

# Study: Hey, advertising and marketing pros! Before you 'go thin,' think again

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Credit: Baylor University

Here's the skinny: Not all women will buy products because the models in the advertisements are thin, according to a new study of a diverse group of 239 women by a Baylor University marketing professor.

In fact, marketers and advertisers who default to the "thin ideal"—the belief that thinner is better—could be alienating up to 70 percent of their audience, said James Roberts, Ph.D., The Ben H. Williams Professor of Marketing in Baylor's Hankamer School of Business.

Roberts co-authored the report, "Does Thin Always Sell? The Moderating Role of Thin Ideal Internalization on Advertising Effectiveness," with his daughter, Chloe Roberts, a freshman at the University of Alabama. The study is published by the *Atlantic Marketing Journal*.

"The current 'thin sells' fixation is a gross oversimplification of how [women](#) respond to advertising," the study said, adding that previous research has shown that only 5 percent of women could possibly achieve the body size depicted in typical advertisements.

Advertisers tend to default to this ideal without knowing for sure if other options are viable, James Roberts said.

"Advertisers need to do a bit more research with their target market," he said. "They need to find out what these women are thinking, as related to [body size](#)."

To conduct the study, the researchers had to determine which of the women surveyed internalized the "thin ideal." To accomplish that, each was asked a series of eight questions to determine whether she fell into the low or high internalization category.

"It was our belief that women who ascribed to the 'thin ideal' would be more receptive to the thinner models," James Roberts said.

Following that identification, each woman surveyed was then asked to respond to a series of magazine advertising photos featuring women

modeling with purses. The purses were the product for sale. Half of the photos were altered to increase the body sizes of the models. Attitudes toward the ad and brand were both measured, as was the likelihood of purchasing the product.

## The results?

"For those who did not ascribe to the thin ideal, model size did not play a part in ad effectiveness," James Roberts said.

That number was significant, he said. Of those surveyed, 25 percent disagreed with the "thin ideal" and 45 percent did not fully ascribe to it.

On the flip side, women who internalized the "thin ideal"—30 percent of those surveyed—"were more receptive to thin models compared to average-size models," according to the study.

James Roberts said this study puts actual numbers to beliefs that have existed for a while, but he said the research findings should be enough to give advertisers pause before they cast their next models.

"We don't want to oversimplify," he said. "We need to look at the target market, and we also have to look at the product category. For some product categories, 'thin' is probably going to do better. For others, it very well may be that an average-size model may sell better than a thin model. It just may be a good business decision."

**More information:** *Atlantic Marketing Journal*,  
[digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/amj/vol4/iss1/1/](http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/amj/vol4/iss1/1/)

Provided by Baylor University

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