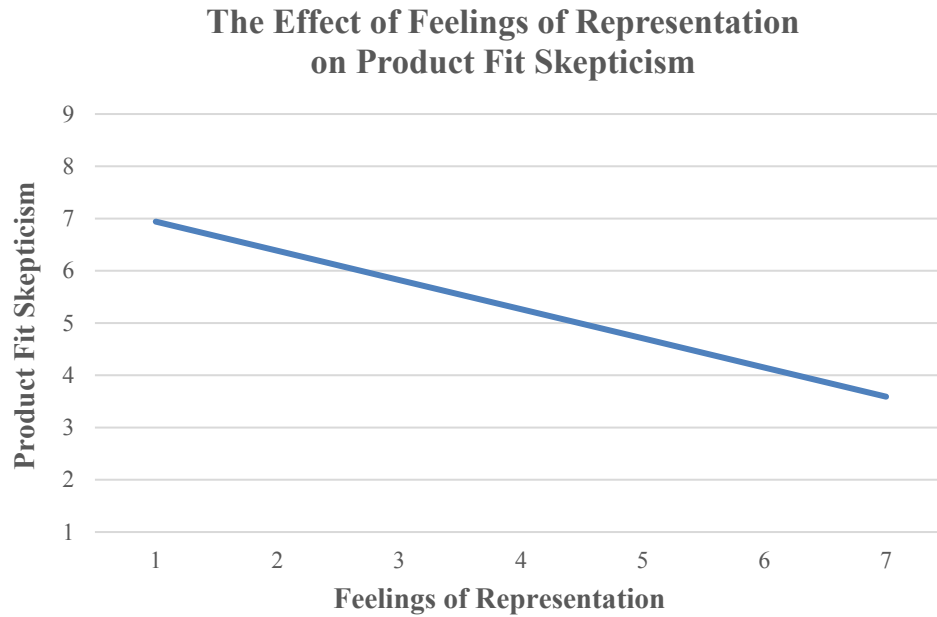
## ***Results***

I conducted reliability tests to assess the internal consistency of my items for their intended measures: product fit skepticism and brand attitudes. The reliability test on the three product fit items had high reliability ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ). Therefore, the three product fit items were averaged into one composite measure of product fit skepticism. The reliability test on the three brand attitude items also had high reliability ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ) and was, therefore, averaged into one composite measure of brand attitude.



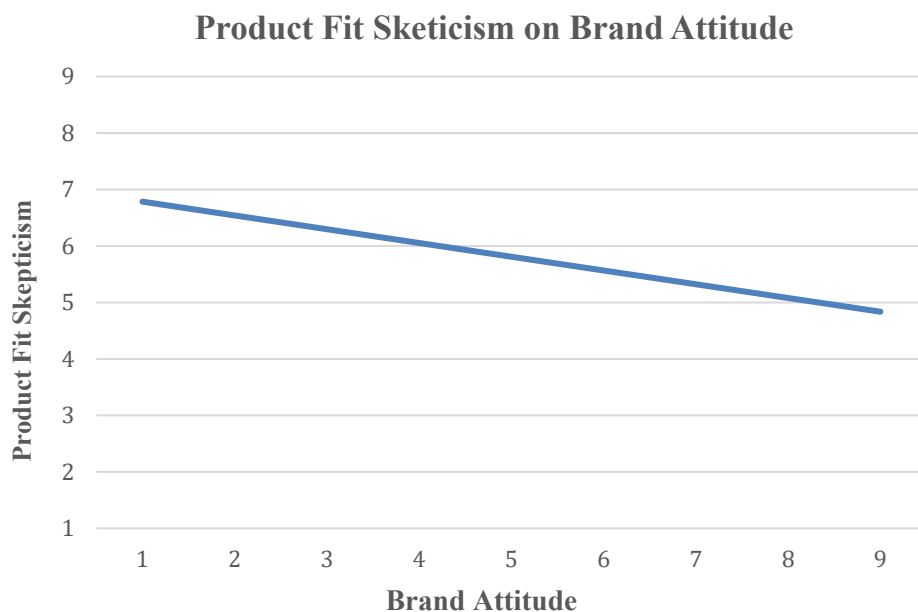
**FIGURE 1.2 Study 1: Lower Feelings of Representation Lead to Lower Brand Attitudes**

As predicted, there was positive relationship between feelings of representation and brand attitude ( $t(366) = 3.56, p < .001$ ; see Figure 1.2). That is, the consumers that felt underrepresented in the marketplace had a lower brand attitude score than those who felt represented.



**FIGURE 1.3 Study 1: Lower Feelings of Representation Lead to Higher Product Fit Skepticism**

Furthermore, feelings of representation had a negative relationship with product fit skepticism ( $t(366) = -12.09, p < .001$ ; see Figure 1.3). Those who felt less represented had greater skepticism towards CAM Cosmetics products.



**FIGURE 1.4 Study 1: Higher Product Fit Skepticism Leads to Lower Brand Attitude**

There was also a negative relationship between product fit skepticism and brand attitude ( $t(366) = -4.79, p < .001$ ). Importantly, a formal test of mediation using feelings of representation as the IV, product fit skepticism as the mediator, and brand attitude as the dependent variable (PROCESS Model 4; Hayes 2018) confirms that product fit skepticism drives lower brand attitudes (indirect effect:  $b = .14, SE = .03, CI_{95\%} [.07, .21]$ ). In summary, I find that lower feelings of representation increase product fit skepticism for consumers which subsequently lowers brand attitudes.

### ***Discussion***

These findings suggest that lower brand attitudes towards cosmetic brands from those who express feeling less represented stem from product fit skepticism about the extended product line. Thus, product fit skepticism is an important aspect for brands to address when launching inclusive skin tone product lines. In the next study, I will conduct an experiment, examining whether a marketing intervention can be used to improve brand attitudes.

## **STUDY 2: MARKETING INTERVENTION OF TRIAL SAMPLES**

The experiment aims to replicate my finding that feelings of representation in skin tone products affect brand attitude. It also aims to test how a marketing intervention changes the outcome of feelings of representation and brand attitude; the goal is to help reduce the difference in brand attitude between those who feel more or less represented. As Study 1 found, product fit skepticism is what drives lower brand attitudes. So, to address this product fit skepticism, I tested whether a free sample trial kit before the actual purchase of the product would help consumer skepticism towards the new inclusive product, thereby increasing brand attitude.

## ***Method***

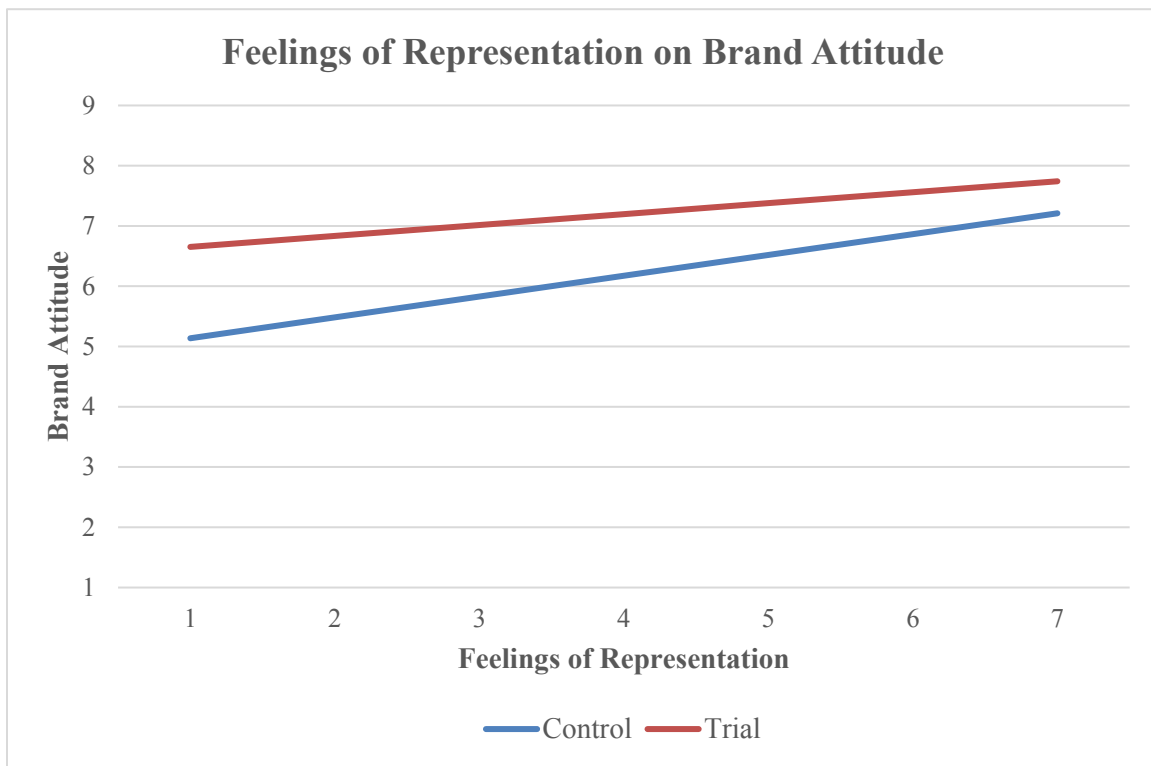
I recruited 400 female-identifying participants on Prolific, a market research platform for conducting social experiments. All participation in the study is voluntary and monetary compensation is based on the federal minimum wage. I excluded 5 responses due to these participants not meeting the recruitment criteria of being female-identifying, leaving a sample of 395 responses ( $M_{\text{age}} = 33$ ).

Participants were asked to rate their feelings of representation using the same question item as in Study 1. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two intervention conditions (control vs. trial). The study experiment then proceeded to have all participants read a scenario of buying make-up foundation from a brand-named CAM Cosmetics. The scenario explained that CAM recently extended its foundation line to include a broader range of skin tones.

Participants assigned to the control condition did not see any additional information. However, participants in the trial condition were shown an additional scenario that the brand is offering a “Foundation Trial Kit,” a product sampling option, for consumers to determine which foundation color would work best for them. They were allowed to choose 5 different foundation shades to try before deciding to purchase a product. All participants were then asked the same brand attitude items used in Study 1, which were averaged together to create one brand attitude measure.



## Results



**FIGURE 1.5 Study 2: The Interactive Effect of Feelings of Representation and Product**

### Sampling

The same reliability test as Study 1 was conducted on the data collected in Study 2. To determine if the proposed marketing intervention moderated the effect of feelings of representation on brand attitude, I conducted a regression analysis using feelings of representation as the independent variable, a sample trial kit as the moderator, and brand attitude as the dependent variable (PROCESS Model 1; Hayes 2018). Firstly, in the control condition, there is a main effect of feelings of representation on brand attitude ( $t(391) = 5.75, p < .001$ ; see Figure 1.5). The less represented consumers feel, the lower their brand attitude score. Aligning with the hypothesis and Study 1, feelings of representation predict one's brand attitude toward a company even after the brand has launched an inclusivity initiative.

I also found a main effect of the intervention ( $t(391) = 3.33, p = .001$ ; see Figure 1.5), where the brand attitude was higher for those in the sample trial kit condition relative to the control condition. That is, in the trial condition, everyone's brand attitude was increased regardless of their feelings of representation. More importantly, I found a marginally significant interaction of sample trial kit condition and control condition ( $t(391) = -1.82, p = 0.07$ ; see Figure 1.5). That is, the differential effects of feelings of representation on brand attitude were weakened for those in the trial condition compared to the control condition. This result suggests the success of my proposed marketing intervention in improving the brand attitude, particularly for those who feel less represented.

### *Discussion*

My findings show that brands can use marketing interventions to improve consumers' brand attitudes. This intervention offers a practical solution for companies to tackle the product fit skepticism underrepresented consumers may harbor towards skin tone inclusivity initiatives. Importantly, this intervention demonstrates that the differential response in brand attitude between the represented and underrepresented individuals can be attenuated.

## **GENERAL DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

In Study 1, I found that feelings of representation and product fit skepticism do affect brand attitude, suggesting that not all consumers respond in the same way to product line extensions that are intended to be more inclusive. Following an inclusive product line extension, those who feel less represented have lower brand attitudes than those who feel represented.

My results from Study 1 also suggest the underlying reason for these lower brand attitudes is driven by product fit skepticism. Thus, my research adds to the literature by improving the

understanding of not only why some consumers have lower brand attitudes but what is driving these attitudes. Companies that are releasing inclusive products want consumers to feel better represented in the market and fulfill their needs through a product that works for them. Knowing that the underlying driver of lower brand attitude is attributed to product fit skepticism, companies must take appropriate actions to assure the consumer that their inclusive products will have a high product fit and to foster better brand attitudes.

In Study 2, I found product sampling to be a successful marketing intervention in addressing product fit skepticism. This was evidenced by the boost in brand attitude ratings, particularly for those who felt less represented. In other words, product sampling trials were especially effective for those who felt less represented relative to those who felt more represented.

Interestingly for Study 2, the product sampling increased the brand attitude of everyone regardless of representation. This shows the ability of marketing interventions to foster positive brand attitudes, further indicating its high potential in changing the brand attitude of underrepresented consumers. Thus, the companies could benefit from many consumer groups beyond the underrepresented group by investing in offering product sampling.

Product sampling is a practical and implementable marketing intervention that marketing managers can use to reduce the difference in brand attitude between those who feel underrepresented and those who feel represented. My overall findings from my paper can be utilized as a justification for the cost and investment of rolling out such marketing interventions, especially for other functions of the company such as the finance and accounting departments. Previous studies are showing the direct relationship between how the consumer's attitude towards a brand affects purchase intention (Najmi, Mirbagheri, and Atefi 2014). Therefore, efforts to raise brand attitudes can benefit the company's end profitability.

Furthermore, in Study 2, despite the difference in brand attitude as a function of feelings of representation, brand attitudes were, on average, generally positive (i.e., above the scale midpoint). Thus, consumers are positively disposed to a company's efforts in creating better representation via inclusive product lines, as it may demonstrate the company's commitment to diversity and inclusion. Therefore, it is important to note that, overall, companies may benefit by creating inclusive products for their consumers. However, as evidenced by this research, merely extending a product line is not enough.

should first analyze if they are providing products that are inclusive in design. The product itself requires an ability to meet the needs of different individuals before advertising the product to everyone. Then, the company can focus on marketing the inclusive product for the consumer to acknowledge the product's features and benefits as product fit skepticism will still exist for underrepresented consumers even with inclusive product launches.

### ***Limitations And Future Research***

One limitation in this research can be in the scenario given within the study and experiment. The scenario is based on participants doing online shopping and does not consider in-store purchases. It would be interesting to study whether the findings would be different if participants were given an in-store shopping experience scenario. Consumers' sensory connections to the product are more easily achieved through an in-store shopping experience than online, making it likely for the experience to be more memorable (Lawrence and Ackerman 2011, Marhanma 2021). The responses to inclusive products could be different with the additional factors of these sensory connections. A good experience in-stores could create positive associations with the product offerings and perhaps further address product fit skepticism.

In this research paper, only one marketing intervention was examined as a way to increase brand attitudes. Future research can test additional marketing interventions that may also be able to address product fit skepticism. One such intervention could involve studying how transparency of the product development process affects consumer's brand attitudes. Such efforts may increase the trust consumers have in the brand to successfully deliver products that fit them well. Another possible intervention to test is creating personalized advertisements tailored to the various consumers of the diverse product line. Stories that consumers can personally relate to could build a positive connection to the company and help increase brand attitudes toward the company.

Furthermore, given its relevance to marketplace trends, this research focused on skin-tone inclusivity. Future research could explore other forms of inclusivity, such as clothing size and hair type inclusivity. It would be interesting to study if consumer response to these types of inclusive product lines mimics or deviates from my findings on skin-tone inclusive product lines.

While I focused on brand attitude in this research paper, future research could explore how feelings of representation affect other important outcomes such as purchase likelihood, improvements to customer retention rates, and word-of-mouth advertising. These are elements that can help inform the success of a product launch to a company and the existence of product-market fit.

Additionally, I argued product fit skepticism is an underlying cause for a lower brand attitude among those who feel underrepresented. However, many factors can influence brand attitude. Future studies may explore other possible mediators that might also contribute to driving lower brand attitudes of consumers.

## **CONCLUSION**

For some consumers, the release of inclusive products will be seen as a bandwagon to the consumer trends at the moment due to the popular topic of diversity and inclusion. Marketing managers and companies can give depth to their inclusive products by being attentive to the different consumer responses and addressing them through marketing interventions, providing trust in the expansion of inclusive product lines.

This research paper speaks on an important topic that has just begun to be studied. It is an area of many opportunities for future research to create a better, wholesome understanding of consumer's responses to inclusive product lines.

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