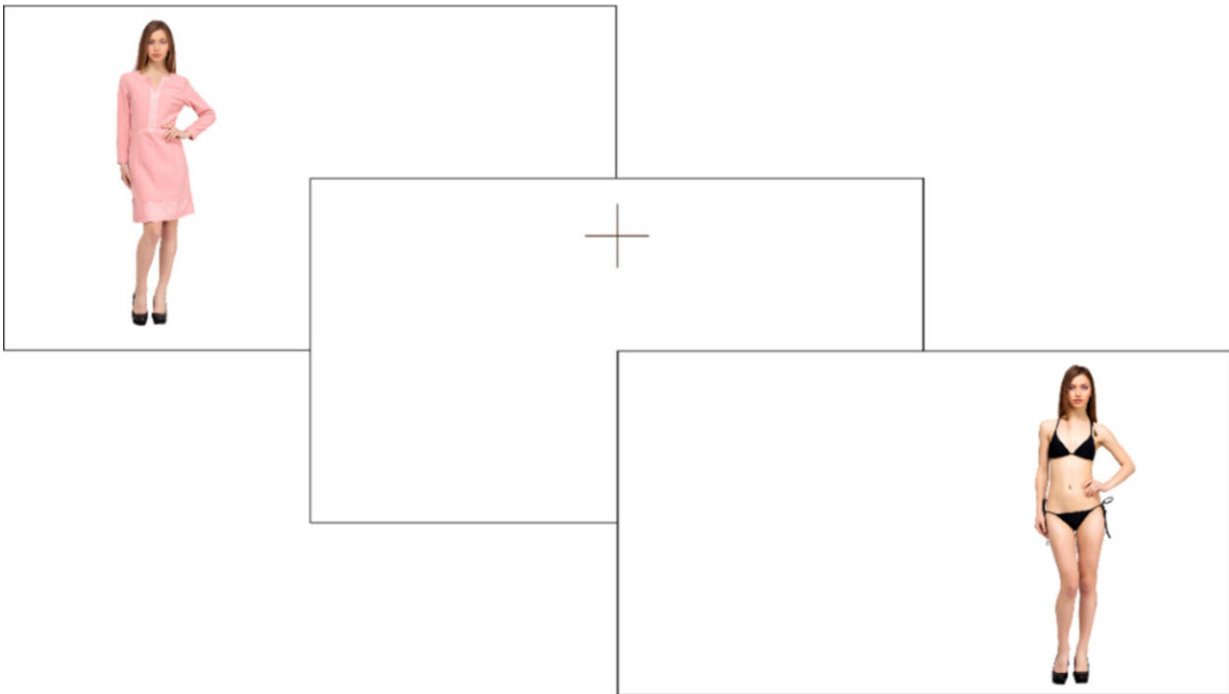


Activewear angst: Why shopping for workout clothes can be harmful to women

July 28 2023



Example of female imagery in the fully and partially clothed imagery conditions in the gaze task, respectively. Credit: *International Journal of Consumer Studies* (2023). DOI: 10.1111/ijcs.12977

Though it's just as likely to be worn while lounging on the couch as in the gym, a large driver of activewear's popularity among women is its association with a dynamic lifestyle, positive well-being and overall good health.

However, two new Edith Cowan University (ECU) studies suggest online [shopping](#) for activewear may in fact be harmful to [women's body image](#). The study, "Gaze behavior, body image in women and online apparel shopping," was published in the *International Journal of Consumer Studies* and the study, "Experimental evidence that browsing for activewear lowers explicit body image attitudes and implicit self-esteem in women," was published in the Journal *Body Image*.

Sales of "Athleisure"—a hybrid style of athletic clothing typically worn as everyday wear—have risen rapidly following the onset of COVID-19 and are expected to be worth more than \$548 billion globally by 2024.

Led by ECU psychology researcher Dr. Ross Hollett, the new studies are the first to use an eye-tracking experiment to explore online clothing shopping for activewear and its psychological outcomes.

During laboratory sessions, women were randomly allocated to browse an activewear, casualwear or home decor [website](#) for 15–20 minutes.

Their body image and self-esteem were then measured using a combination of self-report and reaction time measures.

After the shopping activity, researchers used eye tracking technology to measure the women's eye gaze behavior towards a new set of female images, to see if the websites they browsed led to changes in where they focused their attention.

Both studies found women felt worse about their looks and experienced lower self-esteem after browsing an activewear website.

In comparison, browsing for casual clothing or homewares did not lead to negative body image or lower [self-esteem](#).

Dr. Hollett said activewear retailers deliberately used body-focused marketing to promote their products, which tended to be tight, form-fitting or revealing.

"Activewear marketers often use images of toned athletic models who are cropped to focus on specific body parts, for example buttocks or breasts," he said.

"This type of imagery can be very threatening to women's body image because it promotes an idealized and difficult to attain physique."

Clues from gaze behavior

Dr. Hollett said the first experiment found an interesting pattern of attention when researchers tracked women's eyes towards a new set of female images after the activewear shopping activity.

"Women who browsed for activewear showed much lower body gaze, meaning they preferred to gaze at faces, compared to women who browsed for casual wear," he said.

"One potential reason for this finding is that women who browsed for activewear may have felt their body image was threatened by the body-focused imagery used by the activewear website.

"When body image is threatened, women may be less likely to continue looking at other women's bodies after browsing for activewear because they feel more uncomfortable."

Choose websites wisely to protect your self-esteem

Almost 100% of women involved in Dr. Hollett's study had shopped

online for clothes in their lifetime, and 80% had done so in the past month.

They spent about 90–100 minutes per week browsing for clothes online, with activewear one of the most popular clothing categories—second only to casualwear.

"In one of our studies, we found a general reduction in [negative mood](#) across all the shopping websites, suggesting that online shopping might be used by women to alleviate negative mood by offering a distraction from everyday stresses," Dr. Hollett said.

However, Dr. Hollett said if women do engage with [online shopping](#) to reduce negative mood, the choice of website is important.

"Browsing some apparel websites might put women at risk of negative self-concept because they are comparing themselves with fit and toned models in tight fitting clothing which may contribute to longer term issues such as body shame and depression," he said.

Dr. Hollett said clothing retailers are under increasing pressure to operate in ethically responsible ways, such as reducing environmental impact or avoiding exploitative labor.

However, he said minimizing the negative impact of retail imagery on the psychological well-being of consumers was also their responsibility.

"Our research offers some of the first experimental evidence that the use of sexually objectifying imagery by some online apparel retailers is threatening to women's well-being," he said.

"These findings provide an impetus to explore alternative marketing strategies which achieve the retailer's objectives while minimizing

threats to the self-worth of consumers."

More information: Ross C. Hollett et al, Gaze behaviour, body image in women and online apparel shopping, *International Journal of Consumer Studies* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/ijcs.12977](https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12977)

Ross C. Hollett et al, Experimental evidence that browsing for activewear lowers explicit body image attitudes and implicit self-esteem in women, *Body Image* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2023.07.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2023.07.004)

Provided by Edith Cowan University

Citation: Activewear angst: Why shopping for workout clothes can be harmful to women (2023, July 28) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-07-activewear-angst-workout-women.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.