

1 **The Grit in the Glamour:**

2 **A Qualitative Study of the Well-Being of Fashion Models**

3
4 **Abstract**

5 Fashion models are often assumed to have a glamorous job with limited consideration
6 for their well-being. This study aims to assess the well-being of models through semi-structured
7 interviews with six professional fashion models and six industry professionals. Thematic
8 analysis revealed that although models experienced improved self-confidence, they also
9 reported heightened anxiety levels, body image issues and negative influence of modelling on
10 their self-esteem. By contrast, industry professionals reported no or minimum concerns about
11 anxious behaviours or the general well-being of fashion models. Being resilient as a model was
12 perceived as an essential attribute to have by both models and industry professionals as they
13 face recurrent rejection in this industry. These results demonstrate a significant gap in the
14 current understanding of the well-being of fashion models between industry professionals and
15 the models themselves. Findings imply that there is an inherent need for change in the
16 modelling industry to promote and enhance their well-being.

17
18 **KEYWORDS:** Modelling, Fashion industry, Well-being, Body image, Resilience

1 **1. Introduction**

2 In early 2020 and before the COVID-19 pandemic, the global fashion industry was
3 generating an annual revenue of \$2.5 trillion U.S. dollars (Amed et al. 2020). The fashion
4 industry is mostly unregulated, allowing companies to operate in unethical ways and causing a
5 real detriment to human lives (Wallenberg and Thanem 2017). These issues seem to have
6 exacerbated in light of the COVID-19 pandemic with the fashion industry workforce facing
7 endless struggles and financial hardship (The Business of Fashion & McKinsey 2020). In
8 recent years, the modelling and fashion industry has received widespread criticism for its less
9 than ethical practices (Lewak and Ridley 2017; Preti et al. 2008; Santonastaso, Mondini, and
10 Favaro 2002).

11 One of the most predominant ethical issues is the constant bombardment with the
12 idealised female body in media imagery, which has been associated with an increase in adverse
13 effects on well-being such as negative mood, body image dissatisfaction, and eating disorder
14 symptoms among young women (see Levine and Harrison 2004 for review). Social comparison
15 theory stipulates that people often engage in self-evaluations by comparing themselves to
16 others (Festinger 1954) and evidence shows that fashion models tend to engage
17 disproportionately in a “higher drive for thinness” than non-models (Swami and Szmigielska
18 2013, 113). Models are also at a higher risk of “lower psychological needs satisfaction, less
19 well-being, and less optimal personality adjustment” (Meyer et al. 2007, 2). Models also face
20 a higher risk of developing disordered eating habits and anorexia nervosa (Santonastaso,
21 Mondini, and Favaro 2002).

22 Despite the voiced concerns of mistreatment of models in the fashion industry, little has
23 changed in recent years with regards to regulation and protection. The most referenced and
24 recent example of an attempted change is that of the French passing legislature in 2017 ruling
25 that for each model to participate in Paris Fashion Week, an authorized health certificate

1 displaying a healthy Body Mass Index (BMI) must be provided (Gayle 2017). Another
2 attempted instance of change within the industry was the passing of a New York law in 2013
3 whereby models would be required to be 18 or over to participate in fashion week (Dockterman
4 2014; Willsher 2017). Yet, there is evidence that this rule is not being enforced as adolescents
5 have since been spotted on the catwalk following the passing of this legislation (Stampler
6 2019). Some examples include celebrities such as Kaia Gerber (age 16), Bella Hadid (age 17),
7 Mason Grammer (age 14) and Ondria Hardin (age 14), all of whom walked in New York
8 Fashion Week while underage (Milligan 2016). Furthermore, this is a loophole that exists for
9 modelling agencies regarding the underage model ban. While they are not allowed to let
10 underage girls work, they typically scout the girls as young as age 14 and do not actively
11 manage, promote or sign them to contracts until they are 16 (Chen 2018).

12 In the UK, there is still a lot of work to be undertaken to safeguard the well-being of
13 models. The issues mentioned above in the modelling and fashion industry raise concerns about
14 the well-being of fashion models and their experiences in this growing industry. Nonetheless,
15 research in this area is scant.

16

17 **2. Literature review**

18 ***2.1. Fashion models and the fashion industry***

19 Although the fashion industry has the reputation of being alluring and glamorous, the
20 #MeToo movement and online call-out culture have caused a ripple effect and a restructuring
21 of the fashion industry (Fernandez 2018). Several collectives have formed to bring awareness
22 to and stop the mistreatment of models in fashion such as the Model Alliance in New York,
23 and Responsible Trust for Models in the UK. These organisations advocate for models' rights
24 in response to the prevalence of abuse in the fashion community (Roux 2019; Sodomsky 2014).
25 For example, models are widely accepted and categorized as independent contractors and

1 hence, are less protected by the law (Goldberg 2015). For instance, “minimum wage laws do
2 not apply to them, and the clients can pay the models in trade, meaning just clothes, not
3 cash” (Sodomsky 2014, 296).

4 The financial side of modelling remains a harsh reality models must face. Victoire
5 Maçon Dauxerre, author of *Size Zero: My Life as a Disappearing Model* stated she earned
6 “several tens of thousands of euros” but only received “10,000 euros” of her income (Praagh
7 2017). Payment schedules are not regulated and it can take months to receive pay for a job
8 (Cole 2018). This type of job insecurity of not knowing when you will be paid, how much it
9 will be and if there is another job on the horizon can create not only a perpetual state of
10 dependence on the agency but also can negatively impact the well-being of fashion models.
11 Numerous publications have shown that job insecurity negatively impacts health and well-
12 being (e.g. Green and Leeves 2013; Weinstein and Stone 2018; De Witte, Vander, and De
13 Cuyper 2015) including on measures of self-esteem, depression and anxiety (Weinstein and
14 Stone 2018). In order to improve working conditions for models with a positive impact on
15 their well-being, it is crucial to identify current fundamental issues in the fashion industry.

16

17 **2.2. Well-being of fashion models**

18 There has been much discussion on how the concept of well-being should be defined
19 (Dodge et al. 2012). Subjective well-being is a psychological concept that most people highly
20 value (Diener 1998). Existing literature on subjective wellbeing conceptualises this term in a
21 number of ways and with reference to psychological wellbeing – including a focus on self-
22 esteem and self-evaluation (Ryff 1995), life satisfaction (Grob 1991), happiness (Veenhoven
23 1991), and a balance between positive and negative affect (Bradburn 1969). In this study, well-
24 being relates to the concept of subjective well-being including a person’s mental health and
25 ability to manage stress (Davis 2019) and also, physical health. Past literature has linked

1 anxiety with depression (Kinderman et al. 2015). Kinderman and his co-authors also found that
2 while adverse life events were related to depression and anxiety, social isolation was related to
3 low levels of subjective well-being.

4 With specific reference to modelling, a thick skin, and being able to accept rejection is
5 imperative to succeed and survive in this industry (Helmore 2017). Kinderman et al. (2015)
6 further emphasised that rejection and abuse form part of negative life experiences. Therefore,
7 models can be viewed as a high-risk group for depression and anxiety as a result of the amount
8 of rejection they endure throughout their careers.

9 Since the well-being of models is not widely investigated and monitored, models may
10 be developing undiagnosed mental health issues which are left untreated. Schonfeld et al.
11 (1997) explained that untreated anxiety and major depressive disorders have a detrimental
12 impact on functioning. Carr and Mercer (2017) found that modelling can both positively and
13 negatively impact one's psychological development, while also having an effect on one's self-
14 perception, self-confidence and maturity.

15 Modelling has also been revealed to be more than just a profession; it is a lifestyle
16 requiring a tremendous amount of commitment with a significant impact on personal identity
17 and also has the potential to affect mood and self-esteem for some models. However, these
18 findings were limited to a sample of three participants only (Carr and Mercer 2017). Supported
19 by social comparison theory and objectification theory, past research showed that appearance
20 feedback predicted body surveillance, body comparison, self-esteem and disordered eating
21 (Tylka and Sabik 2010). Fredrickson and Roberts (1997, 173) shared similar results, stating
22 that the "internalization of an observer's perspective as a primary view of their physical selves"
23 has a disproportionately large effect on women with regular body monitoring causing increased
24 anxiety, body shaming and this can lead to several mental health risks including eating
25 disorders.

1 There is some evidence on the association between appearance and self-esteem. For
2 example, young adults with high self-esteem reported less dissatisfaction with their appearance
3 and engaged in less social comparison than those with low self-esteem (Lennon, Lillethun, and
4 Buckland 1999). Meyer et al. (2007) also found that models exhibited lower self-esteem than
5 non-models, possibly jeopardizing their psychological well-being.

6 Considerable attention has been previously drawn to professional fashion models being
7 more susceptible to eating disorders as their careers tend to rely on extreme thinness as opposed
8 to non-models (Record and Austin 2016). Preti et al. (2008) examined the prevalence of eating
9 disorders among professional fashion models and found that models were highly at risk of
10 suffering from anorexia nervosa. Behaviours and characteristics such as restrictive eating,
11 bulimic episodes, physical activity for weight-control, guilt after eating, body shape and weight
12 concerns, menstrual difficulties and also, an unhealthy BMI were all found to be more prevalent
13 in models than non-models. However, although previous research has examined the effects of
14 young women observing the thin-ideal in advertising (e.g. Dittmar and Howard 2004b;
15 Halliwell and Dittmar 2004; Phillips and McQuarrie 2011) the impact of the internalized thin-
16 ideal on the well-being of fashion models is yet to be explored.

17 Fashion models have been found to exhibit symptoms of anxiety, such as nervousness
18 surrounding their body image (Carr and Mercer 2017). This type of *body-focused anxiety* has
19 also been explored in other studies (e.g. Dittmar and Howard 2004a; Halliwell and Dittmar
20 2004) with an indication that high internalization of the thin-ideal and “strong habitual social
21 comparison” (Dittmar and Howard 2004a, 1) harmed body image in women (Greenberg and
22 Hofschire 2001; Phillips and McQuarrie 2011; Tiggemann and McGill 2004).

23 However, what these studies failed to recognize or explore is the effect of these image
24 expectations, internalization and social comparison on the perpetrators of this perfect and ideal
25 body image, the models themselves. The study of Swami and Szmigielska (2013) is one of the

1 very few that assessed whether fashion models were a vulnerable group to suffer from body
2 image concerns. It was found that fashion models had a very pronounced drive for thinness
3 even when already having a low body mass. Models also revealed a higher level of
4 dysfunctional investment regarding their appearance than non-models.

5 So far, a few studies exploring the general or psychological well-being of fashion-
6 models concluded that models are at an increased risk of poor well-being. For example, Meyer
7 et al. (2007) found that models suffered from personality maladjustment and a lower sense of
8 well-being due to unfulfilled basic psychological needs. Meyer et al. was the first study to
9 speculate on the reasoning behind psychological maladjustment in models. The authors
10 emphasized the importance of motivation supported by self-determination theory (Deci and
11 Ryan 2002). With the three basic psychological needs being: competence (need to be confident
12 and effective), relatedness (need for a sense of belonging) and autonomy (need for choice,
13 control and freedom of behaviour). This theory examines motivation, both autonomous
14 (actions based on free will) and controlled (a product of obligation and pressure). Possible
15 reasons for lower well-being in models were linked to models being primarily valued for
16 superficial attributes, affecting their competence coupled with constant travelling and the
17 transitory nature of the modelling profession leading to more superficial relationships, limited
18 relatedness, and finally, a lack of free will in the job. The authors concluded that modelling
19 could be “lonely”, “unfulfilling” and cause models to feel “undervalued” (Meyer et al. 2007,
20 14).

21

22 ***2.3. The current study***

23 Though fashion models are defined as the epitome of perfection, models suffer from
24 unsatisfied needs and have significantly lower well-being when compared to non-models
25 (Meyer et al. 2007). Nonetheless, no study has yet considered and explored the perspectives of

1 both industry professionals and the models themselves on the well-being of fashion models
2 using a qualitative approach for an in-depth understanding of the topic. The present research
3 will attempt to answer this first research question: (1) how do the perspectives of fashion
4 models and professional industry experts compare on topic of the well-being of models?

5 Research exploring why the very concerning realities of this industry still exist remains
6 very limited (Prete et al. 2008; Ziff 2019). Many studies have alternatively been conducted to
7 examine the effects of idealised beauty stereotyping in fashion magazines on body image in
8 young women who are not in the modelling profession (e.g. Grabe, Ward, and Hyde 2008;
9 Kozar 2010; Thomsen et al. 2002). However, to our knowledge, no other study has explored
10 the impact of this idealised beauty and the pressure to uphold it on the fashion models
11 themselves with a particular emphasis on young female adults. Our study will attempt to
12 answer this second research question: (2) what is the experience of being a fashion model and
13 to what extent does this influence their well-being?

14

15 **3. Methods**

16 ***3.1. Participants***

17 Convenience and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit twelve participants:
18 six fashion models between the ages of 19 and 28, and six fashion professionals, between the
19 ages of 26 and 69. The demographic information for both groups of participants is provided in
20 Table 1. Our sample size matches the recommendation from Fugard and Potts (2015).

21 INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

22

23 All fashion models had been working in the industry for at least two years and were
24 signed to a contract in one or more major fashion capitals (London, New York, Milan or Paris).
25 The industry group included professionals with different specialisations such as one

1 photographer, one model agency director, one model agent, one fashion business executive,
2 one casting director and one creative director. All of whom had direct relationships with models
3 in the industry through hiring, promoting or managing.

4 **3.2. Materials**

6 Two semi-structured interview schedules were designed; one for each group, i.e.
7 models and professionals. Both interview schedules consisted of 15 open-ended self-designed
8 questions in line with past literature on fashion models and well-being (e.g. Ahern, Bennett,
9 and Hetherington 2008; Kinderman et al. 2015; Meyer et al. 2007; Swami and Szmigielska
10 2013). Questions to models probed into their experiences and well-being (e.g. “what is it like
11 to be a model?”; “do you feel that modelling has impacted in any way how you feel about
12 yourself?”). For industry professionals, questions revolved around their perceptions of the
13 well-being of fashion models (e.g. “do you think modelling impacts in any way how models
14 think about or perceive themselves?”; “what do you think the main struggles of fashion models
15 are?”).

17 **3.3. Procedure**

18 This study received ethical approval from the Psychology Review Ethics Panel at the
19 London College of Fashion. Interviews with fashion models lasted on average for an hour while
20 the interviews with industry professionals lasted on average, for around 25 minutes. All
21 interviews were audio-recorded following informed consent from the participants. Pseudonyms
22 are used to refer to all participants.

24 **3.4. Data analysis**

25 All interview recordings were transcribed orthographically, coded and analysed on

1 NVivo software (version 10) using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The six steps
2 as proposed by Braun and Clarke were followed: 1) familiarisation with the data; 2) initial
3 coding; 3) identifying themes; 4) reviewing the themes; 5) defining and naming themes, and 6)
4 report writing. Only semantic themes were identified. Reliability was established with the
5 second author reviewing the coding process and acting as the second coder.

6

7 **4. Results and Discussion**

8 This study aimed to explore the well-being of fashion models from the perspective of
9 models themselves and industry professionals to capture the extent to which there are existing
10 gaps in understanding. Thematic analysis identified two main themes: (1) the work perception
11 gap between models and professionals with two sub-themes (experience as a fashion model
12 and the illusion of glamour); and (2) models' well-being with four sub-themes (happiness,
13 resilience, anxiety, self-esteem).

14

15 ***4.1. Theme 1: The work perception gap between models and professionals***

16 This theme sheds light on the nature of the modelling career and how this relates to the
17 well-being of the models. While industry professionals focused mainly on the positive effects
18 of modelling including “enhanced self esteem” and “confidence”, the models mainly discussed
19 the negative physical and psychological effects of modelling. These discussions involved all
20 models sharing accounts of abuse, sexual objectification and/or extreme pressure from the
21 industry to remain thin.

22

23 **4.1.1. Experience as a fashion model**

24 All the models experienced some form of abuse in their profession. The majority of
25 these instances occurred as a result of the abuse of power in the industry.

1 *“I had one very disgusting experience [...] Everybody left and sort of photographer*
2 *was shooting... and I'm laying on my back [...] And then all of a sudden, he's like, on*
3 *top of me. And I'm like, What the f* is happening? [...]” (Stella, model)*

4 One model commented on corruption in the industry, stating that some countries do not
5 abide by set rules and regulations and “forge the numbers and stuff”, putting the health and
6 well-being of models at risk. All models also stated that they wanted body sizes to be changed
7 to healthier ones so the pressure to engage in disordered eating would be alleviated.

8 *“If the sample sizes changed then we will change” (Cara, model)*

9 Gaps in understanding were identified between models and professionals. When asked
10 what they believed models experienced in the industry, four of the six professionals stated
11 “rejection” and nothing more. Only one professional expressed a desire for increased regulation
12 within the industry to protect models as illustrated below.

13 *“It's either going to be a union for the models, or the designers must be regulated. One*
14 *of the two” (Dana, casting director)*

16 4.1.2. The illusion of glamour

17 Both groups of participants believed that the fashion and modelling industry was
18 incorrectly glamorised by the general public, creating an unrealistic portrayal of this industry.

19 *“The general public thinks of it as a very glamorous job, something that only perfect*
20 *people can do. But the industry itself is more callous” (Scarlett, model)*

21 All six models and three industry professionals also presented the reality that modelling
22 is a short career and models are seen as “disposable”. One industry professional also admitted
23 to building and reinforcing this glamorous illusion as it is a “business of selling dreams”. All
24 models discussed the turmoil created by this short term career in their interviews. This is
25 reflected below.

1 *“I realized that it's not a career for your entire life [...] It's taken me a long time to*
2 *like, be okay with that” (Victoria, model)*

3 Each of the six models shared at least one circumstance where modelling had made
4 them feel very uncomfortable. For example:

5 *“People are just always going to be talking about you right to your face, because they*
6 *completely dehumanize you like I've just had like the strangest comments about like my*
7 *appearance or body made right in front of me” (Rose, model)*

8 This study is an extension of Meyer et al. (2007) whereby it was also revealed that
9 negative experiences in the industry, along with lack of support and uncertainty in the
10 modelling career, harmed the well-being of models.

12 ***4.2. Theme 2: Models' well-being***

13 This theme provides an in-depth insight into the well-being of the fashion models based
14 on the perceptions of industry professionals and the models themselves. All model participants
15 reported that modelling had both positively and negatively affected their well-being in different
16 ways whereas fashion professionals presented more conflicting accounts with minimum
17 concerns raised about the well-being of models.

19 ***4.2.1. Happiness***

20 Several factors were perceived to influence the happiness of models. All model
21 participants identified vocational success to have a positive influence on their happiness. All
22 the models also reported specific moments when their careers had brought them happiness and
23 a sense of fulfilment. These experiences included runway shows as well as campaigns and
24 placements in foreign countries that had left them with the feeling that they had “made it”. As
25 stated by one model:

1 *“As far as the career happiness I think it was several happy moments and especially*
2 *like every good booking [...] for me, it was business, it was earning money. That's it,*
3 *every time the salary would be super good... and I would be booked for that job. I would*
4 *be absolutely above the moon” (Stella, model)*

5 However, all models also explicitly referenced the impact of agency feedback and ‘lost’
6 castings as having “devastating”, “crushing” and “miserable” effects on their happiness.
7 Furthermore, five of the six models explained how they were told by their agency to lose weight
8 and described how this had a direct, negative impact on their happiness and well-being. The
9 sixth model was not asked to lose weight as she was already struggling with anorexia when she
10 began modelling. This consistent pressure to conform to a particular body size seemed to lead
11 to feelings of body insecurities and a lack of self-acceptance as they would report never feeling
12 satisfied with their weight or physique.

13 *“I was told to lose weight within a certain amount of time for a contract which I think*
14 *I lost most of it but not all of it that my agency wanted. But in that period of my life I*
15 *was the most neurotic. Like the most upset that I probably was in my whole life”*
16 *(Scarlett, model)*

17 As found in past research, appearance feedback is associated with body surveillance,
18 body comparison, self-esteem and also, disordered eating (Tylka and Sabik 2010). The
19 prevalence of disordered eating behaviours was also found in this sample in line with previous
20 findings (e.g. Meyer et al. 2007; Goldberg 2015; Preti et al. 2008; Santonastaso, Mondini, and
21 Favaro 2002). Specifically, the detriment to body image and self-concept was referenced by
22 models.

23 Five of the six professionals also admitted to observing how models struggled in their
24 careers and how this often harmed their emotional well-being. Many felt “very upset” or “really
25 down”. They also highlighted that while some models were happy in general, others were not.

1 One stated that:

2 *“I met girls that were very happy because you know, they had an incredible show*
3 *season and they were muses or major models in the industry, so that was the dream....*
4 *at the same time I met very unhappy models...” (Wes, model agent).*

5 These mixed results suggest that happiness is positively and negatively linked to
6 modelling depending on the subjective experiences of individual models and their career
7 aspirations.

8

9 4.2.2. Resilience

10 All participants from both groups stated that a “thick skin” was necessary to survive
11 this “cutthroat industry” explaining that models “cannot survive” without it due to the constant
12 rejection models have to face in their career path; a finding which received some speculation
13 in popular media (Helmore 2017). The need to develop resilient qualities could also be an
14 indication of poor well-being (Hunter and Chandler 1999). Interestingly, models and
15 professionals perceived the effects of rejection differently.

16 In line with Hunter and Chandler (1999), all of the models commented on the lasting
17 emotional and psychological effects rejection have on their well-being and which have also
18 been shown to be part of negative life experiences in past research (Kinderman et al. 2015).
19 This is illustrated below.

20 *“All of the rejection that comes with [modelling] ... you get used to it, but then... you*
21 *really realize how much it affects you” (Victoria, model)*

22 While five of the six of the professionals agreed that rejection was painful to endure,
23 they also believed that models were equipped to handle this.

24 *“They’ve experienced rejection of every level, they are hardened to it, they know how*
25 *to deal with it” (Ben, model agency director)*

1 They did not express specific concerns for models and none reported to have taken any
2 action to protect or prepare models for this reality, stating that models learned how to handle
3 rejection from each other.

4 *“They go on castings together so you know they see how other models behave and*
5 *they behave like other models [...] it’s the unwritten rules of the business. That’s the*
6 *everyone else is cool about it I’ve got to be cool about it. It is what it is [...] that’s the*
7 *industry” (Ben, model agency director)*

8 This identifies another gap in understanding between models and professionals as all
9 the models interviewed described a lack of support, for instance, being “thrown to the wolves”
10 and a feeling of isolation when coping with rejection. The importance of a support system in
11 this industry was discussed by Paccione (2016). By contrast, four of the six professionals
12 expressed a lack of sympathy for the tenacious nature of the fashion industry. One stated that:

13 *“You got it, you can get hired, you don’t, well, maybe you should do something else.”*
14 *(Alex, fashion business executive)*

15 The lack of support and connection between the agent (manager) and model is
16 concerning as the model agent is supposed to be the advocate for the model, especially when
17 the model is abroad and underage. Yet another gap in understanding identified when comparing
18 both groups was the disagreement between models and professionals that rejection is more
19 prevalent in the modelling profession than in others. For example:

20 *“I don’t think any other profession goes through as much rejection as we do” (Cara,*
21 *model)*

22 *“Initially it’s tough [...] it’s difficult for anyone to be rejected. I think it’s the same for*
23 *everyone [...] it’s not specific to models, it’s specific to rejection” (Ben, model*
24 *agency director)*

25 Interestingly, for five of the six industry professionals, the development of coping

1 mechanisms such as “to not take it personally” or as “something they learn along the way” was
2 crucial for a model to survive in the industry. Furthermore, the feeling of being quickly
3 disposed of, as felt by models, was also commented on by fashion professionals who
4 emphasised that resilience and a robust support system were needed to face this reality. This is
5 illustrated in the quote below.

6 *“This is quite a brutal industry in terms of, um, you’re very recyclable. So one girl*
7 *could have an incredible show season and then the next season... nobody wants her. So*
8 *dealing with that... definitely you need to have a very... [...] I would call it like a very*
9 *strong foundation from your family and friends” (Wes, model agent)*

10 Only half of the fashion professionals recognised the possible detriment of rejection to
11 one’s emotional well-being including that of models as shown below.

12 *“No one wants to be rejected. And I think rejection makes a mark on us emotionally”*
13 *(Dana, casting director)*

14

15 4.2.3. Anxiety

16 While all models reported high levels of anxiety, half of the industry professionals
17 reported that they had not observed anxious behaviours in models. As such, another gap in
18 understanding was found surrounding the anxiety levels in models.

19 Explicitly, models connected their anxiety to the demands of modelling. All the models
20 reported that their anxiety was fueled by one or more of the following triggers: physical
21 insecurities, financial uncertainty and/or feelings of ill-preparation. Specific experiences
22 surrounding castings, visiting the agency and taking digitals were also reported to result in
23 heightened anxiety levels and cause emotional distress.

24 *“[Modelling has] made me feel super f*ing anxious. I would say honestly, all the time*
25 *[...] to the point where it's like... debilitating anxiety” (Victoria, model)*

1 All the model participants also commented on the uncertainty present for them in the
2 industry, “the waiting, the not knowing” and how this can lead to feelings of anxiety. Moreover,
3 all models attested feelings of anxiety surrounding their body image. They described some sort
4 of unhealthy relationship with food with some sharing second-hand experiences. This is
5 illustrated in the quote below.

6 *“Some of the girls I know that started really early have like, very f*ed... eating habits.
7 Like this girl in Hong Kong started when she was 13. And I was hanging out with her
8 one time and she just like flippantly was like, “yeah, I just take Adderall and don't
9 eat” (Rose, model)*

10 Swami and Szmigielska (2013, 113) reported that modelling could trigger image
11 obsession and a “higher drive for thinness” and it has also been found that models displayed
12 heightened levels of anxiety surrounding their body image (Carr and Mercer 2017).

13 Only two of the six industry professionals reported observing anxious behaviours in
14 models although they did not report any attempt to propose interventions that could improve
15 the well-being of these models. This disregard from industry professionals further emphasises
16 the dynamic power relations between model and fashion industry professionals, causing fear
17 of coming forward about any form of abuse or neglect in the industry. Furthermore, an apparent
18 gap in understanding the negative implications of modelling can be observed between the
19 models and industry professionals in relation to how extreme physical expectations and
20 consistent pressure to lose weight can cause harm to a model’s well-being. Four fashion
21 professionals vehemently denied the prevalence of eating disorders being any more present
22 than “if you took a similar group of women” outside of modelling. As one explained:

23 *“Things like anorexia and bulimia... and funnily enough is not as common as the press,
24 media and general perception is of modelling... a lot of people take that as a criticism
25 of models and modelling. [...] I don't think you can relate that condition to the fact it's*

1 *modelling. I think you have to relate that condition to the personal circumstances of*
2 *each model” (Ben, model agency director)*

3 Findings show that whilst there is some recognition for the harshness of the industry,
4 there is minimum interest on behalf of industry professional to change it for the better. Hence,
5 despite having some positive changes in this industry (e.g. Dockterman 2014; Fernandez 2018),
6 more work is still needed in this area including academic research to advocate for further
7 changes to promote the well-being of fashion models.

8

9 4.2.4. Self-esteem

10 While both groups of participants perceived modelling to have a positive effect on self-
11 esteem, two of the six professionals perceived the impact of modelling to only be positive and
12 “model confidence is probably the number one big result”.

13 Reported by the models themselves, five of the six models stated that the pressure to
14 lose weight for modelling was detrimental to their well-being as it led to feelings of inadequacy,
15 eating disorders, lowered their self-esteem, and affected their body image negatively. These
16 issues are reflected in the quote below.

17 *“[...] within the industry, there's a lot of self-esteem issues. And that brings me a lot*
18 *of issues with my self-esteem. I would say specifically... just like the body weight. [...]*
19 *Constantly just hearing comments [...] or people or like girls will say like [...] you've*
20 *got a big like, nice, fat ass. And I'm like, well, I want to be a stick though. Like, I want*
21 *to be a stick [...] I based my worth on my weight all the time [...] I don't like the*
22 *feeling of being full... It makes me feel like I'm not doing something right. It's really*
23 *deeply psychological” (Victoria, model)*

24 These results find support from the study of Carr and Mercer (2017), with the addition
25 of providing a clearer picture of how and why models were struggling with anxiety and body

1 image. For example, the immense pressure to physically remain a certain size, the lack of
2 emotional support and a consistent demand to lose weight from their agency and bookers.

3 The rather complex relationship between identity in modelling and self-esteem was also
4 explored. The constant rejection and pressure to self-objectify and scrutinize one's own body
5 image was shown to dramatically lower self-esteem in all six model participants. As stated by
6 Nezelek et al. (1997), low self-esteem and depression can exacerbate the effects of rejection.
7 One model even stated that she held the fashion world accountable for the increased self-
8 objectification experienced by models who are constantly trapped into a feeling of worry.

9 *“You put on one centimetre on the hips, or whatever, you're always worried about*
10 *something. And even girls who look amazingly perfect to me, you would always worry,*
11 *they would always be concerned. And trying to like to find any, anything I'm going to*
12 *pick on myself that I don't like, yeah. It's just crazy... this fashion world” (Stella, model)*

13 In line with the objectification theory (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997) with an emphasis
14 on the internalisation of the observer's perspective (e.g. the agency and bookers in this study)
15 as the main lens through which one's physical self is evaluated, this can lead to regular body
16 monitoring causing increased anxiety, body shaming and mental health risks including eating
17 disorders.

18

19 **4.3. Implications of findings**

20 Despite existing regulations in modelling to ban the use of underage models (Willsher
21 2017), this is yet to be thoroughly implemented (Okwodu 2019; Stampler 2019). This reality
22 was also reflected in this study as the majority of models interviewed began modelling between
23 the ages of 14 to 16 years. Fashion conglomerates such as Kering wants to ban the use of all
24 models under the age of 18 and LVMH wishes to impose more regulations to protect models
25 while continuing to use underage girls (Stampler 2019). Though LVMH pledges more

1 protection, in the past, heightened regulation in modelling has been called “disingenuous
2 nonsense” (Clements 2013). This study supports this claim to some extent as one participant
3 corroborated that agencies in Paris pay doctors to forge BMI certificates and to prove models
4 are a healthy size when, in fact, they are underweight. This directly contradicts the French ban
5 on using underweight and unhealthy models (Gayle 2017). Current findings and existing
6 ongoing work in the modelling industry both stipulate that existing regulations must be
7 monitored considerably more to promote the well-being of fashion models and, bridge the gap
8 in understanding between the models and the industry professionals.

9 Some participants referred to the complexity of the model-agent relationship in terms
10 of its power dynamics. Models are typically defined as “independent contractors” such that the
11 agencies that represent them are not responsible for providing them with “minimum wage,
12 mandatory breaks and even protection from sexual harassment” (Sodomsy 2014, 152).
13 Although the independent contractor loophole has rarely been examined or discussed in the
14 modelling context, it can aid in shifting the power dynamics of the model-agent relationship.
15 Models often feel replaceable, but the reality is that without models, there are no agencies.
16 With unionization and enhanced regulation and liability, agencies would feel more of a
17 responsibility to oversee the process and ensure the safety of their models.

18 Furthermore, the majority of models believed that if the pressure to conform to the UK
19 size six was alleviated, this would decrease the experience of eating disorders and body image
20 issues. The expansion of sample sizes, even from a UK size six to eight can help alleviate some
21 of the pressure models put on themselves and their bodies to meet societal expectations.
22 Symptoms of anxiety such as nervousness surrounding body image can be exacerbated by
23 social comparisons, and more realistic expectations may help alleviate these symptoms
24 (Greenberg and Hofschire 2001; Phillips and McQuarrie 2011; Tiggemann and McGill 2004).

25

1 **4.4. Study evaluation**

2 This study has several strengths. For instance, the researcher was able to access and
3 interview both industry professionals and established fashion models which helped to engage
4 in a comparative approach when interpreting the findings for a more in-depth understanding of
5 the topic. Researching these two groups also helped to unravel gaps in understanding regarding
6 models' well-being. These findings could assist the industry in being better prepared to
7 advocate for the necessary changes that could help protect models in the future. This study also
8 has a few limitations. All fashion model participants were females only. It would be interesting
9 for future research to capture whether there are gender differences concerning models' self-
10 perceptions of their well-being in the modelling industry and also, their experiences of being a
11 fashion model. Moreover, due to the qualitative nature of this study and the use of a small
12 sample size, findings cannot be generalised to all fashion models and industry professionals.
13 Finally, since the first author was a fashion model herself this could have led to increased
14 subjectivity during data analysis. However, this was minimised during inter-reliability check
15 and the author's first hand account experience was valuable as it provided an insider's
16 perspective on this topic.

17 18 **4.5. Conclusion**

19 This study revealed that modelling helped to boost confidence levels but also caused
20 the following issues: increased anxiety, lower self-esteem and a negative impact on feelings of
21 happiness among fashion models. Resilience in the form of "thick skin" was the only attribute
22 of well-being deemed crucial to have in modelling by both models and industry professionals.
23 Findings also draw attention to the toll modelling takes on the well-being of fashion models
24 which needs to be taken more seriously in the fashion industry. The current state of the fashion
25 world seems to lack empathy for fashion models. More work including academic research,

1 needs to be undertaken to pave the way for a brighter and healthier future for fashion models
2 in the modelling and fashion industry.

3

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7

1 **Table 1.** Participant (fashion models and fashion professionals) demographics

2

	<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age started Modelling</i>
MODELS	Amy	F	14
	Stella	F	14
	Scarlett	F	16
	Victoria	F	16
	Rose	F	19
	Cara	F	20

3

	<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Years of Experience working in the modelling industry</i>	<i>Job title</i>
PROFESSIONALS	Rebecca	F	6	Creative Director
	Alex	M	8	Fashion Business Executive
	Dana	F	18	Casting Director
	John	M	25	Photographer
	Ben	M	39	Model Agency Director
	Wes	M	53	Model Agent

4

5

6

7