

Size inclusive and body positive? Key discrepancies between U.S. female body measurements and current models represented by fashion modeling agencies

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**Introduction and purpose.** Models are an important part of the fashion industry to test fit and display clothing in fashion shows as well as in advertising and media. Beauty ideals presented in the media featuring ultra-thin models have been found to have negative consequences on individuals and are a point of criticism for the fashion industry. To counter this effect and address a wider range of consumers, ideas of size inclusivity and body positivity have been gaining attention in recent years. These initiatives are not only a positive move for society but can build and grow market and loyalty where customers can see themselves and align with a common cause. The aim of this study was to discover what challenges and opportunities the modeling industry is facing to support the body positivity/size inclusivity movement.

**Review of literature.** From an outsider's perspective, modeling can appear exhilarating and glamorous. Consumers view models in advertisements or advertising campaigns, believe these are ideal bodies, and do not realize what is required to look the way they do. Every day, thousands of both male and female professional models are having to decide whether they are going to eat the meal sitting in front of them, or keep their job (Jestratijevic, 2017, as cited in Paulins, & Hillery, 2020). Unfortunately, this issue does not just resonate with professional models. With society viewing model's bodies as ideal within a majority general population who do not look that way, many women show signs of low self-esteem, disordered eating habits, and shameful attitudes towards those who do not fit within these measurements. Due to the negative feedback fashion brands have been receiving throughout the years, consumer pressure to change this thin ideal has led some companies to use a wider range of different sized models, demonstrating body positivity and size inclusivity. Comments on social media show consumers want their fashion brands to show diversity in body types through examples that resemble the general population more closely (Pounders & Mabry-Flynn, 2019).

According to Statista, Women's clothing sizes most browsed by consumers in the United States from 2015 to 2017, included 44.8% Misses and 25.8% Plus-Size (Smith, 2022a). Size inclusivity is expressed in companies offering fashion apparel in a wider range of sizes than previously available. The current business climate shows that size inclusivity has become an absolute necessity for fashion brands to remain successful, both in the U.S. and across the globe (Kingston, 2022). While size inclusivity is becoming more prevalent across fashion brands, the sizes actually offered by retailers do not necessarily reflect sizes readily accessible in stores. If body diversity is to be integrated in the fashion industry, then brands must be able to book professional models who display a range of body sizes and types. The following research

questions were addressed to explore this issue further: “What is the current range and frequency of women labeled models and curve labeled models' measurements publicly shared by top modeling agencies and corresponding sizes represented by ASTM?” and “What are the key discrepancies between the range of women and curve labeled model measurements publicly shared by top modeling agencies and corresponding sizes represented of average U.S. female body measurements published by the National Center for Health Statistics (CDC)?”

**Methodology.** To answer the research questions, this study focused on publicly available quantitative data to explore diversification of size ranges amongst both “women” and “curve” models represented by three top agencies with locations in Miami, FL. With this collected data, the researchers were able to characterize the current model waist measurements and frequencies of each model category which were then coded to their designated size based on the *Standard Tables of Body Measurements for Adult Female Misses Figure Types, Size Range 00-20* (ASTM, 2021). From there, comparison to percentiles of the U.S. female population published by the National Center for Health Statistics (2021) was made for this study.

**Results.** Of the 590 total models in the sample, 485 (82%) were in the “women” category and 105 (18%) were designated “curve.” Model waist sizes ranged from 21 to 30 inches with a mean of 24.43 inches for the entire “women” sample. “Curve” models for these three agencies ranged from 24 to 40 inches with a mean of 31.75 inches for the entire “curve” sample. There was overlap with models having waist measurements between 24 and 30 inches that could be categorized in publicly available records as either “women” or “curve.” Once the waist measurements for all 590 models was collected, a coding process was determined to assign each a clothing size based on American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM, 2021). The highest number of models (n=150) had a 24” waist, followed by 25” (n=106), and 23” (n=67). These three measurements, below the ASTM standard for a size 00, represented 323 models or approximately 55% of the total sample. The mean waist measurement of CDC data (National Center for Health Statistics, 2021) for adult women in the U.S. is 38.7 inches which matches to ASTM size 20. This contrasts with the mean of 28.09” of all model waist measurements in this study, which is just below an ASTM (2021) size 8 and below the 5th percentile of the U.S. population. Broken down by model category, the waist measurement mean of 24.43” for the entire “women” sample is 14.24 inches smaller than the CDC mean. Moreover, the mean waist of “curve” models is 31.75, 6.95 inches less than the mean of more than 5000 women measured by the CDC (National Center for Health Statistics, 2021).

**Discussion.** With more than a quarter of U.S. consumers browsing Plus-Size women's clothing (Smith, 2022b) and Plus-Size being approximately 20% of the women’s apparel market (Ell, 2021a), these three top modeling agencies do not proportionally have enough “curve” models to effectively support the “body positive” movement or size inclusive product offerings made by many brands. The distribution of waist for both “women” and “curve” models was concentrated in the smaller measurements and there was no definitive cut-off for when “women”

labeling stops, and “curve” labeling starts. This finding supports Harmon & Reddy-Best (2020) that model labeling is misleading to retailers looking for “curve” models to represent a body positive movement, when they might be selecting a model definitely not in the plus-size apparel category. Furthermore, this research reveals that only a fraction of women in the United States are represented in models examined from these three top agencies. Brands may be offering extended sizes, but this is not apparent in available models to wear those sizes, whether designated “women” or “curve.”

**Implications.** By identifying and revealing the key discrepancies between the current U.S. female body measurements and the current models represented by modeling agencies, this study was able to shed light on current modeling industry practices not reflecting the U.S. fashion consumers’ needs for body positivity and size inclusivity in fashion goods. This study could be used as a guideline to approach future research on addressing body positivity and size inclusivity in relation to the fashion industry marketing and currently active modeling agencies.

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