

# **The Prevalence of the Thin Ideal and How it Affects Advertising Effectiveness in Young Female Consumers: Barriers and Future Directions**

## **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, leads 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).

The propagation of the thin ideal in numerous cultures is reflected in our daily lives through media, including fashion advertisements (Maguire, 2024). 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, and if so, which demographic is affected by it, is unclear.

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

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.

## **A shift in the “ideal” female body**

The definition of an “ideal body size” in Western culture has shifted dramatically 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). Nevertheless, thinness remains the dominant standard in fashion imagery today.

The persistent preference for thinner models is reflected in the Vogue Business Spring/Summer 2025 size inclusivity report, showing continued decline in plus and mid-size representation from some of fashion's most prominent luxury brands, with a whopping 94.9% of 8,763 looks presented across 208 shows and presentations being small-size (US 0-4), and only 0.8% being plus-size (US 14+) and 4.3% being mid-size (US 6-12) (Maguire, 2024). Despite the rising health concerns in the early 21st century, the thin ideal representation persists today, impacting the well-being of models working within the fashion industry.

## **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, it was shown that the difference in average BMI between the groups was around  $4\text{kg}/\text{m}^2$  (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 not natural or 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.

## 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.).

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.

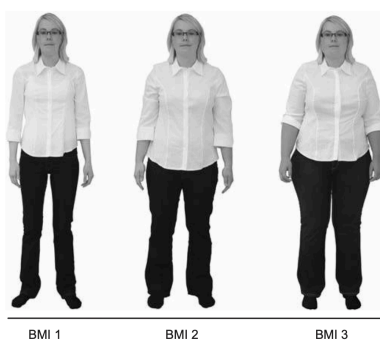


Figure 1: “Independent variable, ideal user BMI”: The 3 models participants were asked to evaluate on brand personality perception (Agerup, 2011)

Responses from 640 female undergraduate students in Göteborg University, Sweden showed that the “Underweight and normal weight” model represented competence the best from the perspective of study participants, and rated equal to or better than others

in other qualities as well. The “Overweight” model was rated poorly on sophistication but highly on ruggedness. These results provide empirical evidence that “underweight and normal weight” models are associated with a competent brand personality, as shown in branch B of Figure 2. On the other hand, the representation of overweight models gave an impression that the brand personality was rather mannish, as shown in branch C of Figure 2, 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).

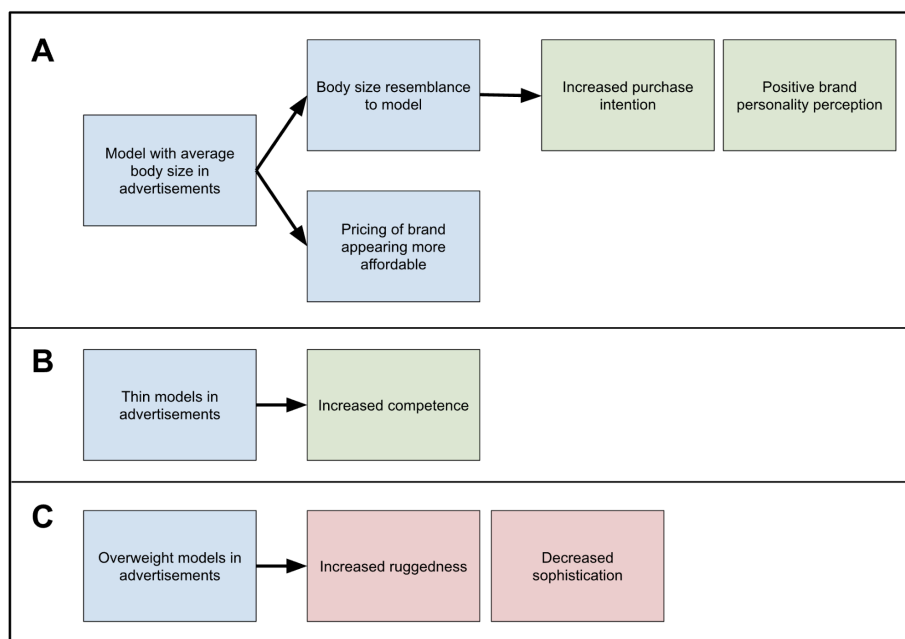


Figure 2: “Varying results in the studies”: A. Models with average body sizes led to increased perception and positive brand image in two studies, and an affordable brand perception in one study. B. Thin models appeared more competent and feminine than overweight models, and C. Overweight models appeared more rugged and less sophisticated than thin models in one study.

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. The results defy the “thin sells” ideology and illustrate that a body size that most consumers would identify with was seen as favourable, as shown in branch A of Figure 2. 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 hints at the possibility that representation of models with diverse body sizes and brand profit may be reconcilable.

Lou & Tse (2021) 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. More than 80% of the participants for each study were white. 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, as shown in branch A of Figure 2. 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) 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. 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, as shown in branch A of Figure 2. 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.

Two studies presented suggest the effectiveness of using average-sized models in contrast to thinner or overweight models in terms of brand personality perception and/or purchase intention. Aegerup’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. Overall, no consistent answer for which body size is the “best” for representing a brand was found.

In addition, most studies did not investigate whether the BMI/body size of participants (a factor of perceived similarity to the model) served as a driving force for perceived brand image. Sohn and Youn’s study considered BMI of participants as covariates (Sohn & Youn, 2013). Aegerup (2011) and Watson et. al (2015) did not consider the variable at all. Therefore, there could have been a deviation in the BMI of participants, which results in a lack of generalizability in the data. It is hence difficult to determine whether the body size of consumers truly plays a role in advertising effectiveness, as Lou & Tse (2021) claimed in their study.

## **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 provides evidence that consumers may have increased purchase intention towards brands that demonstrate authenticity.

Old Navy's experimentation with size inclusivity is prominently recognized as a failed attempt. It wasn't their advertising tactic of the "Bodequality" campaign that seemed to cause this, though; it was rather from their lack of understanding of the demand for each size in the market. On the other hand, Universal Standards, a brand carrying sizes 00 to 40, which is the broadest assortment of sizes in the market, overcame this 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.

## **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 before rating photos of models in physical attractiveness. Participants were allocated to one of two conditions in the model-rating phase: exposure to images of thin models or exposure to images of larger models. After that, 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). 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. In this condition, participants described the thin body size as appearing more "ideal" (Bocage-Barthélémy et al., 2018). The results are alarming in the sense that the level of body satisfaction of the consumer does not affect whether or not 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) tested two conditions on female participants (ages 18-28) from a university in Montreal 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. 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 the perception 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”.

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.

The adverse effect of an improvement in body image was observed for average/plus-size models in fashion advertisements. College-aged female participants in a study (Clayton et al., 2017) reported engaging in the least amount of self-comparison to the model, as well as elevated body satisfaction 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.

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). Hence, depicting average and plus-size models 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.

## **Limitations and further steps**

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. 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 3.

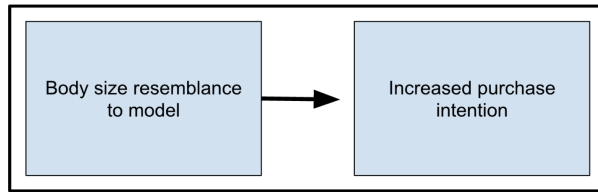


Figure 3: “Impact of body size resemblance”: The resemblance in body size of consumers to fashion models (represented in fashion advertisements) leads to increased purchase intention for the brand.

The studies examined in this paper were all based in Western countries, and cannot prove whether there are 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 4, 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.

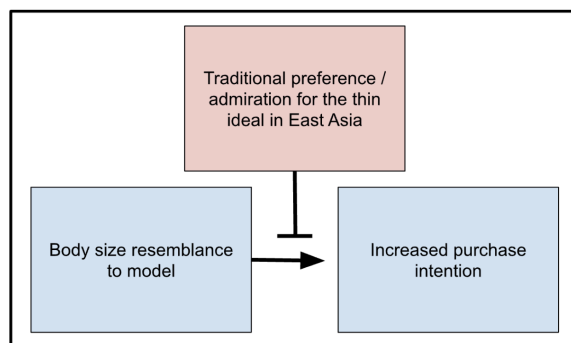


Figure 4: “Body size resemblance vs. ideal”: The traditional preference and admiration for the thin ideal in East Asian consumers may interfere with the causal relationship of the variable of body size resemblance of the consumer to the fashion model represented and the resulting increase in purchase intention.

The 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?

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 5, 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.

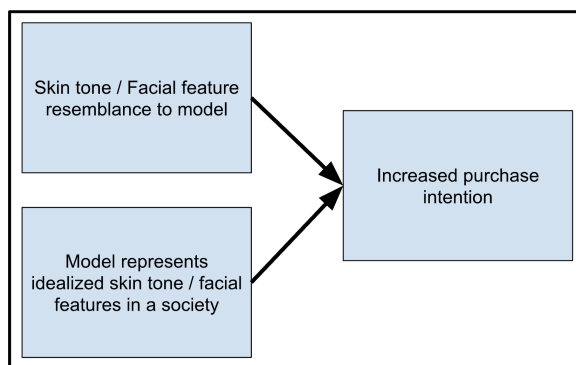


Figure 5: “Skin tone resemblance vs. Ideal”: Whether similarity of skin tone / facial feature of fashion model represented in the advertisement to the consumer leads to increased purchase intention, or the model representing an idealized skin tone / facial feature to the consumer demographic leads to increased purchase intention, is unknown.

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 6.

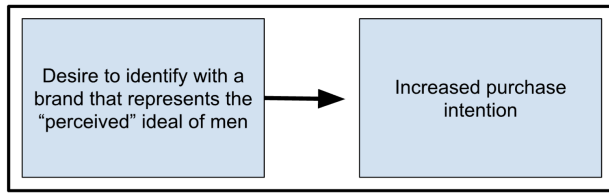


Figure 6: “Impact of opposite-sex perception”: The desire of female consumers to identify with a brand that represents the ideal body size by men as perceived by women may increase purchase intention for that brand.

## Conclusion

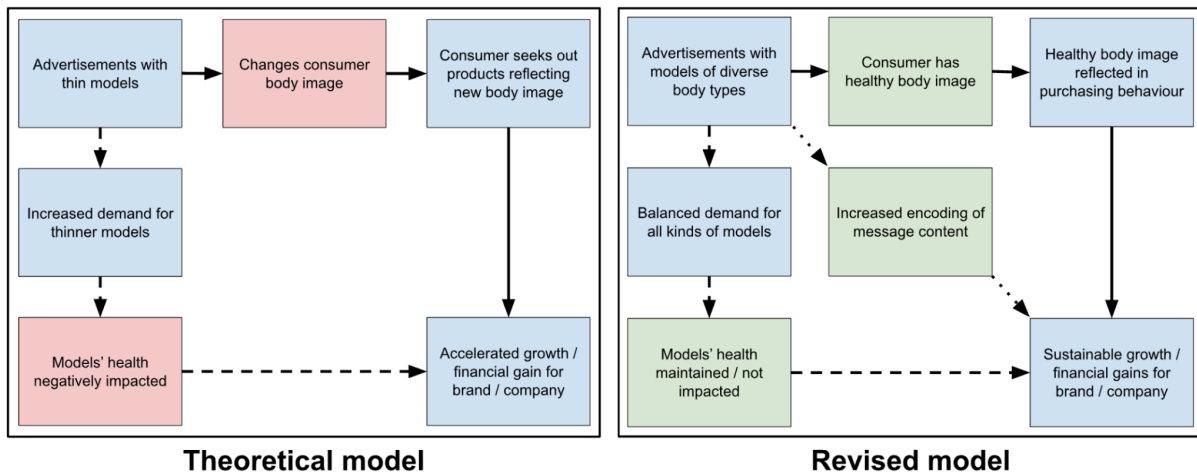


Figure 7: “The theoretical model”: The current, common practice of representing thin models in advertisements affects consumer body image and models’ health, yet leads to accelerated growth/financial gain for the brand/company. “The revised model”: Advertisements with models of diverse body types can 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.

The theoretical model (Figure 7, 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.

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 7, 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.

However, existing studies on this topic report inconsistent findings regarding the impact of body size diversity in models. Specifically, the representation of models with diverse body sizes appears to have varying effects on brand personality perception and purchase intention. Some studies observed the highest advertising effectiveness when representing models with an average body size. Others found stronger results with thin models (Aagerup, 2011) or reported no significant difference across different body sizes (Watson et al., 2015). Lou & Tse (2021) 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 further steps”, for an in-depth discussion on the future steps mentioned.

This study, 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 everyday may be going through, just to conform to the unrealistic body standards the fashion industry has set, could help with preventing internalization of the thin ideal in consumers. The public would hopefully understand that the body size they are exposed to every day 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, 2021) 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 7, right) illustrates the central conclusion of this paper: that ethical marketing and business performance are not mutually exclusive.

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*What Is a Clothing Brand.* (n.d.). Printful. Retrieved March 28, 2025, from

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This paper is suitable to be passed on for peer review for consideration in the competitive journal for high school students, *Convergence*, given its academic rigor, interdisciplinary themes, and thorough literature analysis. The paper demonstrates extensive engagement with current and historical research literature on body image, advertising, consumer psychology, and ethics, which aligns well with *Convergence's* high standards for scientific inquiry and reasoning.

The discussion does a good job at bridging across the disciplines of consumer neuroscience, psychology, advertising, and cultural analysis, reflecting *Convergence's* interest in publishing work that transcends a single discipline. This is in line with our mission to foster new perspectives on topics with societal relevance. Also, despite its advanced analysis, the review style and topic are appropriate for a student-written review or original research submission, fitting *Convergence's* audience of pre-university student researchers.

With respect to the manuscript readiness and improvements, the structure follows a logical organization, with an Introduction, Body, Limitations, and Conclusion. However, the inclusion of a formal abstract is necessary to meet full submission expectations. Some minor adjustments to heading levels and citation style (e.g., *Chicago Manual of Style*) may be required to conform to our formatting guidelines.

I recommend passing this paper along for peer review, as it stands a good chance of meeting *Convergence's* standards with minor improvements before submission.

## **Review for Submission “The Prevalence of the Thin Ideal and How it Affects Advertising Effectiveness in Young Female Consumers: Barriers and Future Directions”**

Thank you for submitting your paper to Convergence Journal. As an early-career researcher, your effort to address the critical issue of the thin ideal in fashion advertising is commendable, and this review aims to support your development as a scholar. The paper tackles a timely and significant topic, offering a promising foundation for exploring the impact of body representation on consumer behaviour and well-being.

- **Originality & Significance:** The paper offers a novel perspective by linking the thin ideal in fashion advertising to both brand perception and consumer body image, addressing a gap in understanding its dual impact. The focus on young female consumers and the inclusion of historical shifts add significance, though further exploration of untapped research areas could enhance its uniqueness.
- **Clarity & Structure:** The argument is generally well-organised, with a clear introduction and logical progression from historical context to current issues. However, transitions between sections (e.g., from historical shifts to social media’s role) are abrupt—consider adding bridging paragraphs to improve flow. Some ideas, like the methodology, lack detail, making them harder to follow.
- **Use of Evidence & Research Methods:** Sources are appropriately cited, with references like Bogár et al. (2022) and Clements (2013) providing robust support. The methodology is introduced but underdeveloped—please specify the sample size, data collection process, and analysis methods to ensure soundness and transparency.
- **Engagement with Literature:** The paper demonstrates a solid understanding of relevant research, citing historical shifts (Bonafini & Pozzilli, 2011) and modern trends (Maguire, 2024). However, deeper engagement with consumer psychology studies (beyond Agerup, 2011) would strengthen connections to known results and contextualise findings more effectively.
- **Grammar & Language:** The writing is clear and professional, with minor tense inconsistencies (e.g., “could lead” vs. “leads”). These errors are noted but should not overshadow content improvements.

**Strengths:** The introduction effectively outlines the relevance of the thin ideal, supported by a clear definition and historical context (e.g., shift from plump to slender ideals). Your discussion of social media’s role, including algorithms and user interaction, adds a modern dimension to the topic. The inclusion of health data from Bogár et al. (2022) and personal anecdotes from Clements

(2013) strengthens the argument about the fashion industry's impact on models and consumers, showcasing originality and engagement with real-world implications.

**Areas for Improvement:** The paper's structure could be enhanced for clarity. The transition between the historical shift and current advertising effects feels abrupt—consider adding a bridging paragraph in Section 2 to connect these ideas seamlessly. The literature review is promising but lacks depth in some areas; for instance, integrating more studies on consumer psychology (e.g., beyond Agerup, 2011) would better contextualise your findings. The methodology section, though present, is underdeveloped—please specify the sample size, data collection methods, and analysis techniques to ensure reproducibility. Minor grammatical issues, such as inconsistent tense usage (e.g., “could lead” vs. “leads”), should be polished, though they are not the primary focus.

**Recommendations:** I recommend accepting the paper with major revisions. To proceed, refine the structure with smoother transitions, elaborate on the methodology, and expand the literature review with additional consumer-focused studies. These changes will enhance clarity and rigour. Send the revised version to Jonas Katona ([j.katona@indigoresearch.org](mailto:j.katona@indigoresearch.org)) or [convergencejournal@indigoresearch.org](mailto:convergencejournal@indigoresearch.org).

Indigo Review

**“The Prevalence of the Thin Ideal and How it Affects Advertising Effectiveness in Young Female Consumers: Barriers and Future Directions”**

Data October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2025

Reviewer Report

1. Originality & Significance

Strengths:

The topic is both timely and socially significant, addressing the intersection between body image, consumer psychology, and marketing practices — all of which are crucial issues in today’s socio-digital landscape and identity.

Suggestions:

While the topic is well-chosen, the “approach and contribution” could be stated more explicitly. For example, the author could clarify what gap this paper fills in existing research: is it a synthesis of cross-studies, a comparative analysis, a critique of methodological approaches, or a new conceptual framework? Try adding the frame to the title, add a paragraph in the introduction, plus input a conclusion that explicitly states the paper’s unique contribution — e.g., “This paper contributes to the literature by ... to propose ...”

2. Clarity & Structure

Strengths:

The paper is logically organized, moving smoothly from definition and context to empirical studies, and practical examples. Transitions between sections are mostly fluid, and key terms (e.g., “thin ideal,” “brand personality”) are consistently used and well-defined.

Suggestions:

Some sections (especially the literature review on “Effectiveness of Representation of Different Body Sizes”) could be streamlined. Explore creating a summary table or conceptual timeline mapping (e.g., author, year, summarizing outcomes, sample sizes, implications and key insights) of this study in particular and what is being attained. This will make the comparative analysis more accessible and strengthen the paper’s clarity.

3. Use of Evidence & Research Methods

Strengths:

The paper draws upon a wide range of peer-reviewed sources, and empirical studies, including first-hand accounts (e.g., Clements, 2013), providing a multidimensional understanding of the issue. References are current and relevant (with many from 2018–2024).

Suggestions:

The methodology of the reviewed studies could be critically assessed more deeply. For example, sample demographics (e.g., Western undergraduates) limit generalizability —elaborate on how these limitations affect interpretation and impact the applicability of the findings.

4. Engagement with Literature

Strengths:

The author successfully balances psychological, sociological, and marketing perspectives, showing awareness of interdisciplinary connections and a more global integrative perspective.

### Suggestions:

The literature discussion could be strengthened by integrating theoretical frameworks more explicitly. For instance, body image internalization could be discussed through Social Comparison Theory or Objectification Theory, and consumer behaviour findings through Self-Congruity Theory or Brand Personality Theory (Aaker, 1997). Introduce one or two key theoretical lenses (e.g., Social Comparison Theory) early in the paper and revisit them in the discussion to interpret the findings coherently. Maybe even connect it with the methodological approach. This will give the paper a more coherent development.

### 5. Grammar & Language

#### Strengths:

The writing is clear, professional. Citations are consistent, and paragraph structure supports academic readability. Technical terms are well-explained, making the article accessible to both academic and non-academic audiences.

#### Suggestions:

Occasionally, sentences could benefit from slight condensation for readability (particularly in the literature section). Some transitions between paragraphs (e.g., between Lou & Tse, 2021 and Watson et al., 2015) could be smoother, clarifying whether studies complement or contrast each other.

#### Final Recommendation

#### Accept with Minor Revisions

#### Feedback:

This is a strong and thoughtful paper that demonstrates excellent research engagement, social relevance, and clear communication. It effectively connects the psychological impact of the “thin ideal” with its economic and branding consequences, offering a balanced view of harm and possibility for reform.

The paper is well-researched, but it could benefit from a clearer conceptual framework and theoretical integration to enhance its originality and analytical depth. This could elevate it from a well-structured literature review to a significant academic contribution.

Drawing from social comparison theory and objectification theory, the author explains that repeated exposure to unrealistic body standards contributes to body dissatisfaction, lowered self-esteem, and distorted self-perception. These psychological effects can influence consumer decision-making, reinforcing harmful social norms.

The article also highlights systemic barriers to change, including industry inertia, and deeply embedded cultural practices for thinness. It concludes by calling for stronger regulation of advertising practices, and the inclusion of diverse body types in campaigns, supporting healthier consumer identities.

Ps. Please make sure all the figures are correctly labelled and intitled and visible, some are quite blurred, there spaces inconsistencies that need to be solved together with spacing, and centralization of the paragraphs. Make sure the manuscript is formatted accordingly.

# 1 The Prevalence of the Thin Ideal and How it Affects 2 Advertising Effectiveness in Young Female 3 Consumers: A Comparative Analysis and 4 Reconciliation Framework ~~Barriers and Future~~ 5 Directions

## 6 Abstract

7 The "thin ideal", characterized by extreme slenderness and low body fat, dominates  
8 contemporary fashion advertising, raising concerns about both model welfare and  
9 consumer well-being. This paper examines how body size representation in fashion  
10 advertisements affects young female consumers across two dimensions: brand personality  
11 perception and purchase intention, and consumer body image attitudes. Through a  
12 comprehensive synthesis of experimental studies and real-world case analyses, this review  
13 reveals contradictory findings regarding advertising effectiveness. While some studies  
14 suggest average-sized models generate more positive brand attitudes and purchase  
15 intentions than thin or plus-sized models, others find thin models more effective or report  
16 no significant differences. However, research consistently demonstrates that repeated  
17 exposure to thin ideals distorts body size perception and increases body dissatisfaction in  
18 consumers, while models themselves face documented health risks from industry pressure  
19 to maintain unrealistic physiques. This paper makes three key contributions: it integrates  
20 previously fragmented research across consumer psychology, marketing, and public health;  
21 identifies critical gaps warranting future investigation, particularly regarding cultural  
22 differences and demographic variations; and proposes a revised theoretical framework  
23 demonstrating that diverse body representation can simultaneously improve model health,  
24 consumer well-being, and brand performance. Case studies from Aerie and Universal  
25 Standard provide evidence that authentic inclusivity, when matched with operational  
26 execution, can drive commercial success. This framework challenges the persistent "thin  
27 sells" assumption and offers practitioners an evidence-based alternative approach to  
28 fashion advertising.

29

## 30 Introduction

31 The "thin ideal", defined as a "feminine physique characterized by slenderness and low body  
32 fat" (Kidd et al., 2023), is widely perpetuated across cultures and remains a dominant image

33 in today's media. The desire to adhere to the "ideal" body image could lead one to take  
34 drastic measures that could be detrimental to health, such as the development of eating  
35 disorders, excessive exercise, and consumption of weight loss products with health hazards  
36 or unknown side effects (Edwards-Gayfield, n.d.). At the same time, the fashion industry's  
37 growing preference for thin models raises serious health concerns for those working within  
38 it. The problems with rising rates of obesity are publicly discussed and recognized. Still,  
39 many of the issues that exist on the other end of the spectrum of body perception are  
40 normalized to some extent, with extreme thinness even being idolized or praised in many  
41 cultures around the world. Additionally, in 2021, semaglutide drugs, or weight-loss drugs,  
42 such as Wegovy and Ozempic, were approved for weight management in adults (Roy, 2024),  
43 making substantial weight loss more accessible than ever.

44

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

59

60 Objectification theory posits that women are typically acculturated to internalize an  
61 observer's perspective as a primary view of their physical selves (Fredrickson & Roberts,  
62 1997). This perspective can lead women to adopt external appearance standards as personal  
63 ideals, with potential consequences for both mental health and consumer decision-making. ¶

64 ¶

65 Since the ~~The~~ propagation of the thin ideal in numerous cultures is reflected in our daily  
66 lives through media, including fashion advertisements (Maguire, 2024), understanding its  
67 effects is particularly urgent. However, it is unknown whether the representation of the  
68 thin ideal in fashion advertisements has a positive or negative effect on advertisement  
69 effectiveness in terms of sales and evaluation of brand personality by consumers.  
70 Moreover, whether exposure to the thin ideal has an impact on the consumers' body image,  
71 and if so, which demographic is affected by it, is unclear.

72

73 The current paper investigates the effects of the representation of the thin ideal in fashion  
74 advertisements on consumers, in two variables: (1) their perceptions of brand personality  
75 and purchase intention, and (2) their attitudes toward body image. By comparing consumer  
76 responses to models of varying body sizes, we aim to assess how body representation  
77 influences consumer perceptions of brand personality and purchase intentions.  
78 Additionally, this comparison allows us to explore whether repeated exposure to the thin  
79 ideal increases or decreases appreciation for more realistic body portrayals. This review  
80 focuses on young female consumers (primarily university-aged women) as they represent a  
81 key target market for beauty and fashion advertising. However, this demographic was also  
82 selected due to practical considerations regarding available research, as undergraduate  
83 samples dominate the advertising effectiveness literature.

84

85 This paper makes three key contributions to existing research. First, it provides a  
86 comprehensive synthesis of fragmented research on body-size representation in  
87 advertising, integrating findings from consumer psychology, marketing effectiveness, and  
88 public health literature that have previously remained siloed. Second, it reveals systematic  
89 gaps in current research and proposes future research agendas to address them. Third, and  
90 most significantly, this paper proposes a revised theoretical framework (Figure 8) that  
91 reconciles the apparent tension between ethical representation and commercial viability,  
92 demonstrating through both experimental evidence and real-world case studies that  
93 diverse body representation can simultaneously improve model health, consumer  
94 well-being, and brand performance. This framework challenges the dominant industry  
95 assumption that 'thin sells' and provides an actionable alternative model for practitioners.

96

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

102

### 103 **A shift in the “ideal” female body**

104 The definition of an “ideal body size” in Western culture has shifted ~~drastically~~<sup>dramatically</sup>  
105 over the years, especially with the 20th century redefining the characteristics of beauty.  
106 During the 19th century, a plump female figure was perceived positively, as it symbolized  
107 wealth, health, and sexual attractiveness (Hutson, 2017). However, this perception began to  
108 shift around the 1920s, as the emphasis on reproductive characteristics as a defining  
109 feature of beauty diminished the evolving societal role of women – from mother and  
110 mistress to a career-oriented individual (Bonafini & Pozzilli, 2011). The emergence of

111 flappers, a subculture of young women characterized by a “lean and androgynous”  
112 (Ewbank, 2018) figure, in the 1920s and later popularization of a slender British fashion  
113 model, Twiggy, in the 1960s marked the new trend of a thinner physique (DPA, 2024).  
114 Although women were no longer squeezing themselves into corsets like they did in the 19th  
115 century, the media messaging and societal pressures to adhere to an “ideal” body continued  
116 (Howard, 2018). Moreover, advancements in medical knowledge deemed obesity a threat  
117 (Bonafini & Pozzilli, 2011), creating a binary lens by celebrating extreme thinness in fashion  
118 imagery while highlighting larger bodies as ‘unhealthy’ and ‘bad’ in reporting on obesity in  
119 the 1990s. By the 2000s, concerns arose that this thin ideal had gone too far, from an  
120 international spike in eating disorders and dieting habits amongst a wide age range  
121 (Howard, 2018). ~~Nevertheless, thinness remains the dominant standard in fashion imagery~~  
122 ~~today.~~

123

124 This historical evolution toward extreme thinness has become institutionalized within  
125 contemporary fashion industry practices. Despite the rising health concerns in the early  
126 21st century, prompting discussions about body representation and model welfare,  
127 substantive structural change has remained elusive. Recent industry data demonstrates the  
128 persistence of these narrow beauty standards despite decades of critique.

129

130 ~~The persistent preference for thinner models is reflected in the~~ Vogue Business  
131 ~~Spring/Summer 2025 size inclusivity report revealed, showing~~ a continued decline in plus  
132 ~~and mid-size representation from some of the fashion industry’s~~ fashion’s most prominent  
133 ~~luxury brands. With a~~ whopping 94.9% of 8,763 looks presented across 208 shows and  
134 ~~presentations were~~ being small-size (US 0-4), 4.3% were mid-size (US 6-12), and only 0.8%  
135 ~~were~~ being plus-size (US 14+) and ~~4.3% were~~ being mid-size (US 6-12) (Maguire, 2024).  
136 ~~Despite the rising health concerns in the early 21st century, the thin ideal representation~~  
137 ~~persists today, impacting the well-being of models working within the fashion industry.~~

138

### 139 **Realities of health issues in the fashion industry**

140 An article written by a former Vogue editor, Kirstie Clements, reveals the dangerous  
141 practices that exist amongst top fashion models to maintain the “ideal” physique that the  
142 industry demands. She shares stories of models she met at Vogue, where she had  
143 recognized the extreme lengths models would go to stay fit: scars on a model’s knees from  
144 repeatedly fainting from hunger; a close friend regularly hospitalized and receiving IV drips  
145 after starving herself; and a Russian model who could barely stay conscious during a  
146 photoshoot from her belief that “It is [her] job not to eat” (Clements, 2013) as a model.  
147 These stories reveal that fashion models often engage in harmful behaviors to maintain  
148 extreme thinness. This isn’t just damaging to the models themselves—it may also harm

149 consumers who are exposed to media featuring these models. Viewers may compare their  
150 bodies to the models' unrealistic physiques, which are often the result of extreme dieting,  
151 and further altered by heavy editing.

152

153 In addition, an international investigation into the average BMI of 179 female fashion models  
154 found worrying trends in average BMI and risks of anorexia nervosa. Comparing their data  
155 to the non-model control group, ~~it was shown that~~ the difference in average BMI between  
156 the groups was around  $4\text{kg}/\text{m}^2$  (18.1 for the models, 22.1 for the control). However, the  
157 alarming part was that the frequency of simulated anorexia nervosa was 3.9% among the  
158 fashion models, while it was 1.1% in the control group. Also, 14.6% of the models showed  
159 subclinical anorexia nervosa symptoms versus 2.7% in the control group (Bogár et al., 2022).  
160 This data reveals the health risks that plague the fashion industry and how the profession is  
161 negatively affecting models. These results tell us that the thin ideal is neither ~~not~~ natural  
162 nor sustainable for the general female population, yet the fashion industry normalizes such  
163 unhealthy standards.

164

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

171

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

180

### 181 **Effectiveness of the representation of different body sizes**

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

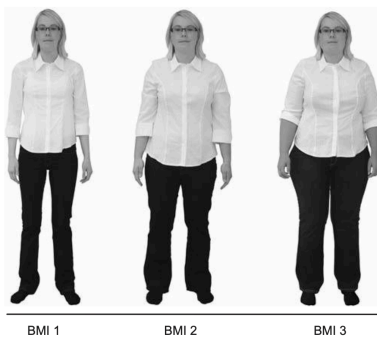
187

188 Self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985) posits that purchase motivation increases when brand  
189 image aligns with the consumer's actual self-image, or perception of their current self  
190 (self-congruity). This effect is amplified when the brand image also aligns with the  
191 consumer's ideal self-image, or who the consumer wants to be (ideal congruity). In the  
192 context of fashion advertising, the model's body size can serve as a key component of brand  
193 image, potentially creating either self-congruity (when models resemble the consumer's  
194 current body) or ideal congruity (when models represent the consumer's body aspiration).  
195 The following studies examine how different model body sizes affect brand personality  
196 perception and purchase intention, with findings that can be interpreted through this  
197 self-congruity framework.¶

198

199

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



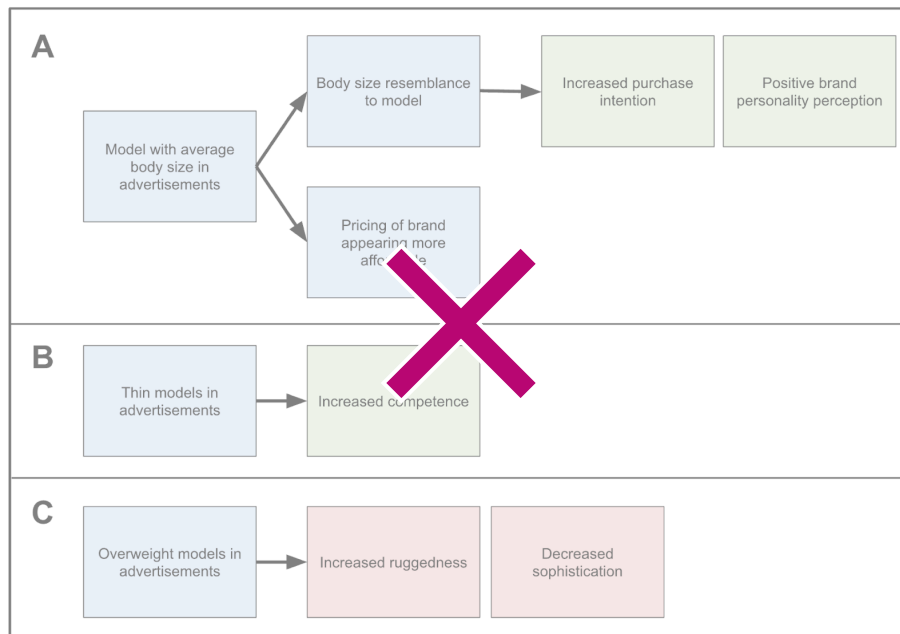
208

209 Figure 24: "Independent variable, ideal user BMI": The 3 models participants were asked to evaluate on brand  
210 personality perception (Aagerup, 2011)

211

212 Responses from 640 female undergraduate students in Göteborg University, Sweden  
213 ~~rated showed that~~ the "Underweight and normal weight" model highly ~~in represented~~  
214 competence, and ~~equally the best from the perspective of study participants, and rated~~  
215 ~~equal to~~ or better than other models in other qualities as well. The "Overweight" model  
216 was rated poorly on sophistication but highly on ruggedness. ~~There were no significant~~  
217 differences between the ways respondents of different BMIs rated models. Ratings were  
218 conducted on a 5-grade Likert-type scale. These results provide empirical evidence that

219 “underweight and normal weight” models are associated with a competent brand  
 220 personality, while, as shown in branch B of Figure 2. On the other hand, the representation  
 221 of overweight models presented a rather mannish gave an impression that the brand  
 222 personality (B was rather mannish, as shown in branch C, of Figure 2), which is presumably  
 223 not a brand personality that many female shoppers would like to identify with. Assuming  
 224 that consumers express their self-image through wearing brands that use models that  
 225 resemble what the consumer is or would like to be, it was concluded that the use of a  
 226 thinner model would be more effective in stimulating purchase intentions (Aagerup, 2011).



227

228

229 Sohn & Youn (2013) presented results that contradicted Aagerup (2011). Sohn & Youn (2013)  
 230 investigated how model body size influences the evaluation of advertisements, while  
 231 controlling for facial attractiveness. They used two types of ads: one for a makeup kit,  
 232 which is typically associated with thin models (product-congruent), and one for an alarm  
 233 clock, which is unrelated to body image (product-incongruent). The models presented were  
 234 either “thin”, “average”, or “large” in body size. Responses from 201 US undergraduate and  
 235 graduate students (59% female) showed that the average-sized model generated more  
 236 positive brand attitude and purchase intention than the use of either thin or plus-sized  
 237 models. This held for products both congruent and incongruent with body image. Attitudes  
 238 toward the ad and brand were measured with the 10-item scale based on Madden et al.  
 239 (1988). Each item was assessed on a 7-point semantic differential scale anchored by  
 240 “unpleasant/pleasant,” “unlikable/likable,” “boring/ interesting,” and “bad/good,” to name a  
 241 few. Purchase intention was assessed by three items, which used a 7-point Likert scale  
 242 ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). For further analysis, the raw scores  
 243 of multiple items were aggregated for each construct. ~~This held for products both~~

244 ~~congruent and incongruent with body image.~~ The results defy the “thin sells” ideology and  
245 illustrate that a body size that most consumers would identify with was seen as favourable  
246 ~~(B, as shown in branch A of Figure 2).~~ It can therefore be hypothesized that familiarity or  
247 relatability to the body size of models in advertisements can create a positive response,  
248 hence elevating purchase intention in consumers viewing the ad (Sohn & Youn, 2013). This  
249 finding indicates ~~hints at the possibility~~ that the representation of models with diverse body  
250 sizes and brand profit may be reconcilable.

251

252 Lou & Tse (2020) presented similar results to Sohn & Youn (2013). Lou & Tse (2020)  
253 investigated how body satisfaction and purchase intentions vary by different body size  
254 representations in fashion brand advertisements. Here, a “thin model” fell below size 3, an  
255 “average-sized model” was between sizes 4 and 6, and a “plus-sized model” was between  
256 sizes 7 and 9. Researchers conducted two similar tests with a control for facial appearance,  
257 where one created ads for a fast-fashion brand, H&M, and the other for a luxury brand,  
258 Gucci. A total of 438 female participants, aged 54 or under, were allocated to the H&M  
259 condition, and 335 female participants, aged 54 or under, were allocated to the Gucci  
260 condition; all recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). More than 80% of the  
261 participants ~~for~~ each study ~~was~~ ~~were~~ Caucasian ~~white~~. Participants were randomly  
262 assigned to view one of three advertisements featuring either a thin model, an  
263 average-sized model, or a plus-sized model. In the first test, participants answered  
264 questions about their lifestyles and habits, including their attitudes toward the brand using  
265 a 7-point scale with anchors such as likeable/unlikeable, bad/good, unpleasant/pleasant,  
266 and worthless/valuable, along with their weight, height, and various filler questions. In the  
267 second test, participants rated their appearance-related self-esteem using statements such  
268 as “I feel pleased with my appearance right now.” In the final test, participants were asked  
269 to view an H&M advertisement that was supposedly slated to appear in a fashion magazine.  
270 After viewing the ad, participants indicated their body satisfaction by rating their  
271 agreement with six statements on a 7-point scale ranging from extremely dissatisfied to  
272 extremely satisfied, such as “Right now, I feel \_\_\_ with my body and shape.” Participants  
273 also indicated how similar they felt to the model on a 7-point scale and reported their  
274 purchase intentions using three statements, such as “I will likely buy the brand.” A separate  
275 Gucci condition followed this same procedure with identical measures and manipulations.  
276 Participants’ BMI was calculated using their self-reported weight and height, which was  
277 then median split. In the H&M condition, participants expressed elevated body satisfaction  
278 and increased purchase intentions when viewing ads that featured an average-sized or a  
279 plus-sized model rather than a thin model. In addition, participants with a higher BMI  
280 preferred an average-sized model over a thin one in terms of purchase intention, and  
281 participants with a lower BMI preferred an average-sized model over a plus-sized one.  
282 They indicated increased similarity to an average-sized model (vs. plus-sized), which in  
283 turn led to increased purchase intentions. Results were similar in the Gucci condition, but

284 body satisfaction did not improve upon viewing the advertisements. The results, like Sohn  
285 & Youn’s study, demonstrate that familiarity or relatability to the body size of models  
286 creates a positive response from consumers, ~~as shown in branch A of Figure 2~~. From being  
287 able to attain similar results from advertisements for both conditions (fast-fashion and  
288 luxury brands), we can anticipate the effectiveness of featuring average-sized models in a  
289 range of brands (Sohn & Youn, 2013). As body size similarity between the model and  
290 consumers elevated body satisfaction and purchase intention, ensuring that a wide range of  
291 body sizes are represented in advertisements may grow the customer base and thus  
292 increase brand profit.

293

294 Watson et al. (2015) showed results that differed from the other three studies. Watson et al.  
295 (2015) digitally manipulated a model’s body size in a fictitious advert to create four  
296 advertising images with underweight, slender, average, and obese model sizes. 198 German  
297 female consumers (ages 18-65) were exposed to one of four images and asked questions on  
298 their brand image perceptions via a survey. In the survey, participants were asked to  
299 indicate the extent to which they felt the brand exhibited/represented the attributes listed  
300 above, using a five-point Likert scale. For example, respondents were asked to indicate on a  
301 scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) the extent to which they agreed “the  
302 brand appears sporty/bold/elegant/ young/sexy”. The attributes were constructed based  
303 on a pre-test interview, where interviewees were shown images of an underweight,  
304 slender, normal, and obese model, and asked to identify which image they preferred. For  
305 their selected image, they were asked to explain their preference, and then asked what  
306 characteristics they would associate with the brand, what they felt the brand symbolised,  
307 its value proposition and the type of person they felt the brand represented. Survey  
308 ~~Results~~ Results showed that the size of the model used in the advertising image does not  
309 significantly impact brand image perceptions. However, it was discovered that participants  
310 associated advertisements with “underweight” and “slender” models with a higher price  
311 point than the “average” size model, ~~as shown in branch A of Figure 2~~. This study concluded  
312 that the body size of models in fashion advertisements did not have a significant effect on  
313 brand image, but rather impacted the perception of the price point of each brand (Watson  
314 et al., 2015). This indicates that brands can appear luxurious by representing thinner  
315 models in their advertisements. On the other hand, affordability or familiarity would be  
316 achieved by using an average-sized model. The definition of what would be a “positive”  
317 brand image would differ by brand in terms of perception of affordability, making it difficult  
318 to draw what kind of body size would lead to the most “positive” response from consumers  
319 in general.

320

Author(s)	Aagerup	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"> <li>• No significant differences between the ways participants of different BMIs rated models</li> <li>• “Underweight and normal weight” model rated highly on competence</li> <li>• “Overweight” model rated low on sophistication but highly on ruggedness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Average-sized model generated more positive brand attitude and higher purchase intention than thin and plus-sized models</li> <li>• Results were similar for ads for a make-up kit and an alarm clock</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Average-sized &amp; Plus-sized models in fast-fashion brand ads elevated consumer body satisfaction (not for luxury brand ads)</li> <li>• Higher-BMI participants showed greater purchase intention for the average- sized model than the thin model</li> <li>• Lower-BMI participants showed greater purchase intention for the average- sized model than the plus-sized model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Body size of the model does not significantly impact brand image perception</li> <li>• “Underweight” &amp; “Slender” models associated with a higher price point than “Average” size model</li> </ul>

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

324

325 As Figure 1 demonstrates, two studies presented suggest the effectiveness of using  
326 average-sized models in contrast to thinner or overweight models in terms of brand  
327 personality perception and/or purchase intention. Aaegerup’s investigation (2011) was the  
328 only study that concluded that thin models should be represented to maintain positive  
329 brand image perception. However, the lack of differentiation in the BMI scale they used  
330 undermines clarity, as it becomes unclear whether it was the thinness or the normalcy of

331 the body size of the “underweight and normal weight” model amongst the participants that  
332 contributed to the results. Watson et al. (2015) found that the perception of the price point  
333 of the brand shifted based on the body sizes of models represented in the advertisements.  
334 There may be certain qualities, such as cultural differences or variations in the definition of  
335 “thin”, “average”, or “overweight” by study, that impacted the results reached in each study.  
336 Overall, no consistent answer for which body size is the “best” for representing a brand was  
337 found.

338

~~339 In addition, some most studies did not investigate whether the BMI/body size of  
340 participants (a factor of perceived similarity to the model) served as a driving force for  
341 perceived brand image. For example, Sohn and Youn (2013) statistically controlled for  
342 participants' BMI as a covariate, whereas's study considered BMI of participants as  
343 covariates (Sohn & Youn, 2013),. Agerup (2011) and Watson et. al (2015) did not  
344 include consider the variable at all. As a result, uncontrolled variations in participants' BMI  
345 may have limited the generalizability of their findings. Without accounting for BMI, it  
346 remains unclear whether consumers' body size itself influences advertising effectiveness,  
347 as suggested by Lou and Tse (2020). Therefore, there could have been a deviation in the BMI  
348 of participants, which results in a lack of generalizability in the data. It is hence difficult to  
349 determine whether the body size of consumers truly plays a role in advertising  
350 effectiveness, as Lou & Tse (2020) claimed in their study. ¶~~

351 These findings reveal nuanced and sometimes contradictory patterns in how self-congruity  
352 theory operates with body size in advertising. Lou & Tse (2020) provide the clearest  
353 support for actual self-congruity, as participants showed greater purchase intention for  
354 models matching their own body size: higher-BMI consumers preferred average-sized  
355 models, while lower-BMI consumers preferred average-sized models over plus-sized ones.  
356 However, the other studies reveal important moderators and boundary conditions to this  
357 effect. Watson et al. (2015) found that model body size didn't significantly impact brand  
358 image perception in their German sample, indicating self-congruity effects aren't universal  
359 and may depend on cultural context. Agerup's (2011) finding that "overweight" models  
360 scored high on ruggedness but low on sophistication suggests consumers may process  
361 model body size through multiple self-concept dimensions simultaneously, not just body  
362 image congruence. Finally, Sohn & Youn's (2013) result that average-sized models  
363 outperformed both thin and plus-sized models could indicate they achieve broader  
364 self-congruity across diverse body types, or represent an idealized yet attainable middle  
365 ground that satisfies both actual and ideal self-congruity for more consumers. Collectively,  
366 these findings suggest that self-congruity theory may require refinement when applied to  
367 body size in advertising, as the effect appears moderated by product category, cultural  
368 context, and competing brand personality dimensions.

369

## 370 **Examples of brands that used average-sized models in advertising** 371 **that experienced a positive change**

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

383

384 Old Navy’s failed attempt at size inclusivity reinforces Sirgy’s (1985) point. Its 'Bodequality'  
385 campaign implemented size-inclusive advertising along with an expansion in size  
386 availability, creating actual self-congruity for extended-size consumers while  
387 simultaneously attracting standard-size customers who wanted to align with inclusive  
388 values. The campaign saw a 40% increase in brand mentions on social media, along with a  
389 doubling of extended-size customers in the quarter, 15% of whom were new to the brand  
390 (PMG Digital Marketing, n.d.). However, Old Navy's lack of understanding of size-specific  
391 demand led to catastrophic inventory mismanagement: stores ran out of standard sizes  
392 while overstocking extended sizes, suggesting that the campaign’s reach extended beyond  
393 projections for extended-size customers, creating incongruence across their entire  
394 customer base. Customers who felt validated by the diverse representation experienced  
395 betrayal when products weren't available in their sizes, damaging brand trust more than if  
396 Old Navy had never advertised inclusivity at all. As a result, parent company GAP suffered a  
397 loss of \$162 million in a span of 3 months following the campaign launch (Jiménez,  
398 2022). ~~Old Navy’s experimentation with size inclusivity is prominently recognized as a failed~~  
399 ~~attempt. It wasn’t their advertising tactic of the “Bodequality” campaign that seemed to~~  
400 ~~cause this, though; it was rather from their lack of understanding of the demand for each~~  
401 ~~size in the market.~~

402

403 ~~On the other hand,~~ Universal Standards, a brand carrying sizes 00 to 40, which is the  
404 broadest assortment of sizes in the market, overcame ~~Old Navy’s~~ **this** issue. Veksler, the  
405 co-founder and CEO of Universal Standard, mentioned it helped that the brand expanded  
406 its size range gradually, continually assessing demand along the way (Segran, 2022).  
407 Universal Standard’s success demonstrates that analyzing size-specific consumer demand  
408 enables brands to deliver on their promise of inclusivity. Old Navy’s failed attempt also

409 reveals that advertising campaigns featuring models of diverse body sizes have the  
410 potential to attract a broader customer base and boost sales with the correct supply of  
411 clothing sizes.

412

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

419

## 420 **How does repeated exposure to the thin ideal affect body image?**

421 We will now look into the effects of exposure to the thin ideal on female consumers' body  
422 image. A study by Bocage-Barthélémy et al. (2018) asked 91 female participants from the  
423 University of Trois-Rivières (Québec, Canada) and 35 female participants from the  
424 University of Poitiers, France, to evaluate their body satisfaction levels and rate ~~before~~  
425 ~~rating~~ photos of models in physical attractiveness. This was done using the Body  
426 Dissatisfaction subscale of the Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI-BD, Garner, Olmstead, &  
427 Polivy, 1983), where participants indicated their agreement with nine propositions (e.g., "I  
428 think that my stomach is just the right size") using 7-point Likert-type scales (1 =  
429 completely disagree, 7 = completely agree). Participants were then allocated to one of two  
430 conditions in the model-rating phase: exposure to images of thin models or exposure to  
431 images of larger models. Participants indicated the extent to which they thought each  
432 model was pretty on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all to 7 = very pretty). Later ~~After~~  
433 ~~that~~, participants were asked to indicate the picture that they thought best represented  
434 their current body shape (actual body image) and then the image that corresponded to  
435 their desired body shape (ideal body image). The Body Size Guide (Harris et al., 2008) was  
436 used to measure perceptions of actual and ideal body shape. Participants were exposed to  
437 10 photographs of the same woman in different body sizes. Results found that  
438 body-dissatisfied women were increasingly likely to associate thinness with beauty after  
439 exposure to thin models. In addition, exposure to thin models increased the desire for  
440 thinness in participants, irrespective of body satisfaction level. ~~In this condition,~~  
441 ~~participants described the thin body size as appearing more "ideal"~~ (Bocage-Barthélémy et  
442 al., 2018). The results are alarming ~~as in the sense that~~ the level of body satisfaction of the  
443 consumer does not affect whether ~~or not~~ one desires a thinner body size after exposure to  
444 thin models. This study indicates that the body size one is most frequently exposed to  
445 shapes the perception of beauty.

446

447 Devine et al. (2022) found similar results. Devine et al. (2022) conducted a study ~~tested two~~  
 448 ~~conditions~~ on 419 female participants (ages 18-28) from a ~~Concordia U~~niversity (in  
 449 Montreal, Canada) to determine the effects of exposure to thin ideals on body image.  
 450 Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: the “stable prevalence”  
 451 condition, where women always saw an equal number of thin bodies and overweight  
 452 bodies, and the “increasing prevalence” condition, where the proportion of thin bodies  
 453 presented increased as the trials progressed, up to the point where overweight bodies were  
 454 rarely seen. Participants indicated whether a computer-generated body image presented  
 455 on the screen was overweight or not by pressing a specific letter on a keyboard. Stimuli for  
 456 this task included 60 images of computer-generated women’s bodies that ranged from  
 457 emaciated to morbidly obese. The bodies had white skin and were wearing white  
 458 underwear and a white tank top. The bodies were stopped at the neck, so no face was  
 459 visible. A total of 800 trials were conducted per participant. Results showed that when  
 460 participants saw an increasing proportion of thin bodies, they became more likely to view  
 461 average bodies as overweight (Devine et al., 2022). This demonstrates that ~~the~~ perceptions  
 462 of “average” (in terms of body size) can be shifted by the prevalence of thin bodies in the  
 463 environment. This highlights how repeated exposure to the thin ideal, as commonly seen in  
 464 brand advertising today, can distort ~~the~~ consumers’ perceptions of body size. This may lead  
 465 to negative health outcomes in consumers from the desire to adhere to this new “ideal”.

Author(s)	Bocage-Barthélemy 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"> <li>• Body-dissatisfied participants were increasingly likely to associate thinness with beauty after exposure to thin models</li> </ul>	Participants who saw an increasing proportion of thin bodies became more likely to view average bodies as overweight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants reported engaging in the least amount of self-comparison to the model and elevated body satisfaction when viewing plus-size models</li> <li>• Participants reported</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exposure to thin models increased the desire for thinness in participants, irrespective of body satisfaction level</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>engaging in increased social comparisons and decreased body satisfaction when viewing thin models</li> <li>Average and plus-size models increased resource allocation and encoding of message content</li> </ul>
--	--	--	---

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

470

471 As Figure 3 shows, these studies show that repeated exposure to the thin ideal not only  
472 influences body dissatisfaction in female consumers but can also move the goalposts for  
473 what one considers to be a thin body. The results provide empirical evidence of the dangers  
474 of the representation of thin body sizes in advertisements for consumers; constant  
475 exposure to the thin ideal can manipulate one’s perception of body size, potentially leading  
476 to extreme dieting measures in pursuit of unrealistic body standards.

477

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

490

491 Improved body image outcomes were observed when average and plus-size models were  
492 featured in fashion advertisements. ~~The adverse effect of an improvement in body image~~  
493 ~~was observed for average/plus-size models in fashion advertisements.~~ In a study of  
494 51 ~~College-aged~~ female participants (ages 18-30) from a large southeastern university in the  
495 US, ~~in a study~~ (Clayton et al. (2017) found that participants reported engaging in the least  
496 amount of self-comparison (measured via a 7-point Likert scale) ~~to the model, as well as and~~

497 elevated body satisfaction (measured via the Body Image State Scale (BISS)) when viewing  
498 plus-size models. In contrast, despite wanting to be thinner, the women reported engaging  
499 in increased social comparisons and decreased body satisfaction when viewing thin  
500 models. These findings suggest that incorporating realistically sized fashion models in the  
501 media may have benefits in terms of improved health outcomes, including higher levels of  
502 body satisfaction and reduced harmful social comparisons.

503

504 As shown in Figure 3, b Benefits were also observed for the brands' ability to deliver their  
505 message via advertisements. Average and plus-size models appeared to increase resource  
506 allocation and encoding of message content (Clayton et al., 2017), as measured through  
507 heart rate deceleration during image exposure and assessed via a visual recognition task.  
508 When the parasympathetic nervous system is activated, heart rate slows down, or  
509 decelerates, which is indicative of greater resources allocated to processing external  
510 information. Heart rate was recorded for a 5-second blackscreen baseline period before the  
511 onset of each image. One electrocardiogram electrode was securely placed on each  
512 forearm, with a ground electrode placed on the participant's left wrist using BioPac  
513 Systems EL 503 pre-gelled disposable electrodes. The visual recognition task involved  
514 having participants identify 12 images of models shown in the study individually by  
515 answering yes/no out of 24 models, which included fashion models from Target and Macy's  
516 online websites. Representing ~~D~~Hence, depicting average and plus-size models in  
517 advertisements, compared to thin models may be a useful strategy if the goal of a campaign  
518 is to increase attention to and memory of a media message.

519

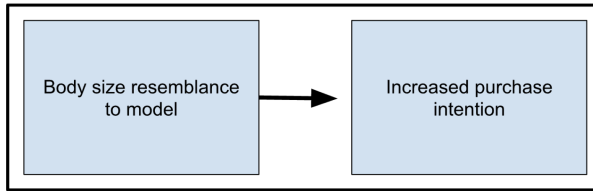
## 520 **Limitations and future research agendas** ~~further steps~~

521 The sample demographics of the analyzed studies primarily consisted of Western  
522 undergraduate students, which limited the generalizability of findings. While this review  
523 focuses on young female consumers, the samples predominantly consisted of university  
524 students, which represents only a portion of the 'young consumer' demographic. Notably,  
525 body image concerns often peak at around ages 10-16 in women (Lacroix et al., 2023). Yet,  
526 this critical developmental period is underrepresented in the reviewed studies due to the  
527 prevalence of undergraduate samples. Future research should specifically examine how  
528 model body size affects advertising effectiveness across more granular age segments.

529

530 Research on how model body size in fashion advertisements affects brand personality  
531 perception has often overlooked the role of body-size similarity between the consumer and  
532 the model in shaping advertising effectiveness. To ensure the generalizability of findings  
533 and support effective branding for consumers of diverse body sizes, future studies should

534 examine how a viewer's body size influences their perception of different models. This  
535 would provide empirical support for the relationship shown in Figure 49.



536

537 Figure 49: "Impact of body size resemblance": The resemblance in body size of consumers to fashion models  
538 (represented in fashion advertisements) could lead to increased purchase intention for the brand.

539

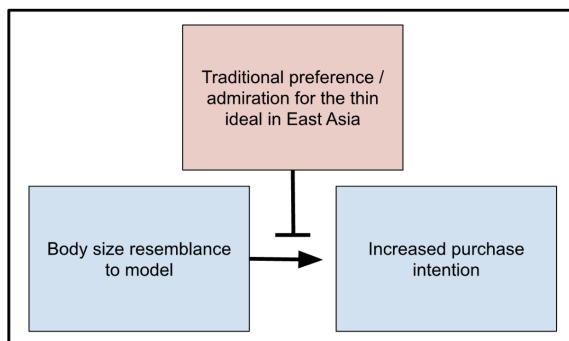
540 The studies examined in this paper were all based in Western countries, and preventing  
541 examination of potential ~~cannot prove whether there are~~ cultural discrepancies in the  
542 effects of the representation of different body sizes in fashion advertisements. For example,  
543 the idol culture in East Asian countries may make skinnier models seem more attractive as  
544 a representation of brands, as such body sizes create a sense of "familiarity", in the nuance  
545 that it is similar to what the consumers frequently see in media.

546

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

553

554 Future studies should conduct similar research in other East Asian countries as well, to  
555 determine whether widespread representation of the thin ideal in media today and the  
556 traditional preference for slimness impact advertising effectiveness as shown in Figure 54,  
557 or if consumers would instead attribute positive brand personality perception towards a  
558 realistic body size representation that adds authenticity that is rare in the East Asian  
559 market.



560

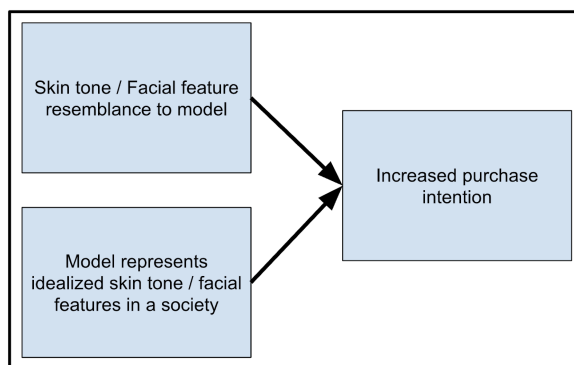
561 Figure 54: “Body size resemblance vs. ideal”: The traditional preference and admiration for the thin ideal in East  
562 Asian consumers may interfere with the causal relationship of the variable of body size resemblance of the  
563 consumer to the fashion model represented and the resulting increase in purchase intention.

564

565 The race of the models may influence how different body sizes are perceived and evaluated  
566 as the representation of brands. It would be interesting for future studies to focus on  
567 whether familiarity/similarity of the represented model to the consumer is also applicable  
568 to race (not just body size), or if the idealization of facial features such as large eyes, double  
569 eyelids, and pale skin amongst East Asian women (Chen et al., 2020) would create a  
570 stronger preference for Caucasian models. Also, in either case, will the representation of an  
571 East Asian or Caucasian overweight model be more effective than the other? Or will body  
572 size be the only driving factor, thus resulting in similar levels of advertising effectiveness?

573

574 The market for skin bleaching products has been continuously growing, with women of  
575 color accounting for approximately 80% of worldwide sales. These products are  
576 particularly popular in regions where fair skin and Eurocentric beauty ideals are culturally  
577 valued, such as Africa, the Asia-Pacific region, the Middle East, and the Caribbean. Online  
578 search trends of terms such as “skin whitening”, “skin lightening”, and “skin bleaching” had  
579 the highest popularity in Pakistan, Nigeria, St. Vincent, and the Grenadines (Arora & Amin,  
580 2024). Therefore, as shown in Figure 65, whether representation of “idealized figures” (the  
581 Caucasian race, with fairer skin) or models with similar physical features (darker skin)  
582 would result in increased advertising effectiveness is up for investigation.



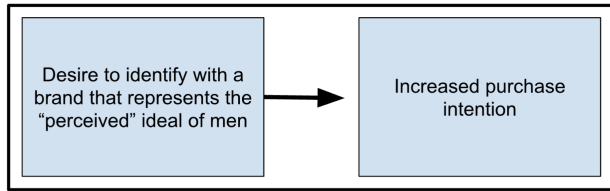
583

584 Figure 65: “Skin tone resemblance vs. Ideal”: Whether similarity of skin tone / facial feature of fashion model  
585 represented in the advertisement to the consumer could lead to increased purchase intention, or the  
586 model representing an idealized skin tone / facial feature to the consumer demographic could lead to  
587 increased purchase intention, is unknown.

588

589 The potential influence of male perceptions on the female body ideal could be explored in  
590 greater depth. A study conducted in Italy found a mismatch between the body type women  
591 believed men preferred and what men found attractive (Gualdi-Russo et al., 2022).  
592 Specifically, female participants assumed that men preferred thinner silhouettes than what  
593 men themselves reported preferred. This may indicate that female consumers attribute

594 positive brand personality to brands that use thin models, as they wish to identify  
 595 themselves with the “perceived” male ideal by purchasing from brands that reflect such  
 596 ideals, as shown in Figure 76.

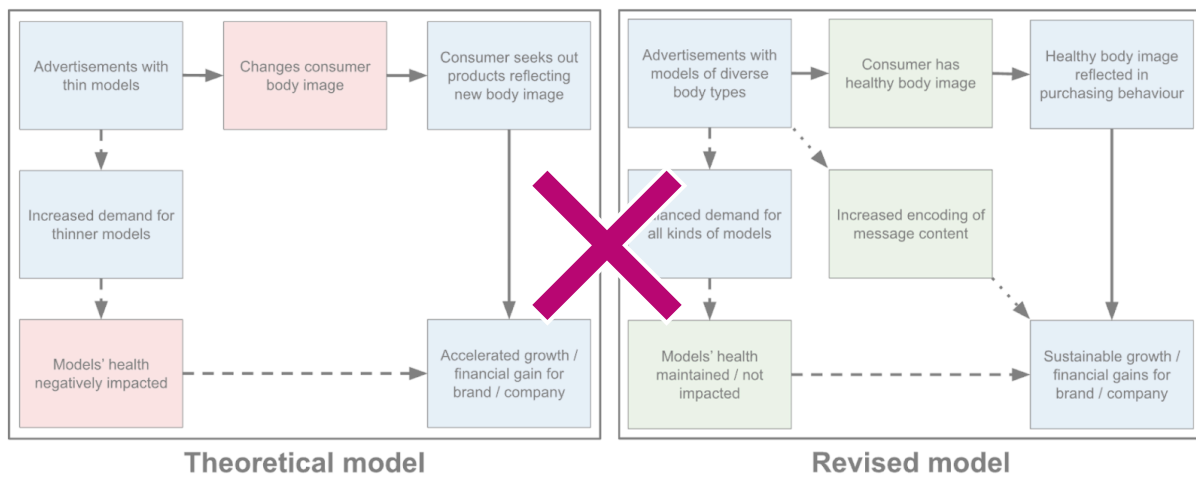


597

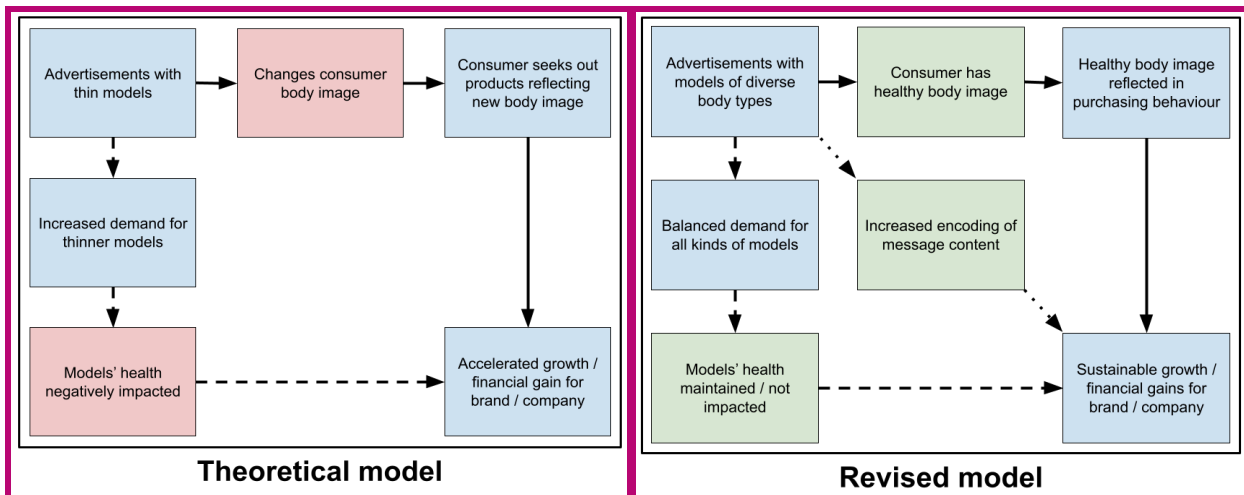
598 Figure 76: “Impact of opposite-sex perception”: The desire of female consumers to identify with a brand that  
 599 represents the ideal body size by men as perceived by women may increase purchase intention for that brand.

600

601 **The Revised Framework Conclusion**



602



603

604 Figure 87: “The theoretical model”: The current, common practice of representing thin models in  
 605 advertisements affects consumer body image and models’ health, yet leads to accelerated growth/financial gain  
 606 for the brand/company. “The revised model”: Advertisements with models of diverse body types can maintain

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

609

610 The theoretical model (Figure 87, left) reflects common trends that are present in fashion  
611 advertisements today, which cause:

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

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

621

622 On the other hand, the revised model (Figure 87, right) reflects a desirable model in terms  
623 of balance between consumer well-being, model health, and sustainable brand profit. If  
624 brands represented models of diverse body types in their advertisements:

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

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

639

## 640 **Conclusion**

641 ~~However, existing studies on this topic~~ report inconsistent findings regarding the impact  
642 of body size diversity in models. Specifically, the representation of models with diverse  
643 body sizes appears to have varying effects on brand personality perception and purchase  
644 intention. Some studies observed the highest advertising effectiveness when representing  
645 models with an average body size. Others found stronger results with thin models

646 (Aagerup, 2011) or reported no significant difference across different body sizes (Watson et  
647 al., 2015). Lou & Tse (2020) was the only study that investigated shifts in purchase intention  
648 with the independent variable as the BMI/body size of participants, and found a positive  
649 correlation between the similarity of body size of the model to the participants (consumers)  
650 and purchase intention. Future studies should investigate whether this correlation stands  
651 in repeated trials, as well as conduct similar tests in different countries with cultures that  
652 put stronger emphasis on conforming to the thin ideal (i.e., desire to identify with a brand  
653 that represents the thin ideal rather than individual differences in body size), to determine  
654 whether the theory still stands. Other potential factors influencing brand image perception  
655 and purchase intention should be investigated as well. Please refer to the previous section,  
656 “Limitations and future research agendas ~~as further steps~~”, for an in-depth discussion on the  
657 future steps mentioned.

658

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

670

671 In addition to the application of this research to advertisements in the fashion industry,  
672 other industries with skewed body size representation in their advertisements must  
673 recognize the impact this choice can make on the body image of their  
674 audiences/consumers, and consider alterations or diversifications in representation if they  
675 truly care for the public's well-being. Although parents and schools can work on censorship  
676 of advertisements with thin ideal representations from children, it would be difficult to  
677 completely shield children from the thin ideal in today's society. Also, it is unknown  
678 whether censorship from the thin ideal would lead to the most positive impact on their  
679 body image, compared to active exposure to diverse body size representation in  
680 advertisements. Governments should take a part by implementing legislation that requires  
681 advertising campaigns to represent diverse body sizes, as self-regulation at a corporate  
682 level may not be strong or strict enough to ensure tangible changes are being made.

683

684 The increasing representation of the thin ideal in the fashion industry has placed growing  
685 pressure on models to conform to unrealistic beauty standards, negatively affecting their

686 well-being (Bogár et al., 2022; Clements, 2013; Maguire, 2024). Experimental evidence  
687 demonstrates that repeated exposure to the thin ideal shifts perceptions of what qualifies  
688 as “thin”, which could push body-dissatisfied consumers to take extreme weight-loss  
689 measures to meet this manipulated standard (Bocage-Barthélémy et al., 2018; Devine et al.,  
690 2022). While findings on the effects of representing diverse/average-sized models remain  
691 mixed, real-world campaigns have found success when inclusive imagery in advertisements  
692 is matched with genuine inclusive sizing in stores (AEO-Inc, n.d.; Segran, 2022). Also, some  
693 studies suggest that similarity in body size between models and young female consumers  
694 increases both purchase intention (Lou & Tse, 2020) and encoding of the advertisement  
695 message content (Clayton et al., 2017). Together, these findings show that featuring models  
696 of diverse body sizes in fashion advertising not only has the potential to improve the  
697 mental and physical well-being of both models and consumers but can also sustain or even  
698 enhance brand performance. The revised model (Figure 87, right) illustrates the central  
699 conclusion of this paper: that ethical marketing and business performance are not mutually  
700 exclusive.

701

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

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Dear Action Editor,

Thank you for taking the time to review my manuscript and for recommending my manuscript for peer review. Below is a point-by-point response addressing your concerns.

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*The inclusion of a formal abstract is necessary to meet full submission expectations.*

Thank you for your feedback! I have included a formal abstract (line 5-26).

*Some minor adjustments to heading levels and citation style (e.g., Chicago Manual of Style) may be required to conform to our formatting guidelines.*

The Managing Editor notified me that Convergence Journal's citation format follows APA 7th Edition style, so they have told me to defer to that.

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I believe these revisions have addressed your concerns and strengthened the manuscript considerably. Thank you again for your guidance throughout this process.

Dear Reviewer 1,

Thank you for taking the time to review my manuscript and for your insightful feedback. I appreciate your constructive comments, which have helped strengthen the paper. Below is a point-by-point response addressing each of your concerns.

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*The transition between the historical shift and current advertising effects feels abrupt—consider adding a bridging paragraph in Section 2 to connect these ideas seamlessly.*

Thank you for your comment! I added a bridge to transition from historical context to present trends (lines 125-129), emphasizing the dissonance between enduring thinness standards and modern health research.

*The methodology section, though present, is underdeveloped—please specify the sample size, data collection methods, and analysis techniques to ensure reproducibility.*

Thank you for your suggestion! I added descriptions of each study's sample size and data collection method in the "Effectiveness of the representation of different body sizes" (lines 193-420) and "How does repeated exposure to the thin ideal affect body image?" (lines 467-590) sections. However, I have decided not to include technical details of the data analysis techniques in each study, as the focus of my paper is not on methodological comparison, but rather on synthesizing their psychological and marketing implications.

*The literature review is promising but lacks depth in some areas; for instance, integrating more studies on consumer psychology (e.g., beyond Aagerup, 2011) would better contextualise your findings.*

Thank you very much for your constructive feedback! I agree, and I have made changes to some sections to link findings to theoretical frameworks. Specifically, I introduced self-congruity and ideal congruity (Sirgy, 1985) in the "Effectiveness of the representation of different body sizes" section (lines 200-208), explaining how the findings from my literature review can be explained within the framework (lines 377-420). The "Examples of brands that used average-sized models in advertising that experienced a positive change" section outlines how Old Navy's failed attempt at size-inclusivity can also be justified within the framework (lines 436-450). Additionally, I introduced Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) in my introduction (lines 58-61) and explained how findings in the "How does repeated exposure to the thin ideal affect body image?" section further support this theory (lines 545-556).

*Minor grammatical issues, such as inconsistent tense usage (e.g., "could lead" vs. "leads"), should be polished, though they are not the primary focus.*

Thank you for pointing them out — I had completely overlooked them. I believe I have fixed the grammatical inconsistencies in my paper during revision, including the use of "could lead" vs. "leads."

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I believe these revisions have addressed your concerns and strengthened the manuscript considerably. Thank you again for your guidance throughout this process.

Dear Reviewer 2,

Thank you for taking the time to review my manuscript and for your insightful feedback. I appreciate your constructive comments, which have helped strengthen the paper. Below is a point-by-point response addressing each of your concerns.

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*While the topic is well-chosen, the “approach and contribution” could be stated more explicitly. For example, the author could clarify what gap this paper fills in existing research: is it a synthesis of cross-studies, a comparative analysis, a critique of methodological approaches, or a new conceptual framework? Try adding the frame to the title, add a paragraph in the introduction, plus input a conclusion that explicitly states the paper’s unique contribution — e.g., “This paper contributes to the literature by ... to propose ...”*

Thank you for your suggestion! I agree that my contribution wasn’t mentioned in the paper, which made the paper seem more explanatory than insightful. I replaced “Barriers and Future Directions” with “A Comparative Analysis and Reconciliation Framework” in my title. I have also outlined my contribution in the second-to-last paragraph in the introduction (lines 87-97) and the last paragraph in my conclusion (lines 798-805).

*Some sections (especially the literature review on “Effectiveness of Representation of Different Body Sizes”) could be streamlined. Explore creating a summary table or conceptual timeline mapping (e.g., author, year, summarizing outcomes, sample sizes, implications and key insights) of this study in particular and what is being attained. This will make the comparative analysis more accessible and strengthen the paper’s clarity.*

Thank you for your feedback! I agree that the literature review on “Effectiveness of Representation of Different Body Sizes” is quite lengthy and that a table comparing key details and findings would improve readability and critical evaluation. I have created a table in the section (lines 357-362) that outlines the author(s), publication year, sample size, sample demographic, and key insights of each study before discussing the studies in depth. I have done the same for the literature review on “How does repeated exposure to the thin ideal affect body image?” (lines 524-536).

*The methodology of the reviewed studies could be critically assessed more deeply. For example, sample demographics (e.g., Western undergraduates) limit generalizability —elaborate on how these limitations affect interpretation and impact the applicability of the findings.*

Thank you for your comment! I agree, and I have moved and incorporated my analysis into the “Limitations and future research agenda” section (lines 593-600; 616-621). I added a discussion of how the sample demographic limits the generalizability of the findings, linking this point to my proposal for future research agendas.

*The literature discussion could be strengthened by integrating theoretical frameworks more explicitly. For instance, body image internalization could be discussed through Social Comparison Theory or Objectification Theory, and consumer behaviour findings through Self-Congruity Theory or Brand Personality Theory (Aaker, 1997). Introduce one or two key*

*theoretical lenses (e.g., Social Comparison Theory) early in the paper and revisit them in the discussion to interpret the findings coherently. Maybe even connect it with the methodological approach. This will give the paper a more coherent development.*

Thank you very much for your constructive feedback! I agree, and I have made changes to some sections to link findings to theoretical frameworks. Specifically, I introduced self-congruity and ideal congruity (Sirgy, 1985) in the “Effectiveness of the representation of different body sizes” section (lines 200-208), explaining how the findings from my literature review can be explained within the framework (lines 377-420). The “Examples of brands that used average-sized models in advertising that experienced a positive change” section outlines how Old Navy’s failed attempt at size-inclusivity can also be justified within Sirgy’s framework (lines 436-450). Additionally, I introduced Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) in my introduction (lines 58-61) and explained how findings in the “How does repeated exposure to the thin ideal affect body image?” section further support this theory (lines 545-556).

*Occasionally, sentences could benefit from slight condensation for readability (particularly in the literature section). Some transitions between paragraphs (e.g., between Lou & Tse, 2021 and Watson et al., 2015) could be smoother, clarifying whether studies complement or contrast each other.*

Thank you for your suggestion! I agree, and I have worked on streamlining the literature review. I have also added a brief sentence at the beginning of each paragraph (describing the study) for a smooth transition and comparison of results in the “Effectiveness of the representation of different body sizes” section and “How does repeated exposure to the thin ideal affect body image?” section.

*Please make sure all the figures are correctly labelled and intitled and visible, some are quite blurred, there spaces inconsistencies that need to be solved together with spacing, and centralization of the paragraphs. Make sure the manuscript is formatted accordingly.*

Thank you for pointing these out! I have centralised paragraphs and fixed spacing. Also, I have downloaded the figures as PNG files and reattached them to my manuscript, which should make the images clearer, but please let me know if they are still blurred.

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I believe these revisions have addressed your concerns and strengthened the manuscript considerably. Thank you again for your guidance throughout this process.

The paper is vastly improved from its initial submission, and it is clear that, for the most part, the author has heeded the suggestions and critiques from the action editor and the two peer reviewers. However, by nature (and to keep the quality of *Convergence Journal* high), we have especially stricter standards as to when we consider a review paper ready for publication. In particular, this review paper could feature a more methodologically aware and transparent review practice *and* a more novel, “commanding” view of the literature, rather than merely summarizing texts.

Hence, while this paper is very solid, some further (in my view, minor) changes should be made before publication. Really, these are mainly about framing rather than anything too substantive.

1. (This one is somewhat major.) I would argue that Reviewer 1’s concerns still stand: **The review methodology remains underspecified.** You should add some sort of review methodology & scope subsection that answers the following:

- Databases searched to find the literature
- The time window specified
- Inclusion (e.g, experiments on thin-ideal advertising) and exclusion (e.g., clinical interventions) criteria
- Rationale for choosing and focusing on certain demographics rather than merely acknowledging biases

You should also address the limitations of narrative synthesis vs. meta-analysis, at least to partially address the point you refused to address from Reviewer 1. In other words, if you are not going to directly answer these concerns, you should at least address them somehow.

2. **The original contribution should be better framed.** You build a reconciliatory framework, identify contradictions, and propose a future research agenda. That is all great, but you should unify this more explicitly and formally in your text. Otherwise, it is hard to frame more precisely *what* your paper allows us to say that has not been said before in the preexisting literature.

Some ideas I have:

- You can propose a three-way mechanism of advertising effects on body image: perceptual distortion, internalization of negative affects, and behavioral mediation
- Make it clearer that these studies do not actually contradict each other. Rather, the literature appears contradictory only because the studies implicitly measure different constructs for the outcomes

This can be especially clarified by adding some sort of schematic or diagram, but this is optional.

3. **You should emphasize the critical aspects of your synthesis more than focusing on the summaries.** You should add more original epistemic positioning and critical evaluation. Instead of “the research suggests” or “these studies indicate,” think “despite frequent citations, X has limited confirmation from other studies...” or “the most methodologically robust studies converge on the point that...”

**4. The literature table can be upgraded slightly to emphasize the epistemic/analytic contribution.** Maybe add another column or two emphasizing the primary outcome (perceptual, affective, or behavioral), theoretical framework used, etc. This would better solidify how each piece of literature fits in your general framework.

**5. The discussion about generalizability and ethics should be more assertive and conclusive.** You correctly address concerns on bias and sampling, but you should include some more implications rather than just acknowledging these. For instance, “Because many of the studies featured only test undergraduate women—who are at an age where physical appearance is especially important for social identity and signaling—the psychological impact of thin-ideal advertising may appear stronger in these studies than it would in the general population.” This makes your study appear a lot more authoritative, confident, and clear—there are not only potential biases, but you are aware of what these are.

If you can address the above five things (which should not require extra literature analysis, but more just some rephrasings, expansions, etc.), then I am confident that your paper will be in perfect condition to be published in *Convergence Journal*.