

The Prevalence of the Thin Ideal and How it Affects Advertising Effectiveness in Young Female Consumers: A Comparative Analysis and Reconciliation Framework

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Abstract

The "thin ideal", characterized by extreme slenderness and low body fat, dominates contemporary fashion advertising, raising concerns about both model welfare and consumer well-being. This paper examines how body size representation in fashion advertisements affects young female consumers across three dimensions: brand personality perception, purchase intention, and consumer body image attitudes. Through a comprehensive synthesis of experimental studies and real-world case analyses, this review reveals that what initially appears to be contradictory findings regarding advertising effectiveness is partly a consequence of studies measuring different constructs at different stages of consumer response. Studies measuring perceptual outcomes found either that thin models produced stronger brand signals or that body size had no significant effect, while studies measuring affective and behavioral outcomes consistently found that average-sized models outperformed thin ones in purchase intention and body satisfaction. However, research consistently demonstrates that repeated exposure to thin ideals distorts body size perception and increases body dissatisfaction in consumers, while models themselves face documented health risks from industry pressure to maintain unrealistic physiques. This paper makes three key contributions: it integrates previously fragmented research across consumer psychology, marketing, and public health; identifies critical gaps warranting future investigation, particularly regarding cultural differences and demographic variations; and proposes a revised theoretical framework demonstrating that diverse body representation can simultaneously improve model health, consumer well-being, and brand performance. Case studies from Aerie and Universal Standard provide evidence that authentic inclusivity, when matched with operational execution, can drive commercial success. This framework challenges the persistent "thin sells" assumption and offers practitioners an evidence-based alternative approach to fashion advertising.

Keywords: thin ideal, fashion advertising, body image, brand personality perception, purchase intention, body size diversity, model representation, consumer behavior, media influence

1. Introduction

The “thin ideal”, defined as a “feminine physique characterized by slenderness and low body fat” (Kidd et al., 2023), is widely perpetuated across cultures and remains a dominant image in today’s media. The desire to adhere to the “ideal” body image could lead one to take drastic measures that could be detrimental to health, such as the development of eating disorders, excessive exercise, and consumption of weight loss products with health hazards or unknown side effects (Edwards-Gayfield, n.d.). At the same time, the fashion industry’s growing preference for thin models raises serious health concerns for those working within it. The problems with rising rates of obesity are publicly discussed and recognized. Still, many of the issues that exist on the other end of the spectrum of body perception are normalized to some extent, with extreme thinness even being idolized or praised in many cultures around the world. Additionally, in 2021, semaglutide drugs, or weight-loss drugs, such as Wegovy and Ozempic, were approved for weight management in adults (Roy, 2024), making substantial weight loss more accessible than ever.

Furthermore, the popularization and widespread use of social media over the last 20 years have increased the pressure to conform to the thin ideal. Social media differs from traditional media (e.g, television, print, movies) as it allows users to post their content and receive feedback from others, as well as immediate access to content at all times (Mingoia et al., 2017). This constant comparison to posts that embody the “thin ideal”, often taken under perfect lighting and presented through flattering filters, could lead to internalization of these idolized “ideals”, causing dissatisfaction, self-consciousness, or even anxiety about the users’ bodies (Pasque, 2023). Several factors and stakeholders contribute to the growing influence of social media in promoting the 'thin ideal,' including: the algorithm, content creators, and the users themselves. Content creators would share a one-sided version of their life online, only highlighting selected, curated photos or similar media, but it is the algorithm that feeds us the content. However, it is up to us users to choose what we see and interact with online, which is a huge factor that influences how we judge our appearance (Oakes, 2019).

Objectification theory posits that women are typically acculturated to internalize an observer’s perspective as a primary view of their physical selves (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This perspective can lead women to adopt external appearance standards as personal ideals, with potential consequences for both mental health and consumer decision-making. Since the propagation of the thin ideal in numerous cultures is reflected in our daily lives through media, including fashion advertisements (Maguire, 2024), understanding its effects is particularly urgent. However, it is unknown whether the representation of the thin ideal in fashion advertisements has a positive or negative effect on advertisement effectiveness in terms of sales and evaluation of brand personality by consumers. Moreover, whether exposure to the thin ideal has an impact on the consumers’ body image is unclear.

The current paper investigates the effects of the representation of the thin ideal in fashion advertisements on consumers, in three variables: (1) brand personality (perceptual), (2) purchase intention (behavioral), and (2) their attitudes toward their own body image (affective). By comparing consumer responses to models of varying body sizes, we aim to assess how body representation influences consumer response. Additionally, this comparison allows us to explore whether repeated exposure to the thin ideal increases or decreases appreciation for more realistic body portrayals.

This paper makes three key contributions to existing research. First, it provides a comprehensive synthesis of fragmented research on body-size representation in advertising, integrating findings from consumer psychology, marketing

effectiveness, and public health literature that have previously remained siloed. Second, it reveals systematic gaps in current research and proposes future research agendas to address them. Third, and most significantly, this paper proposes a revised theoretical framework (Figure 6) that reconciles the apparent tension between ethical representation and commercial viability, demonstrating through both experimental evidence and real-world case studies that diverse body representation can simultaneously improve model health, consumer well-being, and brand performance. This framework challenges the dominant industry assumption that 'thin sells' and provides an actionable alternative model for practitioners.

Our goal is to demonstrate that representations of overly thin models in advertisements are harmful not only to brand image and purchase intention, but also to the consumers' body image. If successful, alteration of body size representation in advertisements can be proposed. This change will benefit everyone: the brands' profit, consumers' mental well-being, and the represented fashion models' health.

To ensure conceptual clarity and transparency, the following section outlines the scope and methodological approach of this review.

2. Methodology

Databases

Relevant literature was mostly found via Google Scholar, from keyword searches such as "thin ideal," "body image," and "brand image perception". Articles without DOIs were found through Google searches.

Time Frame

Studies published after 2010 (preferably after 2020) were considered for analysis to ensure relevance to current readers. However, theoretical frameworks used to base its findings are from the late 1990s, as these foundational theories remain widely cited and empirically supported in contemporary research.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Experimental studies examining thin-ideal advertising exposure and consumer outcomes (perceptual, affective, or behavioral) were included. Studies featuring female participants as the primary sample were prioritized, given the demographic focus of this review. Real-world brand case studies were included where they provided corroborating evidence for experimental findings. Clinical treatment studies, qualitative-only designs, and non-advertising media studies were excluded, as were studies where body size representation was not a primary independent variable.

Demographic Focus

The literature predominantly focuses on young Western female samples. Studies on young female samples were selected as physical appearance is especially important for social identity and signaling during this developmental period, and as they represent a key target market for beauty and fashion advertising. This review centers on the Western population due to an abundance of studies in such regions, and a lack thereof in others (e.g., Asian, African). Where non-Western studies were



available and relevant, they were discussed within the “Limitations and future research agendas” section.

Analytic approach

While a meta-analytic approach would provide quantitative effect size aggregation, the heterogeneity of outcome measures and theoretical frameworks across studies necessitated a narrative synthesis approach. It should be acknowledged that narrative synthesis carries inherent limitations relative to meta-analysis: without pooled effect sizes, it is difficult to determine the magnitude of differences between conditions, and the approach is more vulnerable to interpretive bias in how findings are weighted and compared. However, the studies reviewed here employ sufficiently different operationalizations of key constructs (eg. varying definitions of “thin,” “average,” and “plus-sized,” different scales for measuring brand attitude and purchase intention) that aggregating effect sizes across them would risk obscuring more than it reveals. The outcome-type framework applied in this review is therefore intended as a partial corrective: by distinguishing between what each study actually measures rather than treating all findings as equivalent, it offers a more precise basis for comparison than effect size aggregation alone would provide across such methodologically heterogeneous studies.

3. A shift in the “ideal” female body

The definition of an “ideal body size” in Western culture has shifted drastically over the years, especially with the 20th century redefining the characteristics of beauty. During the 19th century, a plump female figure was perceived positively, as it symbolized wealth, health, and sexual attractiveness (Hutson, 2017). However, this perception began to shift around the 1920s, as the emphasis on reproductive characteristics as a defining feature of beauty diminished the evolving societal role of women – from mother and mistress to a career-oriented individual (Bonafini & Pozzilli, 2011). The emergence of flappers, a subculture of young women characterized by a “lean and androgynous” (Ewbank, 2018) figure, in the 1920s and later popularization of a slender British fashion model, Twiggy, in the 1960s marked the new trend of a thinner physique (DPA, 2024). Although women were no longer squeezing themselves into corsets like they did in the 19th century, the media messaging and societal pressures to adhere to an “ideal” body continued (Howard, 2018). Moreover, advancements in medical knowledge deemed obesity a threat (Bonafini & Pozzilli, 2011), creating a binary lens by celebrating extreme thinness in fashion imagery while highlighting larger bodies as ‘unhealthy’ and ‘bad’ in reporting on obesity in the 1990s. By the 2000s, concerns arose that this thin ideal had gone too far, from an international spike in eating disorders and dieting habits amongst a wide age range (Howard, 2018).

This historical evolution toward extreme thinness has become institutionalized within contemporary fashion industry practices. Despite the rising health concerns in the early 21st century, prompting discussions about body representation and model welfare, substantive structural change has remained elusive. Recent industry data demonstrates the persistence of these narrow beauty standards despite decades of critique.

The Vogue Business Spring/Summer 2025 size inclusivity report revealed a continued decline in plus and mid-size representation from some of the fashion industry’s most prominent luxury brands. A whopping 94.9% of 8,763 looks presented across 208 shows and presentations were small-size (US 0-4), 4.3% were mid-size (US 6-12), and only 0.8% were plus-size (US 14+) (Maguire, 2024).



4. Realities of health issues in the fashion industry

An article written by a former Vogue editor, Kirstie Clements, reveals the dangerous practices that exist amongst top fashion models to maintain the “ideal” physique that the industry demands. She shares stories of models she met at Vogue, where she had recognized the extreme lengths models would go to stay fit: scars on a model's knees from repeatedly fainting from hunger; a close friend regularly hospitalized and receiving IV drips after starving herself; and a Russian model who could barely stay conscious during a photoshoot from her belief that “It is [her] job not to eat” (Clements, 2013) as a model. These stories reveal that fashion models often engage in harmful behaviors to maintain extreme thinness. This isn't just damaging to the models themselves—it may also harm consumers who are exposed to media featuring these models. Viewers may compare their bodies to the models' unrealistic physiques, which are often the result of extreme dieting, and further altered by heavy editing.

In addition, an international investigation into the average BMI of 179 female fashion models found worrying trends in average BMI and risks of anorexia nervosa. Comparing their data to the non-model control group, the difference in average BMI between the groups was around 4kg/m² (18.1 for the models, 22.1 for the control). However, the alarming part was that the frequency of simulated anorexia nervosa was 3.9% among the fashion models, while it was 1.1% in the control group. Also, 14.6% of the models showed subclinical anorexia nervosa symptoms versus 2.7% in the control group (Bogár et al., 2022). This data reveals the health risks that plague the fashion industry and how the profession is negatively affecting models. These results tell us that the thin ideal is neither natural nor sustainable for the general female population, yet the fashion industry normalizes such unhealthy standards.

Clements describes the downfall in many models' physical well-being as “the ultimate vicious cycle”: “A model who puts on a few kilos can't get into a sample size on a casting and gets reprimanded by her agency. She begins to diet, loses the weight, and is praised by all for how good she looks. But instead of staying at that weight and trying to maintain it through a sensible diet and exercise, she thinks losing more will make her even more desirable. And no one tells her to stop.” (Clements, 2013)

With the prevailing thin ideal in today's society, are consumers of fashion apparel drawn more to advertisements that are represented by thin models? Is the representation of thin models in fashion brand advertisements effective in terms of sales or purchase intention by consumers, i.e., does thin sell? Or are the models going through such hardships with no apparent positive impact on the brand's profit? Studies presented in the next section show mixed results, but some present a potential correlation between increased similarity of body size of the consumer to the models in the advertisement and increased purchase intention.

5. Effectiveness of the representation of different body sizes

The term “brand” in this section will refer to “clothing brand”, which describes a business or label that operates within the fashion industry, specializing in creating and selling clothing and apparel. It encompasses designing, manufacturing, marketing, and distributing garments, targeting specific customer segments or the target market (What Is a Clothing Brand, n.d.).

Self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985) posits that purchase motivation increases when brand image aligns with the consumer's

actual self-image, or perception of their current self (self-congruity). This effect is amplified when the brand image also aligns with the consumer's ideal self-image, or who the consumer wants to be (ideal congruity). In the context of fashion advertising, the model's body size can serve as a key component of brand image, potentially creating either self-congruity (when models resemble the consumer's current body) or ideal congruity (when models represent the consumer's body aspiration). The following studies examine how different model body sizes affect brand personality perception and purchase intention, with findings that can be interpreted through this self-congruity framework.

Agerup (2011) investigated the effects that the body sizes of featured fashion models have on the perception of brand personality. Here, "brand personality" is defined as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997). Brand personality was rated according to Aaker's Big Five construct, which includes qualities: competence, sophistication, sincerity, excitement, and ruggedness. The study created 3 different body sizes of the same model through editing, with the "Underweight and normal weight" model having a BMI of less than 25, the "Overweight" model having a BMI of 25-29.9, and the "Obese" model having a BMI of 30 or above.

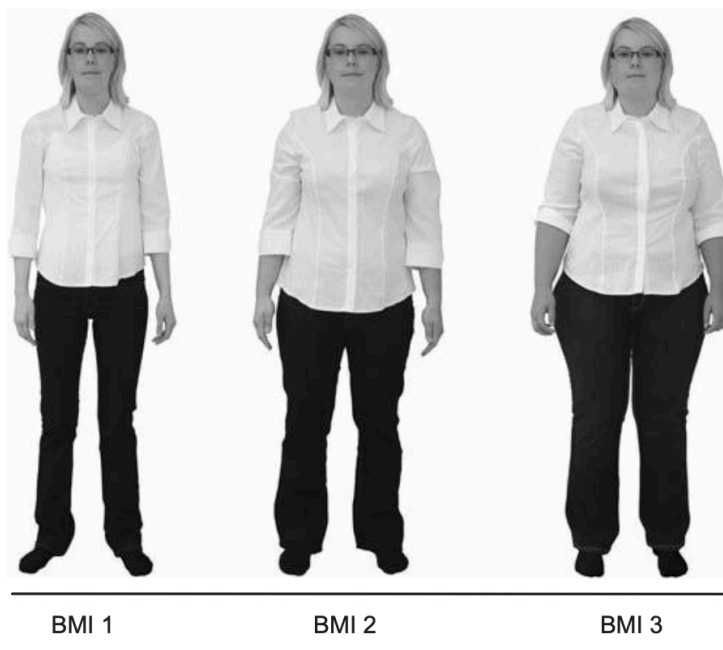


Figure 1: "Independent variable, ideal user BMI": The 3 models participants were asked to evaluate on brand personality perception (Agerup, 2011)

640 female undergraduate students in Göteborg University, Sweden rated the "Underweight and normal weight" model highly in competence, and equally or better than other models in other qualities as well. The "Overweight" model was rated poorly on sophistication but highly on ruggedness. There were no significant differences between the ways respondents of different BMIs rated models. Ratings were conducted on a 5-grade Likert-type scale. These results provide empirical evidence that "underweight and normal weight" models are associated with a competent brand personality, while the

overweight models presented a rather mannish brand personality, which is presumably not a brand personality that many female shoppers would like to identify with. Assuming that consumers express their self-image through wearing brands that use models that resemble what the consumer is or would like to be, it was concluded that the use of a thinner model would be more effective in stimulating purchase intentions (Aagerup, 2011).

Sohn & Youn (2013) presented results that contradicted Aagerup (2011). Sohn & Youn (2013) investigated how model body size influences the evaluation of advertisements, while controlling for facial attractiveness. They used two types of ads: one for a makeup kit, which is typically associated with thin models (product-congruent), and one for an alarm clock, which is unrelated to body image (product-incongruent). The models presented were either “thin”, “average”, or “large” in body size. Responses from 201 US undergraduate and graduate students (59% female) showed that the average-sized model generated more positive brand attitude and purchase intention than the use of either thin or plus-sized models. This held for products both congruent and incongruent with body image. Attitudes toward the ad and brand were measured with the 10-item scale based on Madden et al. (1988). Each item was assessed on a 7-point semantic differential scale anchored by “unpleasant/pleasant,” “unlikable/likable,” “boring/ interesting,” and “bad/good,” to name a few. Purchase intention was assessed by three items, which used a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). For further analysis, the raw scores of multiple items were aggregated for each construct. The results defy the “thin sells” ideology and illustrate that a body size that most consumers would identify with was seen as favourable. It can therefore be hypothesized that familiarity or relatability to the body size of models in advertisements can create a positive response, hence elevating purchase intention in consumers viewing the ad (Sohn & Youn, 2013). This finding indicates that the representation of models with diverse body sizes and brand profit may be reconcilable.

Lou & Tse (2020) presented similar results to Sohn & Youn (2013). Lou & Tse (2020) investigated how body satisfaction and purchase intentions vary by different body size representations in fashion brand advertisements. Here, a “thin model” fell below size 3, an “average-sized model” was between sizes 4 and 6, and a “plus-sized model” was between sizes 7 and 9. Researchers conducted two similar tests with a control for facial appearance, where one created ads for a fast-fashion brand, H&M, and the other for a luxury brand, Gucci. A total of 438 female participants, aged 54 or under, were allocated to the H&M condition, and 335 female participants, aged 54 or under, were allocated to the Gucci condition; all recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). More than 80% of the participants in each study was Caucasian. Participants were randomly assigned to view one of three advertisements featuring either a thin model, an average-sized model, or a plus-sized model. In the first test, participants answered questions about their lifestyles and habits, including their attitudes toward the brand using a 7-point scale with anchors such as likeable/unlikeable, bad/good, unpleasant/pleasant, and worthless/valuable, along with their weight, height, and various filler questions. In the second test, participants rated their appearance-related self-esteem using statements such as “I feel pleased with my appearance right now.” In the final test, participants were asked to view an H&M advertisement that was supposedly slated to appear in a fashion magazine. After viewing the ad, participants indicated their body satisfaction by rating their agreement with six statements on a 7-point scale ranging from extremely dissatisfied to extremely satisfied, such as “Right now, I feel ___ with my body and shape.” Participants also indicated how similar they felt to the model on a 7-point scale and reported their purchase intentions using three statements, such as “I will likely buy the brand.” A separate Gucci condition followed this same procedure with identical measures and manipulations. Participants’ BMI was calculated using their self-reported weight and height, which was then median split. In the H&M condition, participants expressed elevated body satisfaction and increased purchase intentions when viewing ads that featured an average-sized or a plus-sized model rather than a thin



model. In addition, participants with a higher BMI preferred an average-sized model over a thin one in terms of purchase intention, and participants with a lower BMI preferred an average-sized model over a plus-sized one. They indicated increased similarity to an average-sized model (vs. plus-sized), which in turn led to increased purchase intentions. Results were similar in the Gucci condition, but body satisfaction did not improve upon viewing the advertisements. The results, like Sohn & Youn's study, demonstrate that familiarity or relatability to the body size of models creates a positive response from consumers. From being able to attain similar results from advertisements for both conditions (fast-fashion and luxury brands), we can anticipate the effectiveness of featuring average-sized models in a range of brands (Sohn & Youn, 2013). As body size similarity between the model and consumers elevated body satisfaction and purchase intention, ensuring that a wide range of body sizes are represented in advertisements may grow the customer base and thus increase brand profit.

Watson et al. (2015) showed results that differed from the other three studies. Watson et al. (2015) digitally manipulated a model's body size in a fictitious advert to create four advertising images with underweight, slender, average, and obese model sizes. 198 German female consumers (ages 18-65) were exposed to one of four images and asked questions on their brand image perceptions via a survey. In the survey, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt the brand exhibited/represented the attributes listed above, using a five-point Likert scale. For example, respondents were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) the extent to which they agreed "the brand appears sporty/bold/elegant/ young/sexy". The attributes were constructed based on a pre-test interview, where interviewees were shown images of an underweight, slender, normal, and obese model, and asked to identify which image they preferred. For their selected image, they were asked to explain their preference, and then asked what characteristics they would associate with the brand, what they felt the brand symbolised, its value proposition and the type of person they felt the brand represented. Survey results showed that the size of the model used in the advertising image does not significantly impact brand image perceptions. However, it was discovered that participants associated advertisements with "underweight" and "slender" models with a higher price point than the "average" size model. This study concluded that the body size of models in fashion advertisements did not have a significant effect on brand image, but rather impacted the perception of the price point of each brand (Watson et al., 2015). This indicates that brands can appear luxurious by representing thinner models in their advertisements. On the other hand, affordability or familiarity would be achieved by using an average-sized model. The definition of what would be a "positive" brand image would differ by brand in terms of perception of affordability, making it difficult to draw what kind of body size would lead to the most "positive" response from consumers in general.

As Table 1 demonstrates, the weight of evidence, particularly from the two methodologically stronger studies with behavioral outcomes (Sohn & Youn, 2013; Lou & Tse, 2020), favors average-sized models. Aagerup's investigation (2011) was the only study that concluded that thin models should be represented to maintain positive brand image perception. However, the lack of differentiation in the BMI scale they used undermines clarity, as it becomes unclear whether it was the thinness or the normalcy of the body size of the "underweight and normal weight" model amongst the participants that contributed to the results. Watson et al. (2015) found that the perception of the price point of the brand shifted based on the body sizes of models represented in the advertisements. There may be certain qualities, such as cultural differences or variations in the definition of "thin", "average", or "overweight" by study, that impacted the results reached in each study.



Table 1: “Summary table of 4 studies in ‘Effectiveness of the representation of different body sizes’”: The table shows the author(s), sample, key insights, and primary outcome of Agerup (2011), Sohn & Youn (2013), Lou & Tse (2020), and Watson et al. (2015).

Author(s)	Agerup	Sohn & Youn	Lou & Tse	Watson et al.
Year	2011	2013	2020	2015
Sample	640 female undergraduate students in Sweden	201 female & male undergraduate & graduate students in the US	773 female participants (age 54 or under); predominantly White	198 female participants (ages 18-65) in Germany
Key insights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No significant differences between the ways participants of different BMIs rated models • “Underweight and normal weight” model rated highly on competence • “Overweight” model rated low on sophistication but highly on ruggedness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average-sized model generated more positive brand attitude and higher purchase intention than thin and plus-sized models • Results were similar for ads for a make-up kit and an alarm clock 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average-sized & Plus-sized models in fast-fashion brand ads elevated consumer body satisfaction (not for luxury brand ads) • Higher-BMI participants showed greater purchase intention for the average-sized model than the thin model • Lower-BMI participants showed greater purchase intention for the average-sized model than the plus-sized model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Body size of the model does not significantly impact brand image perception • “Underweight” & “Slender” models associated with a higher price point than “Average” size model
Primary Outcome	Perceptual	Affective + Behavioral	Affective + Behavioral	Perceptual

These findings reveal nuanced and sometimes contradictory patterns in how self-congruity theory operates with body size in advertising. Lou & Tse (2020) provide the clearest support for actual self-congruity, as participants showed greater purchase intention for models matching their own body size: higher-BMI consumers preferred average-sized models, while lower-BMI consumers preferred average-sized models over plus-sized ones. However, the other studies reveal important moderators and boundary conditions to this effect. Watson et al. (2015) found that model body size didn't significantly impact brand image perception in their German sample, indicating self-congruity effects aren't universal and may depend

on cultural context. Aagerup's (2011) finding that "overweight" models scored high on ruggedness but low on sophistication suggests consumers may process model body size through multiple self-concept dimensions simultaneously, not just body image congruence. Finally, Sohn & Youn's (2013) result that average-sized models outperformed both thin and plus-sized models could indicate they achieve broader self-congruity across diverse body types, or represent an idealized yet attainable middle ground that satisfies both actual and ideal self-congruity for more consumers. Collectively, these findings suggest that self-congruity theory may require refinement when applied to body size in advertising, as the effect appears moderated by product category, cultural context, and competing brand personality dimensions.

Beyond self-congruity, the apparent contradictions across these four studies further resolve when outcomes are disaggregated by type. The two studies measuring perceptual outcomes found either that thin models produced stronger brand signals (Aagerup, 2011) or that body size had no significant effect on brand image, other than predicted price point (Watson et al., 2015). By contrast, the two studies measuring affective and behavioral outcomes consistently found that average-sized models outperformed thin ones (Sohn & Youn, 2013; Lou & Tse, 2020). This pattern suggests the literature is not genuinely contradictory, but rather that the studies are measuring different stages of consumer response. Thin models may sustain certain cognitive associations with luxury or competence, while simultaneously undermining the affective identification that drives actual purchase behavior. These studies may be concluding on claims about different phenomena that have been incorrectly treated as equivalent.

6. Examples of brands that used average-sized models in advertising that experienced a positive change

Aerie, the lingerie brand owned by American Eagle Outfitters, achieved success through marketing strategies that promoted body positivity and inclusion. Aerie was one of the first lingerie brands to defect from the "sexy and skinny sells" approach popularized by Victoria's Secret (LeSavage, 2020). Eight years after launching the brand, Aerie launched its #AerieREAL campaign to stop airbrushing models in its advertisements in 2014, in hopes of promoting body positivity and diversity (Kim, 2020). Just three years after shifting their advertising tactics, in 2017, Aerie reached a revenue of 500 million dollars, which doubled to a million dollars by 2020 (AEO-Inc, n.d.). Aerie continues to represent models of diverse body sizes, race, and ability in its advertisements (Kim, 2020). Aerie's boost in revenue since its shift in advertising tactics indicates that consumers may have increased purchase intention towards brands that demonstrate authenticity.

Old Navy's failed attempt at size inclusivity reinforces Sirgy's (1985) point. Its 'Bodequality' campaign implemented size-inclusive advertising along with an expansion in size availability, creating actual self-congruity for extended-size consumers while simultaneously attracting standard-size customers who wanted to align with inclusive values. The campaign saw a 40% increase in brand mentions on social media, along with a doubling of extended-size customers in the quarter, 15% of whom were new to the brand (PMG Digital Marketing, n.d.). However, Old Navy's lack of understanding of size-specific demand led to catastrophic inventory mismanagement: stores ran out of standard sizes while overstocking extended sizes, suggesting that the campaign's reach extended beyond projections for extended-size customers, creating incongruence across their entire customer base. Customers who felt validated by the diverse representation experienced betrayal when products weren't available in their sizes, damaging brand trust more than if Old Navy had never advertised inclusivity at all. As a result, parent company GAP suffered a loss of \$162 million in a span of 3 months following the campaign launch (Jiménez, 2022).



Universal Standards, a brand carrying sizes 00 to 40, which is the broadest assortment of sizes in the market, overcame Old Navy's issue. Veksler, the co-founder and CEO of Universal Standard, mentioned it helped that the brand expanded its size range gradually, continually assessing demand along the way (Segran, 2022). Universal Standard's success demonstrates that analyzing size-specific consumer demand enables brands to deliver on their promise of inclusivity. Old Navy's failed attempt also reveals that advertising campaigns featuring models of diverse body sizes have the potential to attract a broader customer base and boost sales with the correct supply of clothing sizes.

The success of Aerie and Universal Standard demonstrates that consumers are drawn to brands that practice diverse representation in their advertisements, beyond theoretical or experimental contexts. Old Navy's failed attempt adds nuance to this discussion by showing that, without consumer trust through operational inclusivity, authentic and diverse representation does not lead to consumer engagement and increased sales.

7. How does repeated exposure to the thin ideal affect body image?

We will now look into the effects of exposure to the thin ideal on female consumers' body image. A study by Bocage-Barthélémy et al. (2018) asked 91 female participants from the University of Trois-Rivières (Québec, Canada) and 35 female participants from the University of Poitiers, France, to evaluate their body satisfaction levels and rate photos of models in physical attractiveness. This was done using the Body Dissatisfaction subscale of the Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI-BD, Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983), where participants indicated their agreement with nine propositions (e.g., "I think that my stomach is just the right size") using 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree). Participants were then allocated to one of two conditions in the model-rating phase: exposure to images of thin models or exposure to images of larger models. Participants indicated the extent to which they thought each model was pretty on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all to 7 = very pretty). Later, participants were asked to indicate the picture that they thought best represented their current body shape (actual body image) and then the image that corresponded to their desired body shape (ideal body image). The Body Size Guide (Harris et al., 2008) was used to measure perceptions of actual and ideal body shape. Participants were exposed to 10 photographs of the same woman in different body sizes. Results found that body-dissatisfied women were increasingly likely to associate thinness with beauty after exposure to thin models. In addition, exposure to thin models increased the desire for thinness in participants, irrespective of body satisfaction level (Bocage-Barthélémy et al., 2018). The results are alarming as the level of body satisfaction of the consumer does not affect whether one desires a thinner body size after exposure to thin models. This study indicates that the body size one is most frequently exposed to shapes the perception of beauty.

Devine et al. (2022) found similar results. Devine et al. (2022) conducted a study on 419 female participants (ages 18-28) from Concordia University (Montreal, Canada) to determine the effects of exposure to thin ideals on body image. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: the "stable prevalence" condition, where women always saw an equal number of thin bodies and overweight bodies, and the "increasing prevalence" condition, where the proportion of thin bodies presented increased as the trials progressed, up to the point where overweight bodies were rarely seen. Participants indicated whether a computer-generated body image presented on the screen was overweight or not by pressing a specific letter on a keyboard. Stimuli for this task included 60 images of computer-generated women's bodies that ranged from emaciated to morbidly obese. The bodies had white skin and were wearing white underwear and a white tank top. The bodies were stopped at the neck, so no face was visible. A total of 800 trials were conducted per participant. Results



showed that when participants saw an increasing proportion of thin bodies, they became more likely to view average bodies as overweight (Devine et al., 2022). This demonstrates that perceptions of “average” (in terms of body size) can be shifted by the prevalence of thin bodies in the environment. This highlights how repeated exposure to the thin ideal, as commonly seen in brand advertising today, can distort consumers’ perceptions of body size. This may lead to negative health outcomes in consumers from the desire to adhere to this new “ideal”.

Table 2: “Summary table of 3 studies in ‘How does repeated exposure to the thin ideal affect body image?’”: The table shows the author(s), sample, key insights, and primary outcome of Bocage-Barthélémy et al. (2018), Devine et al. (2022), and Clayton et al. (2017).

Author(s)	Bocage-Barthélémy et al.	Devine et al.	Clayton et al.
Year	2018	2022	2017
Sample	91 female participants from the University of Trois-Rivières (Québec, Canada) + 35 female participants from the University of Poitiers, France	419 female participants (ages 18-28) from Concordia University (Montreal, Canada)	51 female participants from a large southeastern university in the US (ages 18-30)
Key insights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Body-dissatisfied participants were increasingly likely to associate thinness with beauty after exposure to thin models · Exposure to thin models increased the desire for thinness in participants, irrespective of body satisfaction level 	Participants who saw an increasing proportion of thin bodies became more likely to view average bodies as overweight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Participants reported engaging in the least amount of self-comparison to the model and elevated body satisfaction when viewing plus-size models · Participants reported engaging in increased social comparisons and decreased body satisfaction when viewing thin models · Average and plus-size models increased resource allocation and encoding of message content
Primary outcome	Affective	Perceptual	Perceptual + Affective

As Table 2 shows, these studies show that repeated exposure to the thin ideal not only influences body dissatisfaction in female consumers but can also move the goalposts for what one considers to be a thin body. The results provide empirical evidence of the dangers of the representation of thin body sizes in advertisements for consumers; constant exposure to the

thin ideal can manipulate one's perception of body size, potentially leading to extreme dieting measures in pursuit of unrealistic body standards.

These findings can be understood through the objectification theory, which posits that women internalize an observer's perspective on their bodies, leading to self-objectification, where they habitually monitor and evaluate their bodies against beauty ideals (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Bocage-Barthélémy et al.'s (2018) results demonstrate the internalization process of the thin ideal; repeated exposure to thin models caused women to adopt thinness as their beauty ideal, regardless of initial body satisfaction levels. This exemplifies how women can adopt an observer's perspective after exposure, shifting from internal body satisfaction to external evaluation. Devine et al.'s (2022) results reveal the perceptual consequences of this process; repeated exposure to thin bodies recalibrated the participants' perception of an 'average' body size. This resultant perceptual distortion may make women more prone to shame and anxiety responses (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) about their body size, as predicted by the objectification theory.

Improved body image outcomes were observed when average and plus-size models were featured in fashion advertisements. In a study of 51 female participants (ages 18-30) from a large southeastern university in the US, Clayton et al. (2017) found that participants reported engaging in the least amount of self-comparison (measured via a 7-point Likert scale) and elevated body satisfaction (measured via the Body Image State Scale (BISS)) when viewing plus-size models. In contrast, despite wanting to be thinner, the women reported engaging in increased social comparisons and decreased body satisfaction when viewing thin models. These findings suggest that incorporating realistically sized fashion models in the media may have benefits in terms of improved health outcomes, including higher levels of body satisfaction and reduced harmful social comparisons.

As shown in Table 2, benefits were also observed for the brands' ability to deliver their message via advertisements. Average and plus-size models appeared to increase resource allocation and encoding of message content (Clayton et al., 2017), as measured through heart rate deceleration during image exposure and assessed via a visual recognition task. When the parasympathetic nervous system is activated, heart rate slows down, or decelerates, which is indicative of greater resources allocated to processing external information. Heart rate was recorded for a 5-second blackscreen baseline period before the onset of each image. One electrocardiogram electrode was securely placed on each forearm, with a ground electrode placed on the participant's left wrist using BioPac Systems EL 503 pre-gelled disposable electrodes. The visual recognition task involved having participants identify 12 images of models shown in the study individually by answering yes/no out of 24 models, which included fashion models from Target and Macy's online websites. Representing average and plus-size models in advertisements, compared to thin models may be a useful strategy if the goal of a campaign is to increase attention to and memory of a media message.

8. Limitations and future research agendas

The sample demographics of the analyzed studies primarily consisted of Western undergraduate students, which limited the generalizability of findings. While this review focuses on young female consumers, the samples predominantly consisted of university students, which represents only a portion of the 'young consumer' demographic. Notably, body image concerns often peak at around ages 10-16 in women (Lacroix et al., 2023). Yet, this critical developmental period is underrepresented in the reviewed studies due to the prevalence of undergraduate samples. This may have made the psychological impacts of thin-ideal advertising appear weaker than it would with the inclusion of pre-teen/teenage



subjects. Future research should specifically examine how model body size affects advertising effectiveness across more granular age segments.

Additionally, research on how model body size in fashion advertisements affects brand personality perception has often overlooked the role of body-size similarity between the consumer and the model in shaping advertising effectiveness. This pattern may reflect the characteristics of the study sample rather than an inherent preference. A higher proportion of thin participants could have increased body-size similarity with thinner models, strengthening identification and purchase intention. A differently distributed sample may have produced the reverse outcome. To ensure the generalizability of findings and support effective branding for consumers of diverse body sizes, future studies should examine how a viewer's body size influences their perception of different models. This would provide empirical support for the relationship shown in Figure 2.

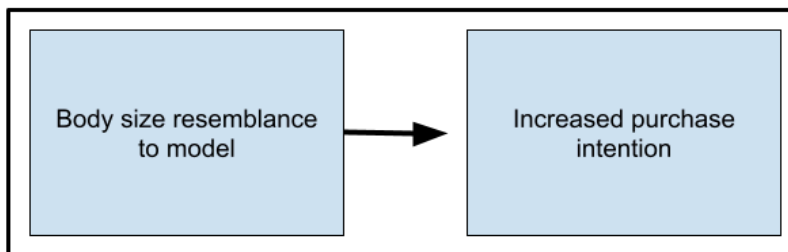


Figure 2: “Impact of body size resemblance”: The resemblance in body size of consumers to fashion models (represented in fashion advertisements) could lead to increased purchase intention for the brand.

The studies examined in this paper were all based in Western countries, preventing examination of potential cultural discrepancies in the effects of the representation of different body sizes in fashion advertisements. For example, the idol culture in East Asian countries may make skinnier models seem more attractive as a representation of brands, as such body sizes create a sense of “familiarity”, in the nuance that it is similar to what the consumers frequently see in media.

One Korean study did indeed show that a thin-size model was perceived as embodying the stereotypical and successful majority, resulting in higher physical attractiveness and greater congruence with the participants’ ideal selves. Thus, participants were inclined to purchase items modeled by the thin-size model. It was determined that the prevailing thin body ideals and the deep-rooted preference for slimness among Korean women are the driving force behind this (Kim & Yang, 2024).

Future studies should conduct similar research in other East Asian countries as well, to determine whether widespread representation of the thin ideal in media today and the traditional preference for slimness impact advertising effectiveness as shown in Figure 3, or if consumers would instead attribute positive brand personality perception towards a realistic body size representation that adds authenticity that is rare in the East Asian market.

The race of the models may influence how different body sizes are perceived and evaluated as the representation of brands. It would be interesting for future studies to focus on whether familiarity/similarity of the represented model to the consumer is also applicable to race (not just body size), or if the idealization of facial features such as large eyes, double

eyelids, and pale skin amongst East Asian women (Chen et al., 2020) would create a stronger preference for Caucasian models. Also, in either case, will the representation of an East Asian or Caucasian overweight model be more effective than the other? Or will body size be the only driving factor, thus resulting in similar levels of advertising effectiveness?

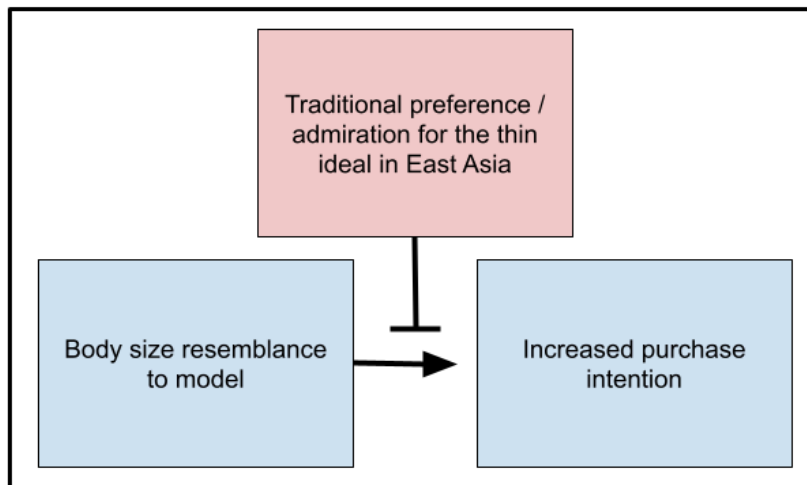


Figure 3: “Body size resemblance vs. ideal”: The traditional preference and admiration for the thin ideal in East Asian consumers may interfere with the causal relationship of the variable of body size resemblance of the consumer to the fashion model represented and the resulting increase in purchase intention.

The market for skin bleaching products has been continuously growing, with women of color accounting for approximately 80% of worldwide sales. These products are particularly popular in regions where fair skin and Eurocentric beauty ideals are culturally valued, such as Africa, the Asia-Pacific region, the Middle East, and the Caribbean. Online search trends of terms such as “skin whitening”, “skin lightening”, and “skin bleaching” had the highest popularity in Pakistan, Nigeria, St. Vincent, and the Grenadines (Arora & Amin, 2024). Therefore, as shown in Figure 4, whether representation of “idealized figures” (the Caucasian race, with fairer skin) or models with similar physical features (darker skin) would result in increased advertising effectiveness is up for investigation.

The potential influence of male perceptions on the female body ideal could be explored in greater depth. A study conducted in Italy found a mismatch between the body type women believed men preferred and what men found attractive (Gualdi-Russo et al., 2022). Specifically, female participants assumed that men preferred thinner silhouettes than what men themselves reported preferred. This may indicate that female consumers attribute positive brand personality to brands that use thin models, as they wish to identify themselves with the “perceived” male ideal by purchasing from brands that reflect such ideals, as shown in Figure 5.

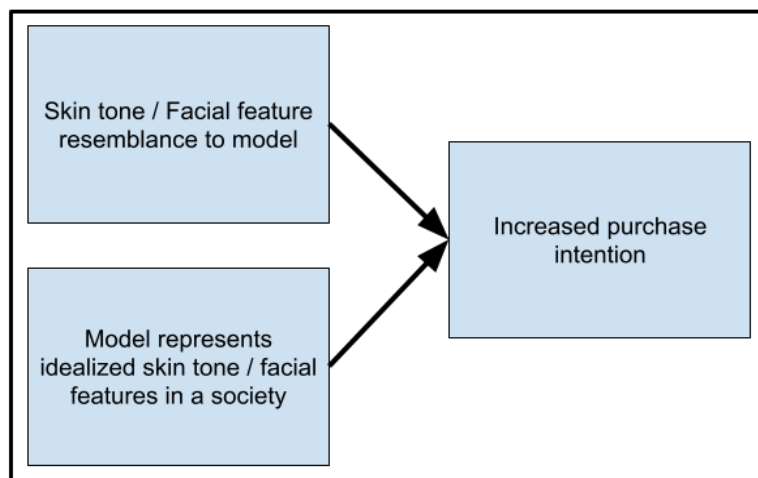


Figure 4: “Skin tone resemblance vs. Ideal”: Whether similarity of skin tone / facial feature of fashion model represented in the advertisement to the consumer could lead to increased purchase intention, or the model representing an idealized skin tone / facial feature to the consumer demographic could lead to increased purchase intention, is unknown.

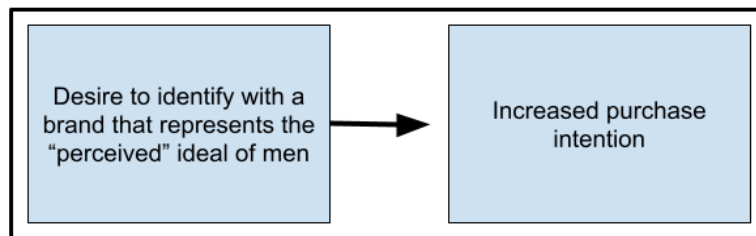


Figure 5: “Impact of opposite-sex perception”: The desire of female consumers to identify with a brand that represents the ideal body size by men as perceived by women may increase purchase intention for that brand.

9. The Revised Framework

The theoretical model (Figure 6, left) reflects common trends that are present in fashion advertisements today, which cause:

1. Increased demand for thinner models to be represented in advertisements, thus negatively affecting model health as they strive to be thinner and thinner.
2. Changes in body image of consumers who are exposed to the advertisements, making them seek out products that reflect this new body image (that they hope to align with) that they have internalized, hence increasing demand for the brand that is represented in the advertisement.

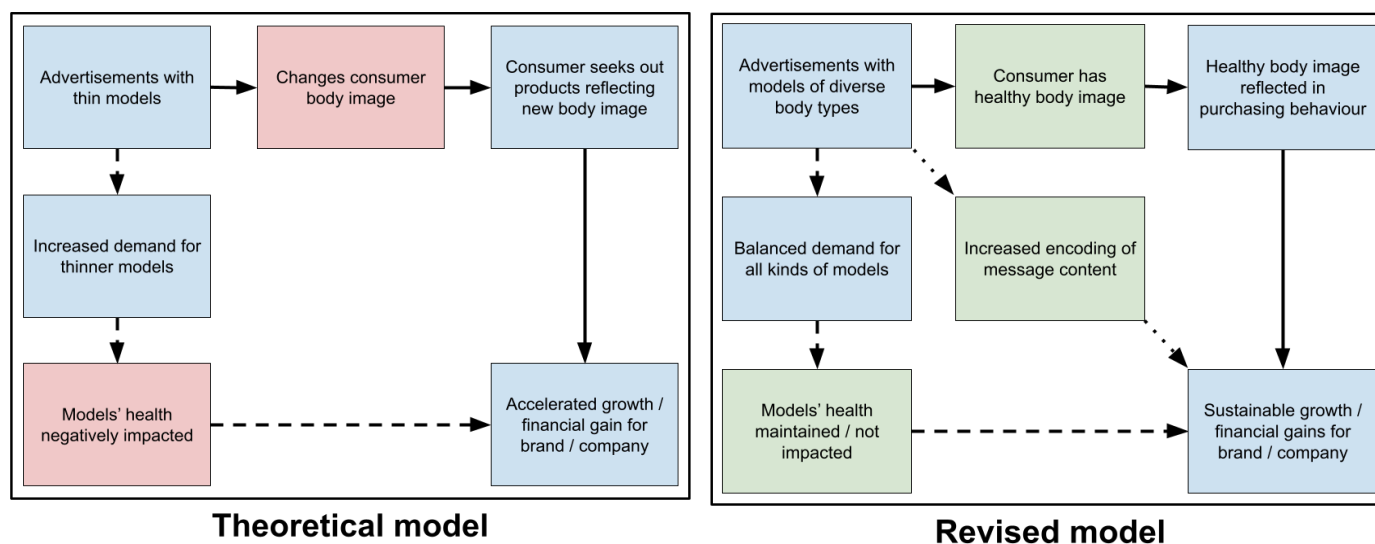


Figure 6: “The theoretical model”: The current, common practice of representing thin models in advertisements affects consumer body image and models’ health, yet leads to accelerated growth/financial gain for the brand/company. “The revised model”:

Advertisements with models of diverse body types can maintain the health of models and a healthy body image in consumers. With the added benefit of increased encoding of message content, this model may lead to sustainable growth/financial gains for the brand/company.

Despite this model causing damage to the mental and physical well-being of the consumers and fashion models, these factors lead to accelerated growth/financial gain for the fashion brand.

On the other hand, the revised model (Figure 6, right) reflects a desirable model in terms of balance between consumer well-being, model health, and sustainable brand profit. If brands represented models of diverse body types in their advertisements:

1. There would be a balanced demand for all kinds of models, reducing the pressure for models to conform to strict body size ideals. This would lead to healthier working conditions, reducing the prevalence of disordered eating and other health risks documented in the industry (Bogár et al., 2022; Clements, 2013).
2. Consumers would be able to maintain a healthy body image, as studies earlier demonstrated that repeated exposure to the thin ideal can move the goalposts for what consumers consider a “normal” body size (Devine et al., 2022), thus influencing their body image perception. When consumers are exposed to diverse body sizes, they will be more likely to identify with a model represented in the advertisement. As a result, this model can reduce the gap between their perceived and ideal self-image. This exposure may also help normalize physical diversity.

As it was also found that average and plus-size models appeared to increase resource allocation and encoding of message content (Clayton et al., 2017), these factors may lead to sustainable growth/financial gains for the brand.

This paper’s central contribution to the reconciliation framework is recognizing that prior studies on body size in fashion

advertising do not genuinely contradict one another, but rather measure different constructs at different stages of consumer response. Specifically, advertising exposure to body-size representations appears to operate through three separable mechanisms: perceptual (shifts in how body sizes are categorized as normal or thin); affective (shifts in body satisfaction and self-comparison triggered by exposure); and behavioral (the downstream effect of body-size similarity on purchase intention). This distinction carries a concrete practical implication: a brand may sustain a perception of luxury or competence through thin-model imagery, as Aagerup (2011) and Watson et al. (2015) suggest, while simultaneously suppressing the purchase intention of the majority of its consumer base, as the affective and behavioral evidence indicates. Rather than an either/or choice between brand prestige and inclusivity, the revised model (Figure 6, right) proposes that diverse body representation can satisfy both: maintaining brand perception while improving the affective conditions that actually convert consumers into buyers.

10. Conclusion

Existing studies report inconsistent findings regarding the impact of body size diversity in models. However, this inconsistency is partly a consequence of the studies measuring different constructs rather than reflecting genuine contradictions. Studies measuring perceptual outcomes found either that thin models produced stronger brand signals (Aagerup, 2011) or that body size had no significant effect at all (Watson et al., 2015). By contrast, studies measuring affective and behavioral outcomes consistently found that average-sized models outperformed thin ones in purchase intention and body satisfaction (Sohn & Youn, 2013; Lou & Tse, 2020). Lou & Tse (2020) was the only study that investigated shifts in purchase intention with the independent variable as the BMI/body size of participants, and found a positive correlation between the similarity of body size of the model to the participants (consumers) and purchase intention. Future studies should investigate whether this correlation stands in repeated trials, as well as conduct similar tests in different countries with cultures that put stronger emphasis on conforming to the thin ideal (i.e., desire to identify with a brand that represents the thin ideal rather than individual differences in body size), to determine whether the theory still stands. Other potential factors influencing brand image perception and purchase intention should be investigated as well. Please refer to the previous section, "Limitations and future research agendas", for an in-depth discussion on the future steps mentioned.

This paper, especially concerning the effects of repeated thin-ideal exposure, serves as a warning for the general public to be aware of how advertisers in the fashion industry are capable of distorting body size perception in their consumers. Recognizing the effects that repeated exposure to the thin ideal can have on body size perception of consumers, as well as being aware of the health struggles the fashion models we see every day may be going through, just to conform to the unrealistic body standards the fashion industry has set, could help prevent internalization of the thin ideal in consumers. The public would hopefully understand that the body size they are exposed to from advertisements isn't a representation of what an average person looks like, and that the standards of thinness they set for themselves to pursue may be manipulated to be increasingly unrealistic.

In addition to the application of this research to advertisements in the fashion industry, other industries with skewed body size representation in their advertisements must recognize the impact this choice can make on the body image of their audiences/consumers, and consider alterations or diversifications in representation if they truly care for the public's well-being. Although parents and schools can work on censorship of advertisements with thin ideal representations from children, it would be difficult to completely shield children from the thin ideal in today's society. Also, it is unknown

whether censorship from the thin ideal would lead to the most positive impact on their body image, compared to active exposure to diverse body size representation in advertisements. Governments should take a part by implementing legislation that requires advertising campaigns to represent diverse body sizes, as self-regulation at a corporate level may not be strong or strict enough to ensure tangible changes are being made.

The increasing representation of the thin ideal in the fashion industry has placed growing pressure on models to conform to unrealistic beauty standards, negatively affecting their well-being (Bogár et al., 2022; Clements, 2013; Maguire, 2024). Experimental evidence demonstrates that repeated exposure to the thin ideal shifts perceptions of what qualifies as “thin”, which could push body-dissatisfied consumers to take extreme weight-loss measures to meet this manipulated standard (Bocage-Barthélémy et al., 2018; Devine et al., 2022). While findings on the effects of representing diverse/average-sized models remain mixed, real-world campaigns have found success when inclusive imagery in advertisements is matched with genuine inclusive sizing in stores (AEO-Inc, n.d.; Segran, 2022). Also, some studies suggest that similarity in body size between models and young female consumers increases both purchase intention (Lou & Tse, 2020) and encoding of the advertisement message content (Clayton et al., 2017). Together, these findings show that featuring models of diverse body sizes in fashion advertising not only has the potential to improve the mental and physical well-being of both models and consumers but can also sustain or even enhance brand performance. The revised model (Figure 6, right) illustrates the central conclusion of this paper: that ethical marketing and business performance are not mutually exclusive.

This paper contributes to the literature by offering three key advances to propose a more sustainable and evidence-based approach to body representation in advertising. It synthesized previously fragmented research across consumer psychology, marketing, and public health; identified significant gaps that warrant future investigation; and advanced a revised theoretical framework showing that diverse body representation can align model health, consumer well-being, and brand performance. Taken together, these contributions challenge the persistent assumption that ‘thin sells’ and offer a viable alternative for both researchers and practitioners.

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Author Biography

Uta Suzaki is a Japanese high school researcher whose work focuses on the intersection of body image, psychology, and marketing. Drawing from her own struggles with self-image, she founded the student organization Kalon, which creates a safe space for teenagers in her school community to engage in often-taboo conversations about confidence, appearance, and self-worth. Through listening to the shared experiences of her members, she recognized that many of their insecurities were not isolated struggles, but reflections of broader societal pressures. This realization led her to investigate how body image concerns are commonly addressed through surface-level or symptomatic solutions, rather than by confronting their root cause: the normalization of thin-ideal values embedded in media and marketing. Her research now explores how psychological science and strategic branding can be leveraged to challenge harmful beauty standards and promote healthier, more inclusive representations.

Mentor Contribution Statement

Dr. Jorge Avila served as the primary mentor for this manuscript throughout its entirety. In the initial stages of the project, Dr. Avila guided the author in identifying a research focus and developing the conceptual scope of the review. With respect to methodology, Dr. Avila advised on the narrative synthesis approach and assisted in establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria for the literature reviewed. During the writing process, Dr. Avila provided structured feedback across multiple



drafts, offering direction on academic formatting, argument development, and the organization of findings. In the revision stage, Dr. Avila guided the author in strengthening the paper's original contributions, including the reconciliation framework and the three-mechanism model of advertising effects. His contributions were advisory and editorial throughout; the writing, analysis, and conclusions are the author's own.

