

She Looks Confident, But I Don't Want to Be Like Her: Young Women's Opinions Towards Average-Sized Model Images on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

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Social media has been widely linked to negative body image among women, leading body-positive movements to advocate for greater representation of average-sized bodies. However, qualitative research that directly explores women's responses to such representations, particularly in non-Western contexts, remains limited. This study conducted in-depth interviews with 20 Chinese female university students to examine their perceptions of average-sized model images on social media. Findings indicate that while these images may temporarily alleviate body dissatisfaction, the effect often stems from downward social comparisons rather than genuine body acceptance. Although participants expressed admiration for the confidence displayed by these models, they remained hesitant to identify with such body types due to the deeply internalized thin-ideal. Importantly, images emphasizing body functionality generated more positive responses. Furthermore, participants displayed critical ambivalence toward average-sized representations, indicating that such strategies may have limited effectiveness as a mainstream body-positive intervention.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by qualitatively examining Chinese women's responses to average-sized bodies, showing effects rely on downward comparison, while functionality-focused images elicit more positive responses.

1. Introduction

Social media has become a convenient platform for sharing, communication, and entertainment, significantly enriching and simplifying people's lives (Yang, 2021). However, research suggests that social media use negatively impacts women's body image due to constant exposure to idealized portrayals (Brown & Tiggemann, 2020; Vandenbosch et al., 2022). For example, trends featuring images, quotes, and content promoting extreme thinness and fitness set unrealistic body standards for women to aspire to (Griffiths & Stefanovski, 2019). When women perceive a discrepancy between their own appearance and these unattainable ideals but find it impossible to bridge, their well-being may suffer, leading to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, as well as unhealthy behaviors such as excessive dieting and eating disorders (Higgins, 1989; Stewart & Clayton, 2022). These negative effects are particularly pronounced among young women who use social media frequently and place greater emphasis on appearance-related expectations (Rounsefell et al., 2020).

1.1. Body Positivity Movement

The body positivity movement emerged as a response to the negative impact of social media on body image (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). It challenges rigid beauty standards by promoting diverse representations of women's bodies on social media (Stevens & Griffiths, 2020; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). The movement aims to foster body appreciation and acceptance, ultimately improving women's well-being (Cohen et al., 2019; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Rodgers et al., 2022). Research suggests that featuring more diverse body types, such as non-idealized bodies, on social media may help challenge the dominance of thin-ideal beauty standards and promote body positivity (de Lenne et al., 2023; Harriger et al., 2023). Among these diverse representations, average-sized bodies have received increasing attention as a form of appearance diversity in body-positive initiatives.

1.2. The Role of Average-Sized Bodies

Compared to thin-ideal bodies, average-sized bodies represent non-idealized images (de Lenne et al., 2023). While some other researchers use terms like "plus-size" or "overweight," these labels all denote body sizes that deviate from conventional beauty standards (de Lenne et al., 2023).

Experimental studies have examined the impact of displaying average-sized bodies on women's body image. A review by Rodgers et al. (2021), found that participants exposed to average or larger-sized models reported a more positive body image than those viewing thin-ideal images. In these experiments, participants were assigned to different image groups (e.g., thin-ideal, average or larger-sized, and non-human-involved) to measure psychological variations in body image before and after exposure (Clayton et al., 2017; Cohen et al., 2019; Mulgrew et al., 2020; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). Results showed that most participants reported higher body appreciation and lower self-objectification after viewing average or larger-sized bodies (Rodgers et al., 2021). Meanwhile, de Lenne et al. (2023) note that non-idealized bodies are more relatable to ordinary women and convey positive messages of self-acceptance and confidence, which in turn help promote a positive body image. Based on these findings, it is suggested that increasing the representation of average-sized bodies on social media could help alleviate body anxieties and promote body positivity.

However, Moreno-Domínguez et al. (2018) argued that the improved body image induced by viewing larger-sized models may mainly result from downward social comparison, whereby individuals feel better about their own bodies by evaluating themselves as more attractive than the models. According to social comparison theory, people can compare themselves upward, downward, or laterally with others (Festinger, 1954; Tylka et al., 2023). Although downward comparison may temporarily boost self-perception, it relies on feeling superior to others rather than genuine self-acceptance. As such, this mechanism is inconsistent with the core value of body positivity, which emphasizes unconditional body appreciation rather than comparative self-assurance. Therefore, the underlying processes through which average-sized bodies influence women's body image remain unclear and require further qualitative exploration.

1.3. The Present Study

While numerous experimental studies suggest that viewing average-sized bodies may lead to a more positive body image, little qualitative research has been done to explain the reasons and processes behind it, especially with non-Caucasian samples (Rodgers et al., 2021). Given the lack of research focusing on Asian women, further investigation is needed to understand how body-positive social media content shapes their body image. Therefore, this study aims to explore the opinions of Chinese young women towards average-sized model images on social media and the underlying mechanisms behind them. Based on this research objective, the following two research questions are proposed:

RQ1: How do Chinese young women think of average-sized model images on social media?

RQ2: What are the potential mechanisms that influence the effect of average-sized model images on women's body image?

A qualitative approach is appropriate for this study because it allows for an in-depth exploration of women's personal experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of average-sized model images on social media (Diedrichs et al., 2011). Unlike quantitative methods, which focus on statistical relationships, qualitative research enables a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms influencing body image by capturing participants' thoughts, emotions, and social contexts (Rodgers et al., 2023).

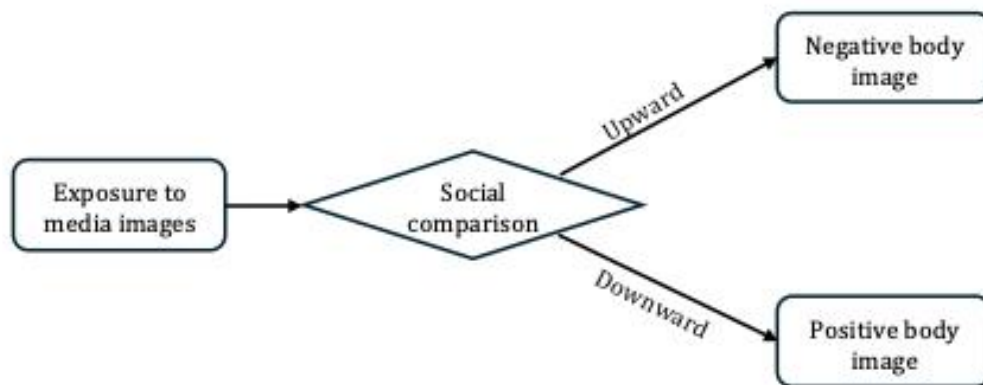
Further, this study focuses on Chinese female university students aged 18 to 26, as they are frequent users of social media and are particularly susceptible to its influence on body image (Budenz et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2020). Given their high engagement with online appearance-focused content, understanding their perceptions and experiences with average-sized model images is crucial. To obtain rich, in-depth insights while ensuring participant privacy, the study employs a one-on-one in-depth interview approach. This method allows participants to freely express their thoughts and emotions, facilitating a deeper exploration of the mechanisms underlying the effects of average-sized model images on body image (Showkat & Parveen, 2017). The media images used in the interviews are sourced from Xiaohongshu, a widely used Chinese social media platform that primarily targets young women and features a significant amount of appearance-related content (Wang et al., 2022). Using images from this platform keeps the study relevant and reflects the online space where participants interact with body-related content.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) proposes that individuals evaluate their abilities and opinions by comparing themselves to others. In the body image domain, exposure to idealized media images often prompts upward social comparisons, which contribute to body dissatisfaction. By contrast, exposure to average-sized or non-idealized bodies may lead to downward or lateral comparisons, resulting in more positive self-evaluations (Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010). Figure 1 presents the model of the theory in the context of social media. This theory provides the basic mechanism for understanding how young Chinese women evaluate their own bodies when viewing average-sized model images on social media.

Figure 1: Social Comparison Theory in the Context of Social Media



2.2. Tripartite Influence Model

The Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al., 1999) highlights three key sociocultural influences on body image: parents, peers, and media. A central mechanism is the internalization of beauty ideals, which mediates the impact of external pressures on body dissatisfaction. Figure 2 illustrates the model of the theory. This model is particularly relevant for the present study because it explains how sociocultural pressures, especially dominant thin-ideal norms in Chinese culture, shape women's responses to average-sized body representations. Together, these two theories form the conceptual foundation of this study.

2.3. The Conceptual Framework of The Present Study

This study aims to explore how Chinese young women perceive average-sized model images on social media (RQ1) and to identify the underlying mechanisms that influence their body image responses (RQ2). To achieve this, two core theoretical frameworks are integrated, namely Social Comparison Theory and the Tripartite Influence Model, which form a coherent conceptual framework (see Figure 3).

Social Comparison Theory explains RQ1 by proposing that individuals assess themselves through comparison with others. When viewing average-sized models, women may

engage in upward or downward comparisons. These comparisons lead respectively to dissatisfaction or more positive self-evaluations, which directly shapes their perceptions of such images. The Tripartite Influence Model addresses RQ2 by highlighting how three key sociocultural factors, including parents, peers, and media, drive the internalization of dominant beauty ideals such as the thin ideal among Chinese young women. This internalization, in turn, shapes the direction of their social comparisons, specifically whether they engage in upward or downward comparisons when exposed to average-sized model images.

Together, these two theories form a clear explanatory chain. Social Comparison Theory clarifies the direct outcome of average-sized image exposure, which is how women perceive these images and evaluate their own bodies, thus addressing RQ1. The Tripartite Influence Model reveals the sociocultural mechanisms that underpin these comparisons, meaning why women compare themselves in a certain way, and this addresses RQ2. This integration provides a focused, theoretically grounded framework for exploring the research questions.

Figure 2: The Tripartite Influence Model and Body Dissatisfaction

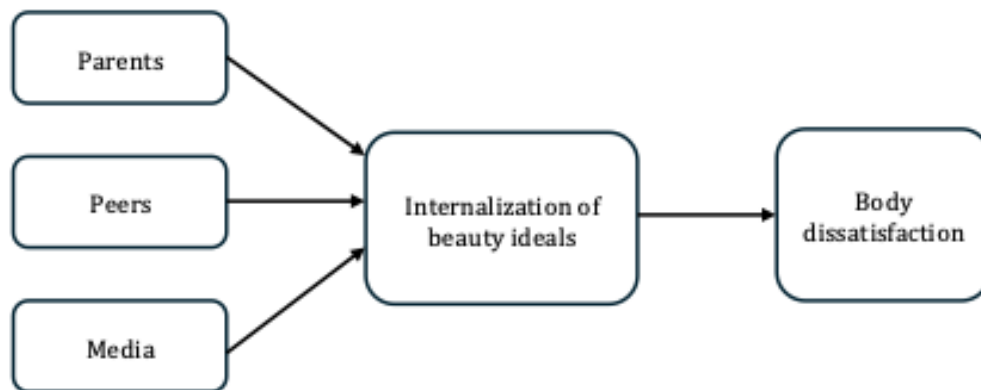
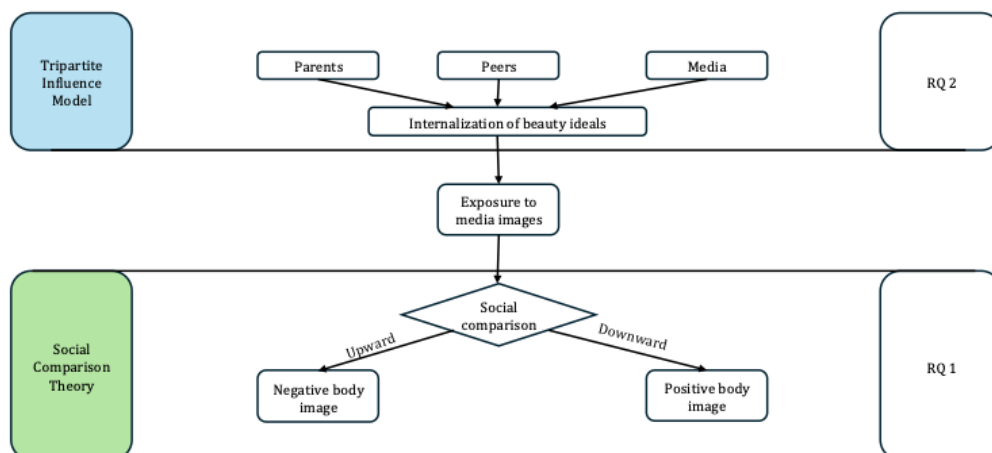


Figure 3: Conceptual Model of Body Image Responses to Social Media Images



3. Method

3.1. Participants

This study includes 20 female undergraduates aged 18 to 26 ($M = 20.01$, $SD = 2.03$) from three universities in mainland China (public, private, and vocational) to ensure diversity. The average BMI was 20.56 ($SD = 4.00$). All participants were Chinese citizens identifying as Asian Chinese. The basic information about participants is presented in Table 1.

Participants were recruited through online community groups, peer referrals, and university bulletin boards, with the study broadly presented as an interview-based research project exploring the impact of social media images on body perception among young women.

Table 1: Participants' Basic Information

Participant Alias	Age	BMI	BAS-2
Ran	26	22.52	39
Hong	23	23.85	36
Min	21	17.36	35
Xia	21	25.12	20
Jin	26	22.60	40
Lin	21	18.14	35
Xuan	21	17.13	37
Ley	24	21.64	34
Kai	25	19.20	34
Yi	24	23.80	23
Mei	23	21.50	25
Fang	26	18.50	38
Zhen	24	24.10	20
Dan	25	22.30	28
Yue	24	20.80	32
Wei	25	23.10	34
Yao	18	21.50	38
Fu	24	22.70	34
Tu	19	23.90	35
Hua	20	20.10	38

3.2. Materials

3.2.1. Body Appreciation Scale

The Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2) was included in this study to assess body appreciation levels and provide context for analyzing textual data. Since this research explores how social media images promote body positivity, and body appreciation is a key indicator of body positivity, incorporating this measure is essential (Swami et al., 2023). Research indicates that individuals with a positive body image tend to filter out negative information and focus on positive messages, helping them maintain a stable self-image and resist harmful media influences (Piran, 2019). Given this, textual analysis should be conducted with consideration of participants' varying body appreciation levels.

The Mandarin version of BAS-2 (CBAS-2) has demonstrated strong construct validity in China, correlating positively with self-esteem and body satisfaction while negatively with BMI and body surveillance (Ma et al., 2022). Participants rated ten CBAS-2 items before viewing images using a five-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater body appreciation (see Appendix A).

3.2.2. Interview Guide

To investigate how images of average-sized models influence women's body image and the underlying mechanisms, a semi-structured interview approach was used. This method allows for flexibility in participants' responses while ensuring that key themes are consistently addressed. The interview questions were developed based on existing research on body image (consists of emotions, cognitions, and behaviors related to appearance; Rodgers et al., 2021), Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), and Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al., 1999).

All questions were designed following the Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) framework, ensuring that each question aligns closely with the study's research questions and is open-ended (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The full interview protocol is presented in Table 2.

First, participants were asked about their social media usage (Q1), which helps establish their level of exposure to body-related content and the platforms where they engage with such images. Following this, they were prompted to reflect on their awareness of average-sized models (Q2). Since body image perceptions are shaped by exposure and interpretation, this question examines whether participants actively recognize shifts in representation. To assess emotional and cognitive responses, participants were asked how these images affect their self-perception and body satisfaction (Q3). This allows for an exploration of both positive and negative reactions, helping to determine whether such representations foster body positivity or trigger comparison.

Since social comparison theory suggests that individuals evaluate themselves relative to others, a direct question on comparison tendencies was included (Q4). This helps uncover whether participants internalize new beauty ideals or experience relief from unrealistic standards. Additionally, to explore behavioral influence, participants were asked whether these images have impacted their lifestyle choices (Q5). This question provides insight into the real-world impact of average-sized model representation on women's habits and self-presentation.

Finally, given the cultural specificity of beauty ideals, participants were asked how Chinese beauty standards influence their perception of average-sized models (Q6). Since body image concerns are shaped by cultural and societal norms, this question allows for an analysis of whether exposure to average-sized models aligns with or challenges dominant aesthetic preferences in China.

Table 2: Interview Protocol

Question	Content
Q1	Which social media platforms do you use most often? How much time do you spend on them daily?
Q2	Have you noticed an increase in images featuring average-sized models? How would you define an "average-sized model"?

- | | |
|----|---|
| Q3 | How do images of average-sized models make you feel about your own body? Do they influence your body satisfaction or self-perception? |
| Q4 | Do you compare yourself to average-sized models? How does this comparison affect your body image? |
| Q5 | Have these images influenced your lifestyle, such as exercise, diet, or clothing choices? |
| Q6 | How do cultural beauty standards in China affect your perception of average-sized models? |
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3.2.1. Average-sized Model Images

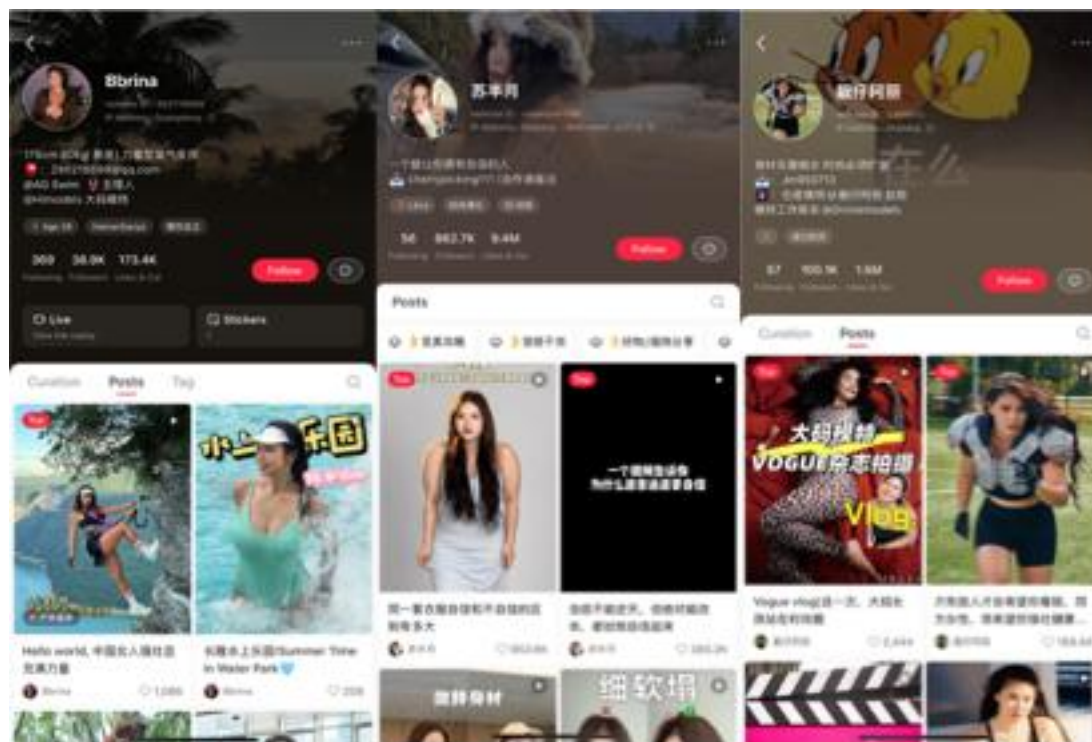
To better capture participants' immediate reactions, the interview protocol included exposure to carefully selected social media posts featuring average-sized models, followed by probing questions about their perceptions and emotional responses. To ensure the selected images authentically reflected real-world social media exposure, average-sized model content was sourced from Xiaohongshu, a popular Chinese platform known for its influence on young women's beauty standards. The search began with the keyword "average-sized model" and "plus-sized models" to identify influencers whose body types aligned with the study's focus on non-idealized representations. Three media bloggers were selected based on the following criteria: (i) a follower count exceeding 300,000, ensuring their content had substantial reach and cultural relevance; and (ii) self-reported height and weight indicating a BMI between 24 and 27.9, classifying them as "overweight" by WHO standards and thus representative of average-sized models in the Chinese context. The chosen influencers included #Bbrina (38.9k followers), #Su BanYue (862.7k followers), and #Liangzai Ali (100.3k followers), based on their follower counts on Xiaohongshu at the time of data collection (screenshots captured by the author in May 2025 are shown in Figure 4). Among the selected influencers, #Bbrina and #Liangzai Ali predominantly featured athletic displays in their posts (e.g., workout routines, sports attire, and active lifestyle content). In contrast, #Su BanYue's content primarily consisted of carefully posed fashion shots (including studio portraits, outfit flat lays, and styled beauty looks). This intentional content variation allowed for comparative analysis of how different presentation styles influenced participants' perceptions towards average-sized models.

From each influencer's account, the most viewed posts featuring average-sized bodies were selected, resulting in a total of nine posts used as interview stimuli (see Appendix B). This approach prioritized content with high engagement to replicate the visibility and impact typical of users' everyday social media consumption. The final image set aimed to balance diversity in styling (e.g., casual, fashion, or lifestyle contexts) while maintaining consistency in body type representation, thereby allowing participants to engage with material that mirrored organic online experiences.

Participants (n = 20) took part in one-on-one interviews conducted in a quiet, vacant classroom at their institutions. This study was approved by the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC) with the ethical approval code UM.TNC2/UMREC_3512. Before the formal session, each participant was welcomed and completed a brief demographic questionnaire and the BAS-2 to assess self-body appreciation. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and all participants provided informed consent after being fully briefed on the study's purpose and procedures. The interviewer confirmed that recording was active to mark the official start of the interview.

The semi-structured interview began with questions about participants' social media use and awareness of average-sized models (Q1–Q2). Participants were then shown nine curated social media posts featuring average-sized models on a laptop, viewing them at their own pace while sharing immediate reactions.

Figure 4: Screenshots of Bloggers' Profiles from Xiaohongshu (Captured by The Author, May 2025)



After viewing, participants answered questions about emotional responses (Q3), social comparison tendencies (Q4), potential behavioral influences (Q5), and perceptions of cultural beauty standards (Q6). An open discussion followed, allowing participants to elaborate on reflections and revisit the images if desired.

Each interview lasted about 20–30 minutes. Afterward, a standardized post-interview protocol ensured methodological rigor and ethical compliance. The researcher first verified the audio recording's integrity, checking duration and clarity for transcription. Participants were then debriefed with a summary of the study's objectives on body image perceptions, information on how their data contributed to research on average-sized model representation in Chinese social media, and a list of counseling resources for body image concerns. They were reminded of their right to withdraw data within 14 days and given the principal investigator's contact information. Finally, participants were thanked for their openness and valuable contribution to understanding non-idealized body representation and self-perception among Chinese female students. The interview protocol's workflow is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: The Workflow of Interview Protocol

Step	Procedure
1	Welcome all participants (one-on-one interview at a classroom)
2	Read the information sheet and sign the consent sheet
3	Complete the demographic questionnaire and the BAS-2

- 4 Interview is formally started. Start recording.
 - 5 Answer Q1 and Q2
 - 6 View nine average-sized model images
 - 7 Answer Q3–Q6
 - 8 Expanded discussion if participants have additional reflections
 - 9 Finish work (thank all participants, check the recording files, etc.)
-

3.3. Thematic Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis to systematically examine the interview data, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of Chinese female university students' psychological responses to average-sized model images on social media and their influencing factors. Following Clarke and Braun (2017) six-phase analytical framework, the research team first conducted repeated readings of the interview transcripts to establish comprehensive familiarity with the data. Through open coding, initial concepts were identified and subsequently synthesized into higher-level thematic patterns.

During coding, special attention was given to how BAS-2-measured individual differences shaped theme development, revealing how varying body appreciation levels moderated responses to the images. A combined inductive–deductive approach was used, maintaining sensitivity to raw data while aligning with existing theories. Reliability was ensured through constant comparison, researcher triangulation, and member checking. All coding was managed in NVivo 12 to enhance transparency and reproducibility, effectively capturing participants' psychological experiences alongside individual variations.

4. Findings

This study explores the Chinese university young women's opinions towards average-sized model images on social media and their underlying mechanisms through in-depth interviews. Using Thematic Analysis, two main themes related to the research questions are presented, which are opinions towards images and underlying mechanisms. Based on these two themes, three subthemes were divided into the theme opinions towards images, which are self-superiority, confidence but unattractive, and healthy vs. unhealthy perceptions. Another three subthemes were generated behind the theme underlying mechanisms, which are families and peers' "pale and thin" beauty standards, the influence of social media, and a desire to be accepted. Table 4 shows the code sheet of the interview data. The following section presents an analysis of each theme, supported by interview data and the results of BAS-2 measurements.

Table 4: Interview Code Sheet

Theme	Subtheme	Description	Examples	Frequency
Opinions towards body images	Self-superiority and body appreciation	Participants with low body appreciation tended to feel body superiority while viewing average-sized models	I think their bodies look a bit overweight, especially around the legs and waist. This makes me feel a little superior.	19
	Confidence but unattractive	Participants thought those models were	She looks confident... But honestly, I don't	18

	Healthy vs. unhealthy perceptions	Active average-sized models were viewed as healthy, posed ones as unhealthy	confident but looked unattractive want to be like her, because she is too fat to be confident. Seeing those sporty images, I feel they look full of energy and vitality. It makes me want to be more active. Posed models seem a bit unnatural and don't look as healthy.	14
Underlying mechanisms	Families and Peers' "pale and thin" beauty standards	Chinese family, society and peers all favor pale and thin bodies	Ever since I was young, my family would say, 'It's better to be thin.' That definitely influenced how I see beauty.	20
	The influence of social media	Social media content portrays the beauty ideals	Social media is filled with people trying to be skinny. It makes me feel like thinness is the ultimate beauty standard.	10
	A desire to be accepted	Being thin is more acceptable and popular among the society	I feel like being thin makes it easier to be liked and accepted by others, so I always try to maintain my weight.	11

4.1. Opinions Towards Average-sized Images

4.1.1. Self-superiority And Body Appreciation

After viewing average-sized model images, most participants reported experiencing a sense of "superiority"—that is, after comparing themselves to the models, they believed their own bodies were better, leading to downward comparison (Festinger, 1954; Tylka et al., 2023). However, this phenomenon manifested differently among participants with varying self-body appreciation scores (BAS-2).

First, this downward comparison effect was particularly pronounced among participants with lower BAS-2 scores. For example, Dan (age 25, BMI=22.3, BAS-2=28) remarked: "I think their bodies look a bit overweight, especially around the legs and waist. This makes me feel a little superior—I'm at least thinner than them." Similarly, Xia (age 21, BMI=25.12, BAS-2=20) stated: "I don't like these kinds of bodies—they remind me of myself, but I still feel slightly better than them." This suggests that participants with lower body appreciation were more likely to engage in downward comparison

when viewing average-sized images, using it as a form of self-affirmation. This aligns with Moreno-Domínguez et al. (2018), who found that people often enhance their self-image by comparing themselves to overweight female models.

In contrast, participants with high BAS-2 scores did not focus on comparison behaviors. This may stem from their greater body satisfaction or more ideal body types, reducing their need to validate themselves through comparisons with larger-bodied models. For instance, Xuan (age 21, BMI=17.13, BAS-2=37) noted: "I don't compare myself to them; in fact, I feel a bit resistant. I prefer influencers who are thinner—it gives me the motivation to 'improve myself.'"

This indicates that when the models' bodies were too dissimilar or perceived as inferior, participants were less likely to engage in comparison. This finding may be explained by de Lenne et al. (2023), who argue that perceived similarity increases engagement with such images. For higher-BMI participants, the resemblance to their own bodies may have heightened attention to specific features (e.g., "fat around the legs and waist"), creating more opportunities for downward comparison. Meanwhile, lower-BMI participants, lacking this similarity, showed less connection with the models.

Additionally, Hong (age 23, BMI=23.8, BAS-2=36), who had a higher BAS-2 score despite not having a notably low BMI, commented: "I don't want to compare myself to them. I think every woman has her own beauty, and I'd rather focus on how my body feels." This suggests that even without a physically "superior" body, high body appreciation could prevent downward comparison. This may be linked to a more positive body image, as body appreciation is a key indicator of body positivity (Swami et al., 2023). According to Piran (2019), individuals with positive body images tend to filter out negative cues, focus on positive ones, and maintain a stable self-image. Thus, high BAS-2 participants may not fixate on the models' perceived flaws or use comparisons to bolster their self-esteem.

In summary, participants with low body appreciation were more likely to reinforce their self-image and alleviate body dissatisfaction through downward comparison when viewing average-sized models. In contrast, those with high body appreciation—whether due to dissimilar body types or a more positive body image—often avoided such comparisons altogether.

4.1.2. Confidence but Unattractive

Most participants mentioned that the models appeared "confident" after viewing the images, which made them feel more at ease. They also expressed that this mindset was worth learning and promoting. For example, Hua (age 20, BMI=20.1, BAS-2=38) noted: "Seeing these models makes me feel more relaxed. Unlike supermodels, they don't make me feel pressured. I don't think their bodies are necessarily better than mine, but their confidence is inspiring." Similarly, Fang (age 26, BMI=18.5, BAS-2=38) remarked: "I still feel quite inspired. They're so confident and composed despite being larger-bodied—I should learn from their attitude." This suggests that, unlike thin-ideal models, average-sized models do not impose body-related pressure on women. Instead, they convey a more inclusive atmosphere, allowing women to temporarily escape body dissatisfaction and adopt a more self-accepting mindset.

This result may be linked to the fact that average-sized models represent non-idealized bodies. Since such body types deviate significantly from societal beauty standards, they can be seen as a form of resistance against the "thin ideal" hegemony. This aligns with the body positivity movement, which advocates for more diverse body representations to foster self-acceptance and challenge narrow beauty norms (de Lenne et al., 2023; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Consequently, women perceive these images as positive messages and endorse them (de Lenne et al., 2023), explaining why participants expressed appreciation after viewing average-sized model images.

However, when asked whether they would personally want to have the models' body types, most participants did not explicitly affirm this desire. Many indirectly stated that they admired the models' confidence and free-spirited attitude but avoided directly endorsing the bodies themselves.

First, this may relate to the fact that non-idealized models are socially recognized as positive symbols within body positivity discourse. Since openly criticizing them could be perceived as rejecting progressive values (e.g., inclusivity, diverse beauty standards), participants may have concealed their true attitudes to avoid social disapproval. According to social identity theory (Tajfel et al., 1979), individuals tend to align with in-group norms (e.g., body-positive communities) to maintain a favorable self-image, potentially suppressing dissenting opinions to avoid ostracization.

Second, this ambiguity may stem from the interview structure. Before being asked whether they would want the models' bodies, participants had already praised their confidence. Thus, when questioned directly, some may have felt unable to contradict their earlier statements without appearing inconsistent. Instead, they implied reluctance without outright rejection. For instance, Lin (age 21, BMI=18.14, BAS-2=35) said: "I prefer my current body, but if I ever looked like them, I'd hope to be just as confident." While not explicitly rejecting the models' bodies, her emphasis on preferring her lower-BMI figure subtly conveyed reluctance.

Nevertheless, some participants openly expressed aversion. Yi (age 24, BMI=23.8, BAS-2=23) stated: "She looks confident...But honestly, I don't want to be like her, because she is too fat to me." Here, Yi acknowledged the models' confidence but still deemed their bodies socially undesirable.

In summary, while participants celebrated the body-positive messaging of average-sized models, their personal aspirations often remained within conventional beauty standards—suggesting that, when it comes to their own bodies, many still prioritize fitting into the "safe zone" of societal ideals.

4.1.3. Healthy vs. Unhealthy Perceptions

The majority of participants demonstrated a distinct preference for average-sized activewear models, perceiving them as healthier and more inspirational. This positive evaluation extended beyond mere aesthetic appreciation to actual behavioral motivation. Notably, the study included posed average-sized models (e.g., #Su Ban Yue) of similar body types, which helped isolate the impact of dynamic presentation from body size factors.

Yue (age 24, BMI=20.8, BAS-2=32) vividly captured this distinction: "Those dynamic model images looked so energetic - it changed my stereotypes about average bodies. It made me want to be more active myself. I've started wearing more athletic clothes, which has really boosted my confidence." Hong (age 23, BMI=23.8, BAS-2=36) added: "Active average-sized models appear strong and lively, which motivates me to exercise and reconsider what true healthy beauty means." These responses suggest that active average-sized models not only challenge traditional aesthetic biases but also serve as role models for healthy lifestyles, effectively inspiring self-improvement motivation.

In contrast, posed average-sized models were generally perceived as less natural and healthy. Yi (age 24, BMI=23.8, BAS-2=23) commented: "Posed average-sized models look somewhat unnatural and not as healthy." This evaluative difference reveals a crucial finding in participants' aesthetic standards: with body size held constant, presentation style significantly influences health perceptions.

This phenomenon may relate to the emerging body neutrality movement (Pellizzer & Wade, 2023), which advocates focusing on body functionality rather than mere appearance. The movement associates functional body display with positive life attitudes. Active models, by demonstrating physical capability, convey more positive messages than posed models, making them more appealing to participants (Mulgrew et al., 2020).

Overall, findings suggest contemporary beauty standards are shifting from pure body size criteria toward more functional health expressions. However, this transition remains complex - while participants appreciated the healthy beauty displayed by active average-sized models, traditional aesthetic biases still surfaced when viewing static presentations. This finding highlights how dynamic presentation may mediate body image perceptions, with active displays helping to counteract size-based stereotypes more effectively than posed images.

4.2. Underlying Mechanisms

4.2.1. Families and Peers' "Pale and Thin" Beauty Standards

Many participants grew up in families and social circles that reinforced the belief that "thin equals beauty." This cultural conditioning profoundly shaped their body ideals, particularly among those in the low and mid BAS-2 groups.

According to the Tripartite Influence Model, familial and peer social influences play pivotal roles in shaping individuals' body image and aesthetic standards (Thompson et al., 1999). Numerous participants reported receiving persistent "thin-is-beautiful" messaging during their formative years, with these reinforced beliefs gradually internalizing into their personal aesthetic standards. For instance, Zhen (age 24, BMI=24.1, BAS-2=20) recalled her family frequently emphasizing that "it's still better to be thinner" - these direct familial evaluations became foundational to her body perception, demonstrating how parental commentary on appearance significantly impacts children's self-worth and body satisfaction.

Concurrently, peer groups subtly reinforced these beauty norms through social osmosis. Yi (age 24, BMI=23.8, BAS-2=23) noted: "My friends all believe 'being pale and thin is the best.' This makes me think that being skinny is the only way to be beautiful." When peer

groups predominantly endorse the "pale, thin, and youthful" beauty standard, individuals often adjust their self-perception through social comparison, sometimes developing conformist tendencies to meet group expectations. This peer pressure manifests not only through explicit verbal evaluations but also permeates daily interactions and group culture, making it emotionally challenging to escape the entrenched "thin-equals-beautiful" ideology, even when rationally questioning monolithic beauty standards.

While high BAS-2 group participants demonstrated greater acceptance of diverse body types, they still acknowledged societal beauty standard pressures. Xuan (age 21, BMI=17.13, BAS-2=37) shared: "Even though I personally accept average-sized models, I can't deny that most people around me still prefer thinness." This reveals how societal ideals remain deeply internalized, even among those who recognize body diversity's value.

Thus, the dual influences of family and peers create a reinforcing cycle that cements traditional beauty standards in individual cognition. Even body-positive individuals like Xuan must acknowledge their social environment's continued preference for the "thin ideal." This socialization process illustrates how body image concerns constitute not merely individual psychological phenomena, but sociocultural products deeply embedded in family dynamics and peer relationships.

4.2.2. The Influence of Social Media

The study examines social media's influence on body image through the lens of the Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al., 1999), revealing complex dynamics in media consumption patterns.

Participants with lower body appreciation (low BAS-2 scores) demonstrate passive engagement with weight-loss content, as illustrated by Yi's (age 24, BMI=23.8, BAS-2=23) statement: "I browse Xiaohongshu daily...body management content motivates me." This reflects both media socialization effects and active gratification-seeking behavior, where users fulfill self-improvement and affiliation needs through curated thin-ideal content.

In contrast, high BAS-2 participants exhibit more selective consumption patterns. Hong (age 23, BMI=23.8, BAS-2=36) noted: "I prioritize fitness content, health over weight," demonstrating how these users satisfy self-actualization and informational needs while resisting mainstream beauty standards. Despite acknowledging persistent societal preferences for thinness, they employ mood management strategies through positive content to maintain body acceptance.

The findings suggest social media's influence operates through an interactive process between algorithmic systems and user motivations. While low-scorers instrumentally consume content for anxiety relief, high-scorers expressively curate feeds for cognitive autonomy, creating distinct discursive spaces around body image.

4.2.3. A Desire to Be Accepted

The study reveals that most participants perceive slimness as critical social capital, particularly pronounced among low BAS-2 scorers.

Participants' narratives clearly reflect how societal evaluation systems shape body cognition. Lin (age 21, BMI=18.14, BAS-2=35) noted: "Thinner people undeniably receive more appearance-based praise; it's a pervasive social reality," demonstrating the internalization of beauty standards for positive feedback. Hua (age 20, BMI=20.1, BAS-2=38) added: "Maintaining a slim figure significantly enhances social acceptance," revealing the social adaptation motive behind body management. These views reflect the strong influence of sociocultural norms, which consistently link slimness to social approval and positive evaluation. Such norms are often internalized through long-term socialization, including influences from family, peers, and society at large.

Notably, group differences emerged. Some high BAS-2 participants asserted: "Self-confidence and health outweigh sheer thinness" (Hong, age 23, BMI=23.8, BAS-2=36), suggesting that supportive subcultures may foster resistance to dominant aesthetics. Thus, individuals' body ideals largely depend on the social norms and values they endorse, aligning with either the "thinness-as-value" or "health-as-beauty" paradigm.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Limitation of Average-sized Images

A key finding of this study reveals that while viewing average-sized model images may temporarily alleviate women's body dissatisfaction, individuals with lower self-body appreciation tend to enhance their self-image through downward social comparisons to gain a sense of superiority. Notably, although most participants praised the confidence displayed by these models and endorsed their body-positive attitudes, virtually none expressed a genuine desire to attain such body types themselves.

This suggests that exposure to average-sized images may only provide short-term relief from body image concerns, without fundamentally challenging the societal thin-ideal beauty standard. Participants' apparent admiration for the models' confidence and liberated mindset likely reflects conformity to socially desirable attitudes rather than authentic personal beliefs. As participants explicitly stated, they ultimately wanted to be accepted by others.

This pattern may be explained by the Tripartite Influence Model, which highlights how deeply internalized sociocultural beauty norms shape attitudes and behaviors. Even when individuals are exposed to diverse and inclusive body representations, the long-term influences from family, peers, and society continue to prioritize slimness as a dominant ideal. Such strong internalization makes it difficult for people to truly abandon conventional standards, even if they express public support for body positivity.

Therefore, mere exposure to average-sized models may not fundamentally resolve women's negative body image issues, serving only as a temporary coping strategy. Lasting solutions require systemic changes in beauty standards to achieve genuine social acceptance of diverse body types. As Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015) emphasize, comprehensive body image improvement necessitates structural shifts in how societies evaluate and reward different appearances.

5.2. The Positive Effect of Presenting Body Functionality

Although average-sized models are not favored by mainstream beauty standards, participants' evaluations diverged significantly based on whether the models were depicted in active versus passive states. Specifically, participants perceived active models as appearing healthier and more positive, while static poses were frequently described as "unhealthy." This suggests that while participants generally associated larger body sizes with poor health, dynamic portrayals effectively mitigated this stereotype.

The emergence of the body neutrality movement (Pellizzer & Wade, 2023), which emphasizes body functionality over appearance, helps explain these findings. When average-sized models are shown engaging in physical activity, thereby demonstrating bodily capability, they are perceived more positively regardless of conventional attractiveness standards. This functional display appears to override weight-based stereotypes, transforming perceptions of health and vitality.

This discovery carries important implications for challenging narrow beauty ideals. Increased representation of active, average-sized bodies in media may enhance public acceptance of diverse body types. By shifting focus from static appearance to dynamic functionality, such portrayals could help decouple body size from health assumptions in the public consciousness.

5.3. Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, constrained by budget and time, the sample was limited to students from three Chinese universities, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings to women with different educational backgrounds or from other regions. Future research could expand the sample diversity to strengthen the conclusions. Second, as a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews, the small sample size may affect the findings' representativeness. Additionally, the conclusions rely heavily on researchers' interpretation of interview data, introducing potential subjectivity. Future studies could employ quantitative methods like surveys to verify these findings with larger samples. Finally, participants were only exposed to average-sized model images for brief periods (up to several dozen minutes), meaning the findings only reflect short-term effects. In reality, exposure to such images typically occurs cumulatively over time. Therefore, longitudinal studies are needed to better understand the long-term impacts of such exposure.

6. Conclusion

This study conducted in-depth interviews with 20 Chinese female university students to examine how young women perceive average-sized model images on social media and the underlying reasons, offering new insights for promoting body positivity through digital communication. Findings show that while exposure to average-sized models may temporarily ease body dissatisfaction, this effect mainly stems from downward social comparisons that evoke feelings of superiority. Although participants admired these models' confidence, they were still reluctant to accept such body types due to the persistent dominance of the "thin-ideal" norm.

The study further found that emphasizing body functionality, especially through active portrayals of average-sized models, elicited more positive evaluations, suggesting a potential path toward greater acceptance of body diversity. The Tripartite Influence Model explains how family, peers, and media jointly shape Chinese women's internalization of thinness as the dominant beauty ideal. Meanwhile, Social Comparison Theory clarifies how downward comparisons function as a short-term strategy to improve self-perception when viewing average-sized bodies.

Overall, the findings indicate that viewing average-sized model images may only provide short-term relief rather than foster lasting body positivity. Challenging thin-ideal hegemony requires broader cultural shifts toward valuing body functionality. At the individual level, fostering self-body appreciation may strengthen resistance to the negative influence of thin-ideal imagery pervasive in social media.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (RECUKM). All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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