

The body to die for: appearance aesthetics, body measurements, and BMI analysis of a female and male runway models (2012-2018)

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This mixed methods study examined the aesthetic norms that the fashion modeling industry uses to transform human bodies into cultural commodities. In the quantitative phase, a secondary data set was utilized to quantify appearance manifestations through the exploration of anthropometric body measurements (height/bust/chest-waist-hips), and body mass index values. This industrial data set contained de-identified information on 609 international models of both genders who participated in at least one fashion show during the official fashion week seasons in New York, Paris, London and/or Milan, over a six-year time period (2012-2018).

In the qualitative phase, a visual content analysis was undertaken to qualify occupational aesthetics and investigate salient appearance attributes including age and facial and body appearance cues. Images for forty models (20 female and 20 male models), the top new talents for the Fall/Winter 2018 season, were extracted from the popular industry website, Models.com. The rationale for merging both qualitative and quantitative data was to form a comprehensive analysis of occupational aesthetics, and to establish a benchmark on restrictive appearance requirements for professional modeling as an occupation.

Growing juvenilization and normative and dangerous thinness represent the two main aesthetic trends captured in the study. Regarding the first trend, being or appearing to be young is the normative characteristic of the high-fashion model labor force. After the 2016 runway season, minor models (<18 years old) accounted for at least 66.7% of the total sample. The youngest age in the male category was determined to be twelve, while the oldest male model age was perceived as being 25. Similarly, the youngest age in the female category was determined to be 14 years old (N=8).

Second, while becoming younger, models continuously dropped in body size over the six-year period. Surprisingly, male models (N=297) were more affected, experiencing a higher drop in the

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chest (-5.91 inches), hips (-4.34 inches), and waist (-3.54 inches) measurements. Hence, when comparing average measurements of the models' hips and chests/busts, female and male bodies became similarly tubular and flat. In some cases, maximal female measurements in the hip (35.04 inches) were higher than minimal male measurements (33.46 inches). Similarly, maximal female measurements in the bust (33.46 inches) were higher than minimal male measurements in the chest (32.68 inches). Considering the fact that males have genetically heavier and wider bones than females, dropping body size values in the male sample are quite concerning (Hudson & Court, 2012).

The trend of prevalent thinness is also dangerous as it is characterized with very low, and even dropping body mass index values. Over the entire six years, all female models (N=312) were dangerously underweight (BMI Range: Min 14.6-Max- 15.9), all of which fell under the baseline of 16 which is the threshold for starvation, according to the World Health Organization. By comparison, 54% of the male models were underweight, having an average BMI closer to 17, which still falls in the underweight BMI category. In terms of body appearance, the results in the qualitative phase reveal that 97.5% of the 40 models sampled were perceived as having small and thin bodies. Fifteen models were assessed to have an extra-small body size, small enough to fit into a dress size zero (For female models, this size corresponds to these measurements: bust 30/31 inches, waist 22/23 inches, hips 33 inches. For male models, this size corresponds to adult male teen small size, with chest measurement smaller than 36 inches). All female models, and 54% of male models were classified as underweight as their weight was estimated as too low to be healthy. Some models were described as "adolescents" with an apparently thin look, but their thinness was a sign of their puberty and young age, rather than a visual indicator of their malnutrition.

Professional modeling remains an unregulated and precarious occupation, where unhealthy occupational aesthetics expose the predominantly young modeling labor force to significant harm, both physical and mental (Record & Austin, 2015; Mears, 2010; Santonastaso, Mondini & Favaro, 2002). To keep working, models are expected to commodify their appearances in order to achieve higher marketability, even though their health may be compromised (Rodgers et al., 2017). As the promotional side of the fashion and retail industry heavily relies on the modeling workforce, this research supports the need to change aesthetic norms to healthier visual standards that would be required of all job providers and casting agencies (Gladstone, 2016). There is also strong justification to closely monitor the modeling industry for its occupational labor expectations and record keeping of model behaviors to ensure the well-being of its workforce (Bildfell, 2018). Consequently, internal aesthetic changes within the modeling industry would

help to prevent further stigmatization of imperfect bodies of consumers who are exposed daily to unrealistic ideals in the fashion media. Hence, raising the visibility and promotion of bodies that vary in shape, color, ability, and age within the mainstream cultural and representational domain of advertising and social media promotion, would potentially affect greater consumer body satisfaction and public well-being.

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