Can you be plus-size and healthy? Nike's new mannequins spark debate

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June 13, 2019

In an effort to increase representation in sport, Nike unveiled new plus-size and para-athlete mannequins at its NikeTown store in London, England on June 5.

"To celebrate the diversity and inclusivity of sport, the space will not just celebrate local elite and grassroot athletes through visual content but also show Nike plus-size and para-sport mannequins for the first time in a retail space," Nike said in a press release.

The addition of diverse mannequins comes two years after Nike introduced its first plus-size women's collection, which has sizes ranging from 16 to 26 (or 1X to 3X).

The mannequins sparked a hostile debate about whether being plus-size should be promoted by retailers.

Some shoppers lauded the brand's effort to reflect the diverse population that wears its clothing, while others were concerned that promoting a higher body mass index is unhealthy and dangerous.

Writer Tanya Gold penned an op-ed for *The Telegraph* in opposition of the new mannequins.

"Yet the new Nike mannequin is not size 12, which is healthy, or even 16 — a hefty weight, yes, but not one to kill a woman. She is immense,

gargantuan, vast. She heaves with fat," said Gold. "She is, in every measure, obese, and she is not readying herself for a run in her shiny Nike gear."

Celebrities like Jameela Jamil and Iskra Lawrence, both vehement supporters of body positivity, responded in support of Nike's new mannequins.

"This is fatphobia, shaming other people's bodies and passing judgement on their health is not your business, and excluding diverse bodies is the opposite of progress," Lawrence wrote in a post on Instagram.

"News flash: I am more healthy NOW than I was when I was thinner because being skinny does not equal being healthy."

In response to the controversy, Nike remains in support of the new mannequins:

"At Nike our mission is to serve all athletes and we continually evolve how we display product across our platforms to reflect the diverse consumers we serve every day," a spokesperson told Global News.

Some people — like personal trainer Sarah Taylor — find themselves in the middle of the debate, recognizing the need for conversations about both body positivity and what it means to be healthy.

Taylor is the founder of Fitness by Sarah Taylor, a body-positive gym in Toronto.

As a plus-size woman, she was extremely excited to see Nike's new plus-size mannequins hit stores.

"For me, the importance of it was… actually (seeing) representation of my body type in fitness. It's not something I ever had," Taylor told Global News. "Women athletes aren't just a size small."

She believes the mannequins will help crush the myth that plus-size women can't exercise.

"So many people think that a plus-size body can't be active. I work out six days a week," she said.

“I could be standing next to somebody who’s thin, and somebody might think that they’re healthy. Meanwhile, they don’t go to the gym and they don’t eat very well.”

In her view, a person’s health can’t be determined solely by their weight.

“There are so many other things to being healthy. It’s really about starting from the inside and changing your measuring stick from a size or a number on the scale to how you feel,” Taylor said.

At her gym, Taylor focuses less on looking “better” and more on feeling better.

“Do you feel good? Are you able to move the way you want to move? Are you able to live the life you want to live?”

In Taylor’s opinion, body positivity is something different than health.

“Body positivity is learning to love your body, whether you’re a woman or a man. Body positivity is realizing that you are valuable and worthy in this present moment,” she said.

Ultimately, Taylor takes issue with those opposed to the Nike mannequins.

“Society says that (fat) people aren’t good enough and they are unworthy. They shouldn’t be in the gym because they don’t belong there,” Taylor said.

“But they also should be in the gym because they’re fat and they’re not supposed to be fat… but we’re not going to give them any clothes to wear. Are we supposed to show up to the gym naked?”

For her, it’s more important to be active and healthy — physically and mentally — than it is to lose weight, and that’s the message she passes on to her clients.

“Body positivity was created, in my opinion, to empower people and make them feel good. In my situation, I learned to love who I was at my heaviest and I just wanted to feel better. My work started on the inside,” Taylor said.

“I’ve lost weight but I don’t talk a lot about my weight loss, even, because it’s not the important part. I still have to measure how I feel.”

She believes the debate around the mannequins and what it means to be "healthy" has become too polarized.

"I don't think extremes in any case are good. If you're all or nothing in terms of… eating, that can be harmful on your body," she said.

"If we're just talking about loving yourself and accepting your body, that's a different conversation."

Tania Lemoine, founder of the BACA Eating Disorder Clinic in Montreal, Que., agrees. She believes you can be healthy at any size.

In her view, eating and exercise can have an impact on how you look, but so can genetics and your history with food.

"In the field of disordered eating, (we'll see) women who are chronic dieters… and they, oftentimes, have a higher BMI," Lemoine told Global News.

"When you diet and you gain and you diet and you gain, your body misinterprets and then misunderstands what your healthy weight is."

Lemoine suffered from bulimia, a form of disordered eating, when she was younger. She says her former "yo-yo" diet in part contributes to her higher body weight now.

"Now, the (conversation) is shifting to how to be healthy at a plus size," she said. "If you move regularly and you train your body… your body will be healthier."

Lemoine has seen first-hand how discussing body positivity without discussing health and vice versa can negatively impact a person's relationship with their body.

"There's a whole discussion around 'to each his own' and 'let's respect one another and a belief that you can find a sense of self-worth and self-esteem at any weight. Then there's the health debate," Lemoine said.

"We're not doing society a service if we don't combine both."

In her practice, Lemoine has noticed that the stigma around the capabilities of plus-size people reinforces unhealthy behaviour.

“If someone is morbidly obese… in my experience, that happens because of shame (and) because they aren’t able to love themselves,” she said.

“A lot of the women who come (to BACA) who are significantly overweight… they don’t want to go to the gym and sweat next to these other thin, model-looking women right there (because) they’re not proud of themselves.”

According to Dr. Simon Sherry of Crux Psychology, new scientific research appears to support both Lemoine and Taylor’s claims: your activity may matter more than your weight.

“It’s a question debated and disputed in scientific research right now, and the crux of that hinges on the following: physical activity appears more important to health outcomes when compared to body weight,” Sherry told Global News.

“To unpack that, it looks like physical activity may help counteract the negative impacts of body weight on health outcomes and by health outcomes, I mean major and important outcomes including mortality… or other major health problems, such as cardiovascular disease.”

In contrast, Sherry says the link between body weight and mortality is “questionable.”

Sherry also says it might be a misconception that lower physical activity leads to weight gain.

In his view, weight gain is commonly caused by other factors — such as health concerns — and the extra weight discourages physical activity.

“I think we need to closely consider a reverse direction of influence here,” he said.

“When it comes to disordered eating right now, clinicians are overly reliant on working from what I would call the inside out. And that is to say we’re reliant on trying to change an individual’s thinking, feeling and behaving so that they can develop a healthier relationship with their body.”

In Sherry’s opinion, there’s not enough emphasis on changing sociocultural factors.

“These are issues and problems embedded in our wider culture. The world we build through media, mannequins and the like can definitely have an impact,” he said.

“And so, I think it’s good that we’re having greater diversity in presentations of models, mannequins and images.”

At her clinic, Lemoine promotes an idea of healthy eating that involves “balanced, spontaneous eating.”

“It’s energy in and energy out,” she said.

“You may not like to typically eat pizza. But if you’re on an outing… and there’s only one place where you can stop, and it’s pizza… you’ll stretch a little and you allow yourself to eat it because you’re hungry, and that’s more important.”

Healthy eating also means being thoughtful about what you put into your body.

“It’s really about not being enslaved by doctrine… it’s about factoring in the idea you need to consider what actually fuels your body. You can’t just order Uber Eats every day.”

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