

From Screen to Cart: The Role of Idealized Instagram Content in the Purchasing Decisions of Young Women in Europe

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to investigate the impact of idealized content on Instagram, published by European fashion brands, on consumer behavior and body image among young women. The paper proposes a theoretical framework for this complex issue, which consists of sociocultural theories, a historical overview of beauty standards evolution in the fashion industry, and theoretical knowledge about body perception. Social Comparison, Objectification, Cultivation theories, and the Theory of Planned Behavior explain the roots of the problem and describe potential drivers of purchasing decisions. In addition, the paper includes an overview of ethical marketing strategies employed by some of the European fashion brands to mitigate negative emotions that can be caused by idealized content. To assess the relevance of the problem and propose solutions for fashion companies, the research involved a survey with 26 questions measuring Instagram usage, social comparison, body satisfaction, and purchasing intentions. The findings of 77 respondents aged 16 to 27 demonstrate that body satisfaction plays a crucial role in choice for content preference and consumer behavior. Women who are pleased with their bodies do not seek reassurance and, therefore, do not feel pressured to conform to beauty standards, which explains the preference for idealized content. Those who feel the opposite, tend to buy from a brand with diverse body representations. Thus, the research identified the importance of diverse body types' inclusion in the marketing strategies of fashion brands. Further research should analyze the economic impact of body-positive campaigns and consider other platforms, which may have a greater impact on purchase decisions.

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Keywords

Instagram, Idealized Content, Body Image, Purchasing Decisions, Inclusive Marketing, Social Comparison, Body Perception, Beauty Standards

INTRODUCTION

Social media has undoubtedly become an essential part of our lives, with millions of people using platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and others to connect with friends, share experiences and opinions, and self-express (Ulvi et al., 2022). While these platforms facilitate connections and information sharing, they also present idealized images that set unrealistic beauty standards, influencing women to compare themselves, thus affecting their self-esteem and purchasing decisions (Xie, 2024). The fashion industry is tightly related to beauty standards, as it is in brands' interest to present their products in the most appealing way (Gazzola et al., 2020). The advent of technologies led to the creation of applications that are able to modify the final result of the image, such as Photoshop, or Facetune (Fried et al., 2020). With these applications, it became easy to edit silhouettes, narrow the waist, and remove skin imperfections to reach flawless results. In order to make a picture more appealing, fashion brands resort to such approaches, which results in adjusted body perception and lower self-appraisal among young women (Jabłońska & Zajdel, 2020). However, this has a tendency to encourage a certain aesthetic that is perceived as being normal, simply because it sells products, for instance, an hourglass figure, perfect skin, well-toned muscles, and many other features (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

This study concerns **European fashion brands** present on the Instagram platform and investigates the relationship between the promotion of idealized body standards and young female consumers' behavior. Clothing companies in Europe are known for their growing desire to develop in design and technology and contribute to overall sustainability, which involves ethical marketing strategies on social media that are designed to minimize the harm of brands' online activity (Nash, 2019). This focus on the geographical factor narrows down a scope, focusing on brands that set trends and standards within Europe. The fashion industry continuously develops in terms of design, technology, and sustainability, which determines the route to eco-friendly practices implementation. In addition, Europe covers a wide range of nationalities, which makes a target segment diverse, indicating a need for companies to tailor their marketing strategies to various cultural contexts and beauty standards. Nevertheless, the effects they produce on female body image and consumer behaviors are still not fully explored.

Psychological theories such as Social Comparison Theory, Objectification Theory, Cultivation Theory, and Theory of Planned Behavior are used in this paper due to their ability to assert that when unrealistic body images are advertised, self-esteem is decreased, social comparisons are negative, and purchase intentions are discouraged (Stein et al., 2019). However, the greater the media imagery diversification, the lesser the negative impact of media on certain aspects of life. This indicates that for companies, publishing relevant and close-to-reality content is crucial, not only to encourage purchasing decisions but also to support the sustainability of the digital environment (Jones & Wynn, 2021).

1.1 Problem Statement

One of the drawbacks of social media is social comparison which happens due to the exposure to idealized content published on various social media platforms which perpetuate unattainable beauty standards (Jabłońska & Zajdel, 2020). The beauty market has become a new cultural-social parameter in the female world which impacts women's behavior and self-perception (Henriques & Patnaik, 2021). This emphasis on appearance in society may help to understand why women are more vulnerable to social comparisons based on physical characteristics (Mu & Wu, 2021). Women often feel insecure due to the discrepancy between their actual appearance and beauty standards which pressure them to

conform, resulting in lower body satisfaction (Jiotsa et al., 2021). It is worsened by Instagram, which is known for its visual nature, allowing users and brands to share photos and videos with their audience, and encouraging perfection (Ballester et al., 2021). Content creators and fashion brands frequently show their best sides, cultivating a perfect image of themselves in their audience's view (Naeem & Ozuem, 2021). Viewing a product showcased on a model unattainable for the mass physique may discourage customers from making purchase decisions because they feel that products will not look as appealing on them as they do in the picture. Hence, it is now imperative for fashion brands to reconsider their approach to images and embrace risky non-offensive and inclusive marketing strategies.

1.2 Research Question

Considering the above-mentioned, the primary research purpose of this study is to apply the theory of upward social comparison while critically assessing the connection between European fashion brands' promotion of beauty standards on Instagram and its effects on the purchasing decisions and body image of young women. In addition, this study will evaluate the importance of diverse body representations in social media marketing. Thus, the research questions were created:

To what extent does the idealized body image in promotional content of European fashion brands on Instagram affect the purchasing decisions of young women?

How does the inclusion of diverse body representations impact purchase decisions and body perception?

The results of the research will help answer these questions. In the next section, the paper will specify the theoretical and practical significance of the study.

1.3 Contributions

In this section of the thesis, the theoretical and practical relevance are mentioned to show how the research contributes to the literature and fashion industry on social media. The aim of this study is to synthesize the current sociological and psychological theories to present an empirically grounded analysis of the relationship between media consumption, purchasing behavior, and feminine identity. It contributes to the present theoretical understanding of the effects of distorting ideal body images and prevention through diversity. Moreover, there is a gap in the historical analysis of beauty trends and their impact on consumer behavior and body perception. This paper involves background information about how fashion evolved with time, transforming appearance-related ideals, as well as presents knowledge on the attitude towards body image in adolescence and young adulthood.

Also, this study includes knowledge about the effectiveness of integrated marketing strategies. Through analyzing the impact of the various representations of the body in the promotional materials, the study analyzes approaches that may be useful for fashion brands to increase engagement and purchase intention among consumers (Burns, 2010).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sociocultural Theories

This research involves theories that will be described in this section in order to provide a theoretical framework which explains the complex relationship between media, body image, and consumer behavior.

2.1.1 Social Comparison Theory

To begin with, the whole paper will be based on Social Comparison Theory. Leon Festinger (1954) proposed that individuals assess their abilities and opinions by comparing

themselves with others to determine their social and personal worth. The criteria for such comparisons are attractiveness, intelligence, wealth, and success (Hicks et al., 2021). The author distinguishes two types of social comparison: Upward (USC) and Downward (DSC). Upward Social Comparison happens when the object of comparison is superior, whereas Downward occurs when we compare ourselves with someone who we consider worse in some aspects (Hicks et al., 2021). USC is motivated by self-improvement, however, sometimes it leads to a set of emotions such as envy and/or anxiety (McComb et al., 2023). DSC, in its turn, makes a lot of people feel better and superior and leads to positive self-evaluation. There is also another outcome of social comparison which is wishful identification (Schouten et al., 2019). This state is associated with the desire to be like another person who is the object of the comparison. Self-esteem, self-appraisal, and self-worth often get doubted during upward social comparison, and it is essential for businesses online to reduce the damage. The fashion industry is tightly connected to beauty, which in its turn causes enormous amounts of amazement and admiration in a combination of jealousy and envy.

2.1.2 Objectification Theory

This theory is especially relevant for women, as it proposes that females are objectified based on their visual characteristics (Daniels et al., 2020). It leads to consequences such as surveillance, internationalization of cultural beauty standards, and body shame (Fioravanti et al., 2023). This theory includes three fundamental concepts which explain the attitude to the beauty factor among young women. Self-objectification occurs when women view themselves mainly in terms of their appearance when self-worth is defined by the way they look. Body surveillance involves the habitual monitoring and scrutiny of one's body, that often leads to comparison, which also happens online. Fashion brands hire models with desirable visual features to make content more appealing and encourage the internalization of beauty standards, which is the extent to which individuals adopt societal ideals of beauty as their own.

2.1.3 Cultivation Theory

George Gerbner (1960) investigated the long-term effects of television and as a result, proposed a Cultivation theory. He suggests that the way users view the real world changes for people who spend more time-consuming media content, as they perceive reality closer to TV depiction (Liao, 2023). Since young generations spend an enormous amount of time online, the way the world is perceived also changes. The constant exposure to idealized content may affect women in a way that the reality may seem wrong, as there is no ideal image, and nothing is truly perfect (Oakes, 2019). After a long-time consumption of idealized content, a woman's perception of beauty changes in accordance with the media, and the "norm" is altered. This theory is extremely important, as it can explain how long-term exposure to idealized content on Instagram may lead to changes in the reality perception, cultivating unrealistic expectations about beauty, lifestyle, and success, which lead to the adjusted perception of reality, and therefore, the behavior may change accordingly.

2.1.4 Theory of Planned Behavior

Human behavior can be explained through three components such as attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). The attitude refers to the emotional response in an evaluation of some consequences, which is usually positive or negative. Subjective norms present a set of values and beliefs a person possesses, which influences his or her behavior. In addition, opinions of friends, family, and any influencers who are trusted and respected may also influence the

establishment of these norms (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). This variable is designed to explain the social pressure to perform a behavior. In the meanwhile, perceived behavioral control refers to the level of difficulty to perform a behavior. The combination of these three factors can help explain the consumer behavior of social media users (Armitage & Conner, 2001). A positive attitude to body positivity increases the likelihood of young women purchasing clothes from brands which adopt inclusive strategies. The subjective norms in this context are influenced by established beauty standards, pressuring females to conform, which demotivates women to make purchasing decisions (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). The difficulty to perform a behavior in this case is associated with negative effects women may encounter while engaging with idealized content on Instagram.

Thus, these theories create a theoretical framework which explains the purchasing behavior, body perception and attitude towards it, and provides reasons why fashion brands choose to publish idealized body images in the first place.

2.2 Beauty Standards

Over the years, the beauty standards changed significantly, continuously trying to exceed former trends (Henriques & Patnaik, 2021). To understand why the fashion industry hires models that reduce mental well-being via unrealistic body images, it is important to analyze the establishment. In this section of the thesis assignment, the evolution of beauty standards in the fashion industry and its impact on society will be described chronologically.

2.2.1 Switch by Poiret and Chanel

In the early 20th century, Paul Poiret and Coco Chanel contributed to today's fashion industry by switching from corsets to looser and therefore more comfortable clothing solutions. Designed and developed by Poiret, the hobble skirt and empire waist dresses were meant to smooth every curve of a woman's body and free her from the bind of tightlacing (PlainGeets, 2024). Coco Chanel in her turn revolutionized women's fashion by designing clothing items such as jersey suits and, of course, the iconic 'little black dress' that represents elegance without extravagance (Groenvold, 2023).

2.2.2 Flappers

The 1920s marked the appearance of the flapper figure that contributed to the liberation of women. Characterized by bobbed hair or short crop, jazz, and the first time women undressed, the flapper lifestyle was embodied with joy of living or *joie de vivre* (Maryland Center for History and Culture, 2017). Flappers were characterized by their liberated behavior and stunning accessories, which could include short hems, low waistlines, and shift dresses (Tikkanen, 2019). This zeitgeist proved ideal to pave a conducive ground for boyish models with tall stature to influence the fashions of the era.

2.2.3 The Golden Age of Haute Couture

The huge impact on physical appearance and beauty standards was made after World War 2, and this period is called "The Golden Age of Haute Couture". In 1947, Dior introduced the "New Look" which reinterpreted the feminine figure of hourglass. It was outlined with full, low-waisted skirts and rounded shoulders, bringing elegance and sophistication to the woman's look (Borrelli-Persson, 2024). To carry Dior's garments, tall and slender women with an hourglass figure were hired, which led to a continued preference for such models. However, the ideal of a slim body quickly exerted pressure on women to conform to these standards, which led to mass body dissatisfaction.

2.2.4 Twiggy

The true game changer in the fashion industry is Twiggy. Representing the epitome of the “size zero” beauty image, Lesley Lawson, commonly referred to as Twiggy, became the face of a new generation of models in the 1960s-1970s (Tikkanen, 2019). The model had an extremely thin frame, which made her well-known worldwide (Nigeria, 2024). Her slimness resulted in concerns about body image, as she became an idol for society, and therefore, her low weight seemed attractive and desirable. Twiggy epitomized the “youthquake” movement, which featured vibrant and rebellious fashion, leaving her mark in the fashion industry.

2.2.5 Ready-to-wear

The Haute couture was substituted with Read-to-Wear (prêt-à-porter) fashion in the 1970s. The traditional measure-to-measure tailored fashion was replaced with mass production of standardized sizing clothes. In line with preceding trends, brands maintained the tradition of using extremely tall super skinny models to promote sleek and minimalistic silhouettes along with modernist aesthetics (Sharma, 2017). This constant desire for thin female silhouettes led to fad diets and extreme exercising since women tried to mimic the look of models showcasing ready-to-wear clothes.

2.2.6 The Era of Supermodels

The 1980s-1990s celebrated the era of supermodels. The four beautiful and glamorous models Cindy Crawford, Christy Turlington, Linda Evangelista, and Naomi Campbell are famous for their heights and slim physiques, making them idols for millions of people (Singer et al., 2023). Featured in almost all the print campaigns and ramps, the stunning looks of these super models created rigid parameters of femininity. These unrealistic images created through the media exert pressure on women to attain impossible standards, leading to eating disorders, distorted body perception, and beauty enhancement operations (Thorpe, 2023).

2.2.7 Body Positivity

Coming to the present time, the 2000s were still promoting supermodel parameters, as with the advent of social media focus was on perfection. Social media platforms provide means for communication, spreading messages, and public opinion, and one of the negative consequences is body shame (Bitesize, 2023). Therefore, society took a route towards body positivity and inclusivity, especially in the fashion industry (Riordan, 2019). Modern fashion brands include diverse body types to be tolerant to everyone and avoid negative consequences on mental health (Humann, 2020). Not only models with different physiques are involved, but also with different cultures and ethnicities to show respect to all kinds of people (Van Edwards, 2023). The body positivity movement was supported by young generations who started fighting for their rights, gaining an appreciation for representing close-to-reality content (Bitesize, 2023). The aim of this movement is to help a modern woman fall in love with mirror reflection, support those who struggle with body insecurities, and minimize the negative effects of social comparison (Humann, 2020). In spite of the progress made by body positivity, society is stuck with preserved beauty standards cemented by the supermodels.

According to this empirical evidence, ideals in body image have changed drastically, consistently dictating standards to young women who then feel pressured to conform to these ideals. The fashion industry plays a crucial role in forming trends on appearance matters, and the chronological overview of them explains the current body trends. To understand how these beauty

standards affect women, the next section will review their impact on women's self-perception in adolescence and young adulthood.

2.3 Body Perception

The way women perceive their bodies is a complex issue which is influenced by appearance-related standards promoted by fashion brands. Body acceptance is a sensitive topic and sometimes requires years to achieve it. This paper explores females' attitudes towards their own bodies in adolescence and young adulthood. (Thieme & Dittrich, 2015).

From adolescence and early adulthood, young females reside in different processes such as rapid puberty, which often leads to self-consciousness and a critical self-evaluation (Thieme & Dittrich, 2015). Previous studies show that girls of around 10 years internalize sociocultural beauty standards, which reduce body satisfaction (Lawlor & Elliot, 2012). According to the Objectification Theory, the media consumed by young females views physique and appearance as the biggest value for a woman (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Witnessing unachievable body images online while being bullied or insecure about body matters is tough for many young girls, who then try different methods of losing weight (Perloff, 2014). In desperate attempts to reach the ideal body image, females resort to drastic approaches such as extreme dieting, purging, taking pills and supplements, and fad diets (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2012). These methods are hazardous for a fragile female organism and may result in eating disorders and huge mental issues (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019).

A woman in her 20s may still feel bothered about her appearance, as it seems like career and societal acceptance depend on visual characteristics (Silva & Steins, 2023). However, it is also a period for a young woman to develop a stronger sense of self and switch from an aesthetic to a health-focused lifestyle. An adult life brings more responsibilities and therefore, the priority switch happens (Pop et al., 2021). Higher education and work require most of the time and life energy, not leaving space for triggering appearance-related issues through idealized content published on social media (Guimarães et al., 2023). Most of the women start noticing fitness benefits in young adulthood, which also decreases body dissatisfaction (Guimarães et al., 2023).

Women's perception of their bodies evolves over time, significantly influenced by standards established by fashion brands. Adolescence and early adulthood are characterized as criticizing periods in a female's body perception, which is supported by a negative attitude towards her own body image. However, the older a woman turns, the more lenient and accepting she becomes. This is explained by a switch in priorities caused by duties and responsibilities of adult life. To understand how the fashion industry impacts young women in terms of body perception and consumer behavior, the next section will delve into marketing strategies brands adopt on Instagram.

2.4 Marketing Strategies of European Fashion Brands on Instagram

Instagram has become one of the main tools for marketing (Torregrosa et al., 2023). This platform offers brands opportunities to showcase their products and use the power of influencers to expand their customer base (impact.com, 2024). From influencer collaborations to the body positive movement, this section will explore the various marketing techniques employed by European fashion brands on Instagram, provide key theories from multiple studies, and present real life examples (Joshi et al., 2023).

Enterprises organize professional photoshoots and hire stylists, assistants, and photographers who can implement the designer's ideas (All, 2023). Previous studies show that visually appealing content significantly affects purchasing decisions (All, 2023). However, attractive pictures can be obtained without translating unattainable beauty standards which damage mental health and lower self-esteem (Jamil et al., 2022). In the creation of idealized content, applications that modify the images play a pivotal role, as they contain tools which are used to adjust body silhouettes or remove skin imperfections to make an image look better (Joshi et al., 2023). This decreases the sense of authenticity and contributes to the body image perception adjustment (Torregrosa et al., 2023). With the widespread trend on sustainability, many companies directed their focus on ethical concerns which arise from the brand's engagement with customers (Jamil et al., 2022). Society puts an emphasis on awareness and spirituality, which encourages people to seek for inner peace and eliminate the factors of mental disturbance (Jamil et al., 2022). It is crucial to implement tactics which align with these ideas to foster a healthier online environment.

2.4.1 Influencer collaborations

An influencer is a person who possesses a power to influence masses in different ways, with distinct features that make him or her special (Pegan & Verginella, 2024). Now, a great percentage of the total number of influencers aligns with established in the era of supermodels, as their parameters are considered the most desirable (Rodrigo & Mendis, 2023). To minimize the negative effects of idealized images, many fashion companies collaborate with influencers to reach a broader audience, attract new customers, and influence people with empowering messages (Pegan & Verginella, 2024). One of the greatest examples of successful marketing campaigns that a fashion brand ran along with a huge modern celebrity is H&M's collaboration with Lizzo. Lizzo is an American singer who advocates for self-acceptance and body positivity (impact.com, 2024). She emphasizes the importance of remaining a human regardless of your size, and highlights the true beauty which is inside and cannot be evaluated visually (*What Is Influencer Marketing?*, 2023). The society gladly responds to these messages and supports her views. By collaborating with an influencer whose mindset aligns with values of the brand, H&M fosters an inclusive culture in a fashion industry (Pegan & Verginella, 2024). Collaborating with influencers is a well-known and widely adopted by market leaders strategy, however, it is not accessible for smaller businesses, as celebrities and major influencers set extremely high prices. Thus, it is a great impactful solution which demonstrates immediate and significant results with a major disadvantage of unavailability for smaller companies.

2.4.2 User-Generated Content (UGC)

Another effective strategy is publishing content generated by users that demonstrate clothing of the brand in order to promote it (Beveridge, 2024). Fashion brands like Urban Outfitters or Monki use UGC to showcase real customers using their products (Brook, 2024). The tool that is used by UO and Monki from my examples above is hashtag #UOonYou and #MonkiReal respectfully, which were designed specifically for selecting content of customers for further publication on their official account (Beveridge, 2024). The announcement of this offer from a fashion brand is usually supported with motivational messages such as "Be the star of your MonkiIRL and get reposted!" (Brook, 2024). Digital creators who generate such content often get promoted by these brands since they express their respect and gratitude by mentioning them in a post description and tagging

on the publication itself (Brook, 2024). The UGC is perceived by other customers as a trustworthy reference of how the piece of clothing would fit on an ordinary person like them, which is driven by relatedness to the content. The example below demonstrates a plus-size woman who is a UGC creator who was published on ASOS Instagram account. The comments indicate customers' appreciation and support (Figure 1).

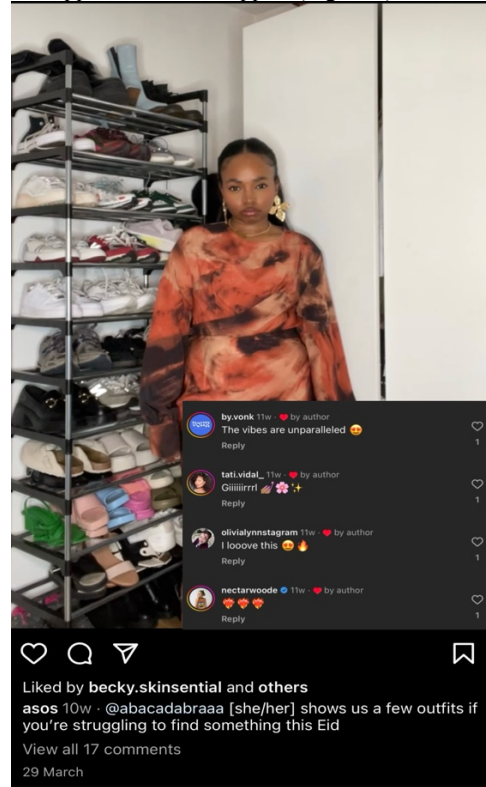


Figure 1. UGC posted by ASOS.

A popular series fashion brands run on their social media is unpacking, where customers record a video reaction to the package unboxing delivered from a brand, and then demonstrate the fit of the ordered clothing (Sadhu, 2023). This way, a customer gets a chance to observe the experience of engaging with a brand, which inspires people to make a purchase (Ekren, 2024). Another trend is to show pictures before the editing and after to demonstrate users how modification through applications like Photoshop can alter reality (Naeem & Ozuem, 2021). By publishing UGC, fashion brands engage with customers and at the same time encourage others to also generate such content, as there is a chance to be selected (Naeem & Ozuem, 2021). Viewing pictures of real customers creates trust and sense of authenticity among customers, which establishes a connection between clients and a brand (Uphance, 2024). Thus, this strategy is beneficial for fast-fashion, medium and small clothing companies as it helps them to be connected to their audience and does not require huge investments (Ekren, 2024).

2.4.3 Body Positive movement

The Body Positivity movement transformed the fashion industry, making fashion acceptable for everyone, and emphasizing the beauty that is inside of everyone (Humann, 2020). This practice carries strong messages and fights over bullying that many people experience due to their appearance or unusual for the society sizes (Humann, 2020b). Dominating for decades beauty standards are narrowed by the trend on body positivity which encourages acceptance of all figures (*Diversity in Fashion*, 2024). The purpose of this movement is to normalize different body types and make people accept everyone regardless of their visual representation (Humann, 2020). Body positivity does not

criticize slim and tall models or pictures capturing skinny body type, but rather aims to highlight the authenticity of a real human body, normalizing body imperfections such as cellulite and stretch marks (Fardouly et al., 2015). Previous studies show that exposure to close-to-reality content results in greater self-acceptance and body satisfaction among young women (Fardouly et al., 2015). Even though the importance of inclusivity is highlighted, and the aware society is leaning towards globally accepted tolerance that everyone deserves, only few giant mass-market brands gradually realize the need to change their marketing strategies (Humann, 2020). The comment section below the inclusive content demonstrates a positive response, appreciating the efforts of H&M in combination with messages that address demand for similar content (Figure 2).

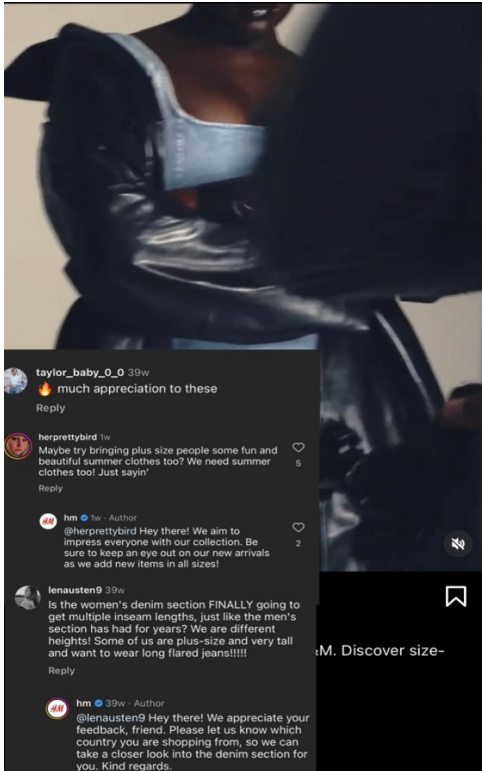


Figure 2. Body Positive content's societal response.

Despite the inclusion of bigger sizes in its collections, H&M highlights the importance of taking care of oneself and following a healthy and active way of life, promoting healthy habits through the sportswear advertisements (Humann, 2020). The fashion brand realizes the need to represent different bodies to make every woman feel beautiful and appreciated, however, at the same time, H&M is not propagating obesity which is considered a huge societal problem (Ray & Nayak, 2023).

This section overviewed the marketing strategies adopted by fashion companies on Instagram with an emphasis on body image. The research identified that publishing visually appealing pictures, influencer collaborations, leveraging UGC content, and inclusion on diverse body types are the key strategies implemented by clothing brands. The research determined the effects of these strategies and how fashion businesses become more ethical. The next section of the thesis assignment presents hypotheses which this research validates.

2.5 Hypotheses

Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses are proposed to examine the relationships between the variables:

H1: Idealized body image in promotional content on Instagram has a direct impact on purchasing decisions of young women.

H2: Idealized beauty image in promotional content on Instagram has a direct impact on the body satisfaction among young women.

H3: Body satisfaction directly affects the purchasing decisions of young women.

These hypotheses will be tested by assessing female consumers' opinion through the questionnaire. The statistics gained from the respondents will help confirm or reject these ideas. In the next section, the method for data collection will be described.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Sample

The sample consisted of women in an age range from 16 to 27 who are active users of Instagram. For the channels, social media platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and Telegram were chosen to distribute the survey among women. Since the nature of the study may be disturbing for people with strong body dissatisfaction, the respondents were notified about the theme before the survey completion. The questionnaire was anonymous to ensure confidentiality of the respondents. The participants could skip questions or withdraw at any time. In total, 94 people responded of which 6 were men, 2 were out of the age group that was targeted, and 9 from the rest did not complete the survey fully. It results in a sample size equal to 77.

3.2 Methods

Young females were asked to complete a questionnaire in English which involved 26 diverse questions. In the beginning of the survey, the first page included a small introduction to the nature of the research. It also contained the contacts of the researcher in case participants have any concerns or questions, and the consent, which participants indicated by clicking the button "Continue". The questions were divided into different sections: demographics, Instagram usage, Body perception, and Purchasing behavior. The demographic questions included standard variables such as age, gender, occupation, and nationality. The next section included questions about daily Instagram usage, the number of fashion-related accounts followed, and frequency of viewing and engaging with fashion content. Questions were adopted from previous studies which examine social media usage patterns, to quantify usage (e.g., "How many hours do you spend on Instagram daily?") and engagement (e.g., "How often do you interact with fashion content on Instagram?") (Fardouly et al., 2018; Akkoz, 2020). The impact of idealized content on Self-Perception and purchasing behavior was measured via 5-point Likert scale (from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") with an emphasis on frequency of social comparison, purchasing decisions, and attitude towards curated publications (Yu et al., 2011). The same scale was used for questions from other questions to unify the answers to facilitate the data analysis in R Studio. The statements captured both sides, validating the opinion of the respondent. The base for the questions that measured agreeableness was a set of studies that tested the relationship between Instagram use and self-objectification and body surveillance. This section of the survey included questions such as "I feel pressured to look like the models in the promotional content on Instagram", and "I am

satisfied with my body regardless of what I see on Instagram". These questions measure how Instagram content affects body satisfaction after consuming curated content. The Purchasing Decision section focused on factors that influence the decision to purchase fashion products seen on Instagram. Questions included: "I am more likely to buy products from brands that feature models with idealized body images.", "If I buy products endorsed by models with ideal bodies, I believe I will be more accepted by society", and "Seeing realistic and diverse body types in promotional content makes me more likely to buy products" (Grabe et al., 2008). These questions aim to understand the direct impact of Instagram content on buying behavior, examining the role of visual appeal, social influence, and perceived relatability in driving purchasing decisions. The content analysis was also included in the questionnaire, which aimed to measure an emotional response to two types of content: idealized and close-to-reality (Appendix). This section involved two pictures which were referred to as Image A (idealized) and Image B (realistic) and the respondents were asked to answer a list of following questions: "Would you be more likely to purchase from a brand that predominantly uses images like Image A or Image B?", "Image B makes me feel good about my body", and "Image A lowers my body satisfaction". These questions were essential to assess respondents' opinion on their preferences in the content they consume and its impact on body satisfaction to be able to draw conclusions and recommendations. Maymone et al. (2019) in their research conducted a similar analysis involving a comparison between idealized and inclusive content, which served as an inspiration for this study.

3.3 Data Analysis

From the dataset, the responses were taken to assess the impact of content published by European fashion companies on purchase decisions. The dataset was cleared from responses which were given by man or by people out of an age range that was defined by the study. The filtering of data happened using tools on the Qualtrics platform to prepare a dataset for further analysis. In addition, the incomplete forms were also removed from the dataset using the function "na.omit" in R Studio.

The data from the question that supported a comparative analysis ("Would you be more likely to purchase from a brand that predominantly uses images like Image A or Image B?"). However, the correlation cannot be established using this variable without dividing the data into two separate variables for idealized and body positive content. This question directly measures the likelihood of a buying decision, therefore, it was decided to take the responses specifically from this question. The other questions assessed frequency of comparison in real life as well as on social media, body image perception, and likelihood of purchasing for brands that use different types of content, and were unified by 5-point Likert Scale. These questions are categorical, therefore, the responses were translated into a numerical system in accordance to the scale - from 1 to 5. To see if there is a dependency between purchase decision and body satisfaction, the responses from above mentioned questions were correlated with questions which measure the level of body satisfaction ("I feel pressured to look like the models in the promotional content on Instagram", "I am satisfied with my body regardless of what I see on Instagram"). After the data was sorted and filtered, the correlation analysis started. The correlation analysis helps understand how body satisfaction and frequency of social comparison impacts purchase decisions from a brand that posts either idealized or body positive content.

4. RESULTS

To collect opinions of young females, the study involved a survey designed via Qualtrics which consisted of 26 questions. The sample size decreased after filtering the dataset, as out of 94 forms, only 77 were appropriate for the analysis.

4.1 Demographics

The overall demographics show that the majority of respondents are females in the 20-23 age range (n=65), 21% indicated their belonging to the younger age group (n=19), and only 5% (n=5) are older than 23. Two people were older than the required age limits, therefore, these answers were eliminated from the dataset. The sample shows that around 90% of the total number of respondents are from different countries around the globe, whereas the remaining 10% are from Ukraine. This signifies the diverse representation of cultures which minimizes bias of selecting people from one region. In addition, most of the women are students at a university, with little percent of those who are either employed or self-employed. This data can be useful while evaluating the results, as work and education require attention and dedication, which might explain the superficial interest in fashion.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	6	7%
Female	86	93%
Age		
Less than 16	0	0%
16-19	19	21%
20-23	65	71%
24-27	5	5%
More than 27	2	2%
Occupation		
Student at School	0	0%
Student at University	79	86%
Unemployed	0	0%
Employed	9	10%
Self-employed	4	4%

4.2 Instagram Usage and Engagement

The 75% of women who participated in a questionnaire responded that they spend from 1 to 3 hours a day on Instagram, and 15% around 5 hours, which indicates that the sample consists mostly of active Instagram users. The majority reported frequent engagement with fashion brands which involves likes, comments, and shares, whereas the other 26% (n = 23) indicated the absence of engagement. The sample demonstrates that some show high interest in fashion (n = 35), and others consume social media for casual reasons such as engaging with friends and family (n = 73), following celebrities (n = 31) and influencers (n = 44), and entertainment (n = 43). Since only 40% of the respondents indicated interest in fashion, the results may differ for a broader audience.

4.3 Self-Perception and Body Satisfaction

The data demonstrates that only 15% (n = 12) of respondents never compare themselves to others in real life, and 17% (n = 13) online, which differs from 20% (n = 16) and 18% (n = 14), who

compare themselves to others everyday in real life and online respectively. Overall, the data demonstrates that nearly half of the participants of the survey compare themselves to others on Instagram with moderately high frequency. In fact, a mean for social comparison variable equals 2.97, which on a 5-point Likert scale refers to “Neither agree nor disagree”, demonstrating a natural stance among participants, and moderate periodicity of social comparison. At the same time, 88% of users agree that Instagram promotes unrealistic beauty standards, and 40% of women feel pressured to conform to them. Almost a half of the sample indicated body satisfaction regardless of content posted on social media ($n = 41$), which differs from 25% ($n = 19$) who are not pleasant about their shape. The impact of idealized as well as body positive content on body satisfaction was measured through following questions: “Image A (idealized) lowers my body satisfaction”, and “Image B (body positive) makes me feel good about my body”. The response to the statement about idealized content was as follows: 34 women neither agree nor disagree, 18 somewhat disagree, 12 strongly disagree, 7 somewhat agree, and 6 strongly agree. It indicates that even though pictures that capture ideal bodies may have a negative impact, for most of them they do not harm the body satisfaction of young women. In contrast, the opposite question presents the following opinions: 40 women could not agree or disagree with the statement, 7 disagreed, and 30 agreed that realistic and diverse body representations have a positive effect on body satisfaction. In addition, the importance of publishing realistic content was assessed and demonstrated that for 6 women it is not important, for 9 slightly important, for 22 moderately important, for 28 very important, and for 12 extremely important. As for respondents’ opinion on what content for fashion companies to post, 14% voted for the idealized content, 79% would prefer to observe diverse body types, 49% would like to see UGC. Moreover, one woman believes that fashion brands should include both types, however, the amount of idealized content for high fashion should be bigger than for fast-fashion.

4.4 Purchasing Decision

The 70% of women who participated in the survey reported that they buy clothes from European fashion brands from 1 to 2 times per month. It indicates moderate frequency, which signifies the relevance of the responses. The data shows that 23% strongly agree and 35% somewhat agree that seeing realistic and diverse bodies increases the buying desire, which differs from 7% and 4% who somewhat and strongly disagree respectively; the rest could neither agree nor disagree. This means that almost half of the participants feel more motivated to buy from a brand with inclusive marketing strategies on Instagram. The question that tested the desire to purchase from a brand that publishes idealized body image shows that 29% somewhat agreed, 27% somewhat disagreed, and 38% stayed neutral. The results from another question that tested buying intention, show that 61% of the sample identified motivation to purchase after viewing idealized content, which indicates a power of visually appealing content influencing consumer behavior. 33% of women do not feel influenced to buy a fashion item after engaging with pictures that represent ideal body figures, and only 6% felt negative effects on purchasing intention. A comparative analysis which involved two pictures was included in a survey to validate the opinion of respondents by comparing answers to theoretical questions with the ones left after viewing images. The analysis indicated that 54% ($n = 41$) of respondents would make a purchase from a brand that predominantly uses body positive content, whereas the rest ($n = 35$) prefer to stick to the traditional fashion standards.

The table below shows the means and standard deviation for questions which specifically measured the purchase decision of young women. The mean identifies the average response among

participants of the survey, and the standard deviation helps determine variability of the data. As can be seen from the table, women agreed the most with the statement which assessed the purchase intention from a brand with diverse body representations, with mean 3.72, which is the rate between “neither agree nor disagree” and “somewhat agree”. On average, females stayed neutral in questions which were to determine the purchase desire from brands that publish idealized body images. The standard deviation in all cases is approximately 1, which means that the variation of the responses is moderate.

Table 2. Body Satisfaction

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation
Would you be more likely to purchase from a brand that predominantly uses images like Image A or Image B? (1 - idealized, 2- body positive))	1.539474	1.066965
I am more likely to buy products from brands that feature models with idealized body images. (1- strongly disagree, 5- strongly agree)	3.565789	1.135249
Seeing realistic and diverse body types in promotional content makes me more likely to buy products (1- strongly disagree, 5- strongly agree)	3.723684	0.8958017
If I buy products endorsed by models with ideal bodies, I believe I will be more accepted by society (1- strongly disagree, 5- strongly agree)	3.013158	1.088999

4.5 Correlation Analysis

The correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between various factors influencing body image and purchasing behavior on Instagram. The variables included gender, frequency of comparing self to others online and offline, body satisfaction, pressure to conform to models, perception of idealized content, purchase decisions from a brand that uses idealized/body positive content, body dissatisfaction due to exposure to idealized content, and body satisfaction due to body positive content. The coefficients for this kind of test are in a range from -1 to 1, where -1 is strong negative correlation, and 1 is the opposite - strong positive, according to the Pearson method. In case a correlation coefficient is 0, the relationship between variables is absent (Fernando, 2024). The first analysis involved Body Satisfaction and Pressure to conform to beauty standards presented by models of European fashion brands, which identified a moderate negative correlation. This means that the more women feel pressured to conform to standards, the less they are satisfied with their own bodies ($r = -0.36$). Those who feel forced to align with subjective norms formed by society and those who are dissatisfied with their bodies, indicate a higher preference for body positive content and increased buying intention, with coefficients equaling 0.22 and -0.25, where the first one is for Pressure to Conform and Purchase Decision for

Body Positive content, and the second is for Body Satisfaction and Purchase Decision BP (Table 3). Even though these rates are relatively small, they still demonstrate a weak dependency of purchase behavior on body image perception. In addition, those who experience societal pressure to match with ideal body image negatively correlate with purchase intention from brand with unattainable figures, with -0.27 correlation coefficient. This means that women who feel pressured following the beauty trends are less likely to purchase from a brand with idealized body images. The correlation analysis also shows that respondents who reported high levels of body satisfaction are more likely to buy from a brand which predominantly uses idealized content, with correlation coefficient equals to 0.37. This means that women who are more satisfied with their bodies tend to prefer idealized images in promotional content on Instagram. It can be explained by the confidence they possess which does not require reassurance or validation that body positive pictures provide. Moreover, the correlation analysis shows that theoretical questions that evaluate the purchase decision depending on the content consumed and a question which includes two pictures which represent two types of content are correlated with a coefficient 0.5, which signifies variability. It means that some respondents may have theoretically preferred one type of content but changed their opinion after viewing images. This may have happened due to the content which was chosen which may have triggered different emotions which influenced this change.

Table 3. Correlation analysis

Variables	Correlation coefficient (r)
Body Satisfaction and Pressure to conform	-0.36
Pressure and Purchase decision for Body Positive content	0.22
Body Satisfaction and Purchase decision for Body Positive content	-0.25
Pressure and Purchase decision for Idealized content	-0.27
Body Satisfaction and Purchase decision for Idealized content	0.37
Theoretical questions and content analysis	0.5

5. DISCUSSION

First and foremost, the findings show that Instagram indeed promotes unattainable beauty standards, which negatively impacts body satisfaction and therefore pressures women to follow those beauty trends (Xie, 2024). Nearly half of the women still compare their appearance with the looks of others, which aligns with the Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954). This theory provides a list of emotions which can be experienced during this process, proposing that the comparison with someone who possesses superior features decreases self-esteem and creates a pressure to conform (McComb et al., 2023). This also

aligns with the theory of planned behavior which emphasizes the role of attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, also known as difficulty to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). The attitude to the body is shaped by subjective norms in a form of beauty standards formed by society alongside fashion brands which often publish unattainable for an average woman body image, which complicates the performance of the behavior. Some women prove these theories, whereas others are more aware of their beauty regardless of what is promoted on Instagram. As was mentioned in a body-perception section of a literature review, adulthood brings lots of duties and responsibilities, which significantly lowers a focus on appearance and following beauty standards becomes less important (Pop et al., 2021). The Objectification theory, combined with a historical overview of the change of beauty standards in the fashion industry, explains the reasoning behind the choices clothing businesses make when generating online content. Brands hire models with perfect bodies to remind women of what is considered attractive to increase buying intention (Macheka et al., 2023). In addition, these theories provide a valuable insight on how a female shapes an opinion about herself, which explains different outcomes of self-evaluation. Even though the sample did not show the high interest in fashion, women identified a moderately high importance of inclusive strategies to fulfill a need of authenticity in promotional content.

The impact of idealized content on purchasing decisions was the main objective of this research. A research identified a weak positive correlation between the influence of idealized promotional content and purchasing decisions. These results were analyzed with caution, considering bias which could happen due to the small sample size and the choice of the participants. The findings indicate that, contrary to some existing literature, there is still a positive influence of ideal body images on purchase decisions. This confirms the first hypothesis which proposed that idealized body image in promotional content on Instagram has a direct impact on purchasing decisions of young women. This pattern is corroborated by Valaei and Nikhashemi (2017) whose study on highly visual and often aesthetically polished Instagram content indicated that it influences consumer wants and boosts sales. This also may indicate a shift in driving forces in consumer behavior or another mental shift with a route to awareness and inner peace (Jamil et al., 2022). Moreover, the research did not identify a significant impact on body satisfaction after viewing idealized content, which rejects a second hypothesis which is "idealized beauty image in promotional content on Instagram has a direct impact on the body satisfaction among young women". However, the pressure to conform to models as well as body dissatisfaction reduces likelihood of purchasing from fashion brands with the skinny and tall body type (Mandarić et al., 2022). In contrast, females who are more pleased with their bodies choose idealized content, and therefore, would be more likely to purchase from a brand with corresponding imagery. Thus, this confirms the third hypothesis - Body satisfaction directly affects the purchasing decisions of young women. Fashion brands adapt inclusive strategies to emphasize the beauty which everyone has regardless of the size you are wearing, and the results may indicate the success of this shift. The findings show that European consumers want to witness diverse body types which represent the body of an average woman, which is also supported with increased likelihood to purchase from a brand which employed inclusive marketing strategies.

5.1 Conclusion

This study explored the impact of idealized body image on Instagram on buying decisions and self-perception through the lens of social comparison. The research was based on following questions:

To what extent does the idealized body image in promotional content of European fashion brands on Instagram affect the purchasing decisions of young women?

How does the inclusion of diverse body representations impact purchasing decisions and body perception?

From the findings of this investigation, the answers can be gained. The research identified a moderate positive influence of idealized content published by European fashion brands on purchase decisions of young women, indicating the power of visually appealing imagery. Though, there is a noticeable tendency of females to lean towards self-awareness and acceptance, which results in a high preference for realistic content. The body satisfaction and pressure created by beauty standards which are translated and promoted on social media lower female desire to purchase from a fashion brand, meaning that body satisfaction plays a crucial role in consumer behavior.

The body positive content, in its turn, shows a more significant result, signifying the need for fashion brands to employ inclusive strategies. In addition, publications which capture diverse body types cause positive emotions among young women, increasing their body satisfaction and purchase desire. Thus, it can be concluded, that close-to-reality body images are important to include in marketing strategies of fashion brands to foster a more accepting and sustainable digital environment.

5.2 Applications of the research

For fashion brands it is essential to hire models who represent a target segment to generate content which is related to the customer. Analysis of existing literature indicates that people are more likely to be emotionally connected with brands which generate relatable and relevant content for their own preferences. Thus, staying close to customers and publishing images which showcase the relevant fit of the clothing on an average female body may lead to enhanced brand loyalty and greater self-acceptance among female consumers (Kim et al., 2018). According to aforementioned, the following recommendations for businesses that sell clothes can be provided.

First and foremost, European clothing companies must ensure availability of products for all sizes, as the live reviews of consumers which they leave in comments under the brand's publications, address concerns about bigger sizes not being included in the catalog. The content should be high quality, minimally edited, and equally appealing for diverse body figures, so that different customer segments feel included, seen, and appreciated. The photoshoots from clothing companies should inspire their customers to treat their own bodies with respect, emphasizing the beauty of all sizes. It might be beneficial for companies to leverage peer and influencer reviews to enhance social proof. To do this, companies should encourage satisfied customers to share their feedback, post outfits with a mention of a brand, and reward creative efforts by reposting their testimonials or leaving a grateful comment. Interacting with customers by responding to their comments or to content requiring brand's attention, a brand uses social media platforms as tools to speak to their audience. The more a brand interacts with their customers, the more they share their wishes and needs, which is crucial for a brand to be successful. And lastly,

Instagram provides an interactive tool for fashion brands which is designed to link a product promoted on a picture to the website where users can directly purchase the favored piece. According to the research findings, females feel compelled to conform to beauty standards, which contradicts the body positivity movement, which focuses on authenticity and naturality. This means that the fashion brands and digital creators should develop this movement, raise awareness and adopt strategies that minimize risks related to upward social comparison. It is essential to foster a sustainable digital environment which does not harm anyone. Translating empowering messages which emphasize the importance of self-acceptance and mental health, clothing companies attempt to change the way young women view the reflection in the mirror and treat their own bodies (Humann, 2020).

This research highlights the importance for the female society to be aware of self-worth regardless of any beauty standards. Social media platforms contain enormous amounts of information and visual content which may damage mental health, therefore, it is vital to filter the media (Zsila & Reyes, 2023). Although fashion brands should be accountable for the harm they cause via posting content, users should be responsible for critically assessing images and choosing the right reaction. Users of social media should realize that the content is curated and beauty standards promoted online should not affect the self-perception while assessing the physique in a mirror reflection. Women should understand that visual appearance is temporary and the true value of self-worth is inside (Ai et al., 2021).

5.3 Limitations

Several limitations were encountered in this study, these include sampling methods, self-report measures and also the restriction to a single platform only. The sample was chosen based on the acquaintances of the researcher and thus leads to potential bias. In addition, the size of the sample is small, which may not represent the opinion of the broader audience. The content for the comparative analysis was chosen by subjective opinion of the researcher and the supervisor who curated this work, which may have its impact on the results. The nature of the topic is quite complex and requires a more detailed and specific questionnaire which would assess important variables from multiple perspectives, providing relevant and accurate outcomes. In addition, the data analysis should involve more tests for more specific results. Thus, the findings of the paper should be taken under cautions, noting mentioned limitations. Future work should incorporate:

- 1) For improved validity across different cultures: samples of greater size and proportional diversity, with bigger interest in fashion.
- 2) Cross-sectional comparisons with other platforms and devices, as they may affect purchasing decisions of young females.
- 3) Comparisons of the effects of appearance-focused media on psychological and behavioral outcomes over time in cross-sectional and longitudinal designs (Fardouly et al., 2017).

5.4 Further Research

The psychological and sociological effects of idealized content in the fashion business have been investigated extensively, however the economic aspect of posting idealized content versus real one has not been thoroughly studied. This oversight could be crucial, because the understanding of how idealized imagery affects sales, viewer's behavior, and market dynamics, could significantly enhance sales of any fashion brand and foster a sustainable digital environment. Future research should try to close this gap by examining the long-term effects of different sales strategies. For instance, compare the brands that align with

realistic beauty standards and brands that post idealized content, and compare their financial performances. Furthermore, comparative studies between the European fashion industry and those in other parts of the world could reveal cultural differences in how idealized content economically and psychologically impacts these markets.

Documenting case studies of brands that have transitioned to ethical marketing and their subsequent economic outcomes can offer actionable strategies for other companies. By focusing on these areas, future research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the economic consequences of idealized content in the fashion industry, ultimately guiding more sustainable and ethical industry practices.

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7. APPENDIX

7.1 Content included in a survey



7.2 Statistics for questions from the survey with frequency and the percentage of responses for each option.

Option	Frequency	Percentage
I often compare my appearance to others on Instagram		
Neither agree nor disagree	20	25.97
Somewhat agree	10	12.99
Somewhat disagree	20	25.97
Strongly agree	14	18.18
Strongly disagree	13	16.88
I am satisfied with my body regardless of what I see on Instagram		
Neither agree nor disagree	17	22.08
Somewhat agree	30	38.96
Somewhat disagree	17	22.08
Strongly agree	11	14.29
Strongly disagree	2	2.6
I feel pressure to look like the models in media advertisements		
Neither agree nor disagree	15	19.48
Somewhat agree	32	41.56
Somewhat disagree	18	23.38
Strongly agree	2	2.6
Strongly disagree	10	12.99
The content from fashion brands on Instagram represents an ideal body image		
Neither agree nor disagree	17	22.08
Somewhat agree	28	36.36
Somewhat disagree	14	18.18
Strongly agree	12	15.58
Strongly disagree	6	7.79
I am more likely to buy products from brands that feature models with idealized body images.		
Neither agree nor disagree	24	31.17
Somewhat agree	48	62.34
Somewhat disagree	5	6.49
How important is it for you that fashion brands promote realistic body images?		

extremely important	12	15.58
moderately important	22	28.57
not important	6	7.79
slightly important	9	11.69
very important	28	36.36
Seeing realistic and diverse body types in promotional content makes me more likely to buy products		
Neither agree nor disagree	22	28.57
Somewhat agree	25	32.47
Somewhat disagree	6	7.79
Strongly agree	21	27.27
Strongly disagree	3	3.9
If I buy products endorsed by models with ideal bodies, I believe I will be more accepted by society		
Neither agree nor disagree	29	37.66
Somewhat agree	21	27.27
Somewhat disagree	22	28.57
Strongly agree	3	3.9
Strongly disagree	2	2.6
Image A makes lowers my body satisfaction		
Neither agree nor disagree	34	44.16
Somewhat agree	7	9.09
Somewhat disagree	18	23.38
Strongly agree	6	7.79
Strongly disagree	12	15.58
Image B makes me feel good about my body		
Neither agree nor disagree	40	51.95
Somewhat agree	18	23.38
Somewhat disagree	6	7.79
Strongly agree	12	15.58
Strongly disagree	1	1.3
Would you be more likely to purchase from a brand that predominantly uses images like Image A or Image B?		
image A	35	46.05
image B	41	53.95