Less (Model's Weight) is More (Population Overweight): Fashion Models and the Overweight Epidemic

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ABSTRACT

Advertisements that present the image of the slim figures of models, movie actors and celebs are often blamed in triggering anorexia. In this paper we suggest that the slim model effect on consumers' weight is substantially greater than previously estimated due to its role in the emergence of overweight spread. We develop an economic model of rational consumer food consumption showing that the growing gap between the ideal and average figure has made the former irrelevant for most individuals. Thus, consumers now refer to the median weight rather than to the ideal one, as the latter has lost its restraining ability. We show that the lower weight of the ideal beauty figure interplayed with other factors (such as the increasing level of food industrialization) exhibits a form of overweight epidemic dynamics that is dominated by a multiplier effect. Based on large-scale historical datasets, we support our theoretical assertions by analyzing US population BMI's over the past five decades vis-à-vis ideal beauty body-size proxies, while controlling for large sets of demographic variables and food industry data.

Keywords: Fashion models, the overweight epidemic, food consumption, ideal of beauty, reference points, Body Mass Index (BMI)