

# Size-inclusive model photos are win-win for online retailers, customers and environment: Study

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Size inclusivity approaches: Examples from online fashion retailers. Credit: *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* (2024). DOI: 10.1007/s11747-024-01034-9

Online fashion retailers clinging to the received wisdom that photos of thin models are the most effective way of selling clothes may want to think again, according to a new study examining the impact of size-inclusive model photos.

New research from the University of Bath, University of Groningen and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam shows a three-fold benefit to online retailers using size-inclusive model photos to showcase their ranges,

which would allow customers to better assess the fit and style of the garments for their particular body types.

The study—"One size does not fit all: Optimizing size-inclusive model photography mitigates fit risk in online fashion retailing" was [published](#) in *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*.

The researchers found retailers' sales and costs would improve, customers would feel greater satisfaction and inclusivity, and the environment—as well as companies' bottom lines—would benefit as expensive and wasteful clothing returns could diminish. And they challenged the long-held notion that thin models drive sales.

"We have seen some progress in portraying diverse body types—but that is largely restricted to advertising, rather than what the [customer](#) sees online when ordering [clothes](#). There are a few honorable exceptions but models online are still very, very thin, as a rule," said Dr. Iina Ikonen, of the University of Bath School of Management and University of Groningen.

"The sector has this misguided notion that aspiration is key, and that any other approach than thin-size photos could damage their business. In fact, not one of our studies shows that own-size model photography negatively affects purchase decisions in comparison with thin-size photos, despite this being a key concern of the fashion companies we interviewed," Dr. Ikonen said.

The researchers found that thin-size models actually hindered online purchase decisions, through increasing the difficulty of assessing a product's fit for customers with different clothing sizes. Thin-size models caused them to disengage as the retailer was not serving their needs.

"Our research showed that retailers employing greater body-size diversity fostered more inclusive and welcoming environments, and especially employing own-size models promotes equal treatment for diverse customers—all of which creates higher consumer well-being. Whereas the current online marketplace stigmatizes consumers who feel their bodies are not represented by thin models," said co-researcher Yerong Zhang of the School of Business and Economics, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

The research suggested the ideal approach for online retailers would be to show every item of clothing on models of various sizes, but the researchers recognized this could be costly, particularly for high-volume, fast-fashion outlets.

"A middle ground might be to use differently-sized models presenting different clothing items. This mixed strategy might help consumers of various sizes feel like their own size is being represented in online shopping environments," Zhang said.

The costs incurred by using size-inclusive model photos could be offset by improved customer satisfaction and reduced product returns, which international regulators are scrutinizing with a view to cutting environmental harm.

"We know that poor fit is the most important reason for product returns—targeting customers with model photography featuring models of their own size would be key to addressing this issue," she added.

Dr. Ikonen welcomed retailers' moves towards diversity in some areas but warned they should be wary of inadvertently creating the potentially alienating 'plus-sizing effect' and should ideally offer, and display, all of their clothes in all sizes, from extra small to extra large.

"We observed an issue with retailers showing off some of their clothes on [thin models](#) and simultaneously proudly pointing to their plus-sized ranges as part of their commitment to diversity and inclusion. The problem was that, often, the clothes showed on thin-size models were not available for plus-sizes. Essentially, these were two different ranges and that is unhelpful for customer inclusivity and positive sentiment—and that will ultimately harm their business," she said.

Dr. Ikonen's co-researchers are Zhang, Jiska Eelen and Francesca Sotgiu, all from the School of Business and Economics, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Dr. Ikonen represents both the University of Bath School of Management and the Faculty of Economics and Business at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands.

**More information:** Yerong Zhang et al, One size does not fit all: Optimizing size-inclusive model photography mitigates fit risk in online fashion retailing, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s11747-024-01034-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-024-01034-9)

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