Trinity Bothur

Dr. Bednar

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Introduction

Contemporary discussions of women's bodies are central to celebrity and popular culture. Entertainment journalism, fashion magazines, and social media circulate images of female celebrities alongside commentary about weight, appearance, health, and beauty. In recent years, discussions about the perceived return of thinness as a feminine beauty ideal have become particularly visible. These conversations frequently reference celebrity weight loss, changing beauty standards, body positivity, and public discussion of GLP-1 weight-loss medications. Yet these discussions matter beyond whether women appear thinner than they did in previous years. The language used to describe women's bodies reveals broader cultural expectations about femininity, health, desirability, and the relationship between physical appearance and personal value.

Ariana Grande provides a useful case study for examining these expectations. As a highly visible celebrity whose appearance has been widely discussed in entertainment media, Grande has become a focal point for conversations about body-shaming, public concern, and the link between appearance and health. In April 2023, she addressed commentary about her body in a TikTok video, asking audiences to reconsider the assumptions they make about other people's appearances. She explained that, in her experience, the body people compared her current appearance to was "the unhealthiest version of my body" (Van Paris). Her statement challenged

the assumption that what the public considers desirable or healthy necessarily reflects an individual's well-being. Yet subsequent media coverage continued to discuss her appearance, showing how hard it is to challenge body scrutiny in a culture that repeatedly makes celebrity bodies subjects of public conversation.

This project does not seek to prove that a "skinny epidemic" exists, determine whether Grande or any other celebrity is healthy, or establish that one factor has caused changes in beauty standards. Instead, it examines how media discourse constructs the perceived return of thinness and gives that idea cultural meaning. The language of a return is itself an interpretive framework: it connects current representations to memories of earlier beauty ideals, particularly the thinness associated with early-2000s celebrity and fashion culture. By describing contemporary thinness as a comeback, media coverage can present it as both a familiar cultural pattern and a potential reversal of more recent discussions about body positivity and inclusion.

Grande is the central case study, but this project also considers related media coverage of Cynthia Erivo and the modeling industry. Erivo's experiences offer an opportunity to examine how race and gender shape interpretations of women's appearances, while reporting on the modeling industry connects public beauty discourse to institutional practices and professional incentives. These comparisons do not suggest that all women experience body scrutiny the same way. Instead, they show how the meaning attached to a woman's appearance depends on the cultural and institutional context in which it is represented.

Three research questions guide this project: How does contemporary media discourse construct the perceived return of thinness as a feminine beauty ideal through representations of Ariana Grande? What discourses surrounding femininity, beauty, health, and the female body emerge in media representations of Grande's appearance? How do these discourses reproduce,

negotiate, or challenge dominant cultural understandings of thinness and femininity?

I argue that contemporary media coverage of Grande constructs the perceived return of thinness through competing discourses of health, concern, admiration, and public judgment. Although some articles challenge the assumption that appearance reveals health and criticize body-shaming, their continued focus on women's bodies can reproduce the surveillance they oppose. Coverage of the modeling industry further suggests that thinness is sustained not only through individual beauty preferences but also through institutional decisions and professional incentives. These contradictions reveal how difficult it is to challenge dominant beauty standards without reinforcing the cultural importance placed on women's appearance.

Research Object and Methodology

This project examines contemporary media discourse around the perceived return of thinness as a feminine beauty ideal, with particular attention to representations of Ariana Grande. The study examines how entertainment journalism, fashion media, and related reporting describe women's bodies and link physical appearance to ideas about health, beauty, femininity, and social value. Rather than treating individual articles as isolated accounts, the project examines recurring language, assumptions, and contradictions across the selected texts.

The primary corpus consists of eight media articles published between 2023 and 2026. These include coverage from Vogue, The Cut, Women's Health, ELLE, Dazed, the Associated Press, and The Independent. The articles address Grande's statements about body commentary, public reactions to her appearance, discussions of Grande and Cynthia Erivo during the promotion of Wicked, and broader debates about thinness and the modeling industry. Together, these texts offer several perspectives on the research object, including celebrity testimony, journalistic interpretation, expert commentary, audience reactions, and industry accounts.

The study uses qualitative close reading and thematic coding. Close reading involves attending to the language, framing, emphasis, and rhetorical choices a text uses to present its subject. Rather than simply recording whether an article supports or criticizes thinness, the analysis considers how its wording positions readers, assigns authority, and establishes relationships between appearance and cultural value. For example, describing body commentary as "concern" frames public attention differently from describing the same practice as "surveillance." Examining these choices makes it possible to investigate how apparently supportive or critical discussions can still rely on assumptions about women's bodies.

Six preliminary codes guide the analysis. The first, emotional framing, identifies expressions of concern, admiration, disgust, anxiety, sympathy, shame, and other emotional responses. The second, health and ambiguity, examines how articles link appearance to health and whether they acknowledge the limits of judging from visual evidence. The third, beauty, femininity, and value, considers how thinness is associated with desirability, youth, fashionability, discipline, success, or professional opportunity. The fourth, surveillance and public judgment, identifies moments when women's bodies are observed, evaluated, compared, or treated as legitimate subjects of public discussion. The fifth, contradiction and ambivalence, examines tensions between criticizing body-shaming and continuing to center physical appearance. The sixth, authority and credibility, considers whose interpretations receive legitimacy, including those of celebrities, journalists, medical experts, social media users, and fashion-industry professionals.

The analysis draws on feminist media and body scholarship to interpret the selected articles. Julie E. Ferris's work on media constructions of "appropriate" bodies helps contextualize how journalistic discourse establishes expectations about acceptable appearance. Kiran Pienaar and Ian Bekker's analysis of competing discourses surrounding the disciplined female body provides

a framework for examining the overlap between health, dieting, and attractiveness. Louisa Rogers's research on bodily surveillance in fashion media offers a related framework for understanding how observation and evaluation can become normalized. Research by Lanice R. Avery and colleagues provide an intersectional perspective for considering how dominant feminine beauty ideals may be experienced differently by Black women.

The project has deliberate limitations. The corpus is relatively small and purposefully selected, so it cannot represent every media outlet, audience response, or contemporary discussion of thinness. The analysis does not attempt to measure the prevalence of thinness in Hollywood, establish causal relationships between media exposure and body image, or determine any individual's health. It also does not assume that all readers interpret the selected articles in the same way. Instead, it examines the meanings and assumptions made available by the texts themselves.

Analysis I: Appearance, Health, and the Limits of Visual Evidence

One of the most persistent patterns across the selected articles is the assumption that a woman's appearance can provide evidence of her health. Discussions of Grande's body frequently move between descriptions of how she looks and speculation about what that appearance means. The problem is not simply that individual commenters may reach inaccurate conclusions. The media conversation often treats a visible body as a source of information about a person's private circumstances, even when observers have limited evidence.

Grande directly challenges this assumption in the TikTok statement reported by Vogue. She explains, "I know personally, for me, the body you've been comparing my current body to was the unhealthiest version of my body" (Van Paris). The statement reverses the public interpretation of her appearance: the body some observers considered healthier was, according to

her own account, associated with a period of poorer well-being. The qualification “for me” matters because Grande speaks from personal experience rather than offering a universal rule about body size. Her point is that appearance alone cannot establish whether someone is healthy.

Grande also tells viewers, “There are many different ways to look healthy and beautiful” (Van Paris). By pairing “healthy” and “beautiful,” she challenges the assumption that one narrow body type represents both. Her statement proposes a broader understanding of appearance while revealing how closely public discourse links health and beauty. The fact that she has to explain that connection demonstrates the cultural power of the assumptions she is challenging.

The Women’s Health article reinforces this distinction through psychologist Rebecca Boswell, who states, “We cannot tell who is healthy by looking at them—medical illness and psychiatric illness including eating disorders can occur across ages, genders, races/ethnicities, and body sizes” (Miller). The statement shifts the discussion from whether Grande appears healthy to the limits of what observers can reasonably infer from appearance. It also challenges the idea that body size reliably indicates a person’s physical or mental state.

Ferris’s study of media constructions of “appropriate” bodies helps contextualize this process. Her analysis of press coverage of Tracey Gold and Carnie Wilson examines how media discourse organizes bodies into culturally meaningful categories (Ferris). Applied to the Grande coverage, this framework helps show that reporting does not simply reflect neutral observations. Descriptions of a body as healthy, unhealthy, too thin, or desirable draw on social expectations about which appearances are acceptable. These judgments can become a means of enforcing cultural norms, even when journalists or commenters present them as objective assessments.

Pienaar and Bekker’s discussion of competing discourses surrounding the disciplined female body is useful here because it identifies how health, dieting, and attractiveness can overlap in

discussions of the ideal body (Pienaar and Bekker). Grande's coverage demonstrates how a comment about health may also participate in a broader system of evaluation in which appearance is tied to desirability and social value. These meanings are not always identical, but they can coexist in the same conversation.

Taken together, these articles suggest that a central struggle in contemporary body discourse concerns who gets to define health and beauty. Grande challenges public assumptions through personal testimony, while experts explain why visible appearance cannot establish health. Yet the continued circulation of commentary shows that these interventions do not automatically end scrutiny. The media can challenge appearance-based judgments while still making a woman's body the center of public debate.

Analysis II: Concern, Admiration, and Body Surveillance

In The Cut article "We Still Suck at Talking About Celebrities' Bodies," the writer acknowledges this contradiction: "I was simultaneously desperate to validate my suspicions that something was seriously wrong and disturbed by the growing obsession with these performers' bodies. And I was disappointed with myself for caring and clicking at all" (Fernandez). The writer's conflicting reactions show that awareness of body surveillance does not necessarily prevent participation. The desire to confirm a suspicion coexists with discomfort about scrutinizing women's appearances. The same person can recognize the potential harm of celebrity body commentary while remaining curious about the discussion.

Mikala Jamison's Dazed article examines whether public concern about extremely thin celebrities can be justified. Avery Edison argues, "I don't think it's anti-feminist to say 'heads up, this woman is unwell and you shouldn't aim to look like her'" (Jamison). This position frames commentary as a possible form of protection, suggesting that questioning an idealized

appearance might prevent audiences from treating it as aspirational. Yet the statement also illustrates the difficulty of separating cultural criticism from speculation about an individual's health. Describing a woman as "unwell" based on appearance risks treating the body as sufficient evidence of a medical condition.

The Dazed article offers a competing perspective through Emma Specter's statement that "This is a systemic problem, not an individual one" (Jamison). This shifts responsibility away from the celebrity and toward the cultural structures that make thinness desirable. The article further argues, "Turning people's bodies or body changes into internet discourse doesn't meaningfully change hearts and minds - it only perpetuates a culture of surveillance and judgment" (Jamison). The language of "surveillance" frames body commentary as a recurring cultural practice in which people are observed, evaluated, and interpreted based on their physical appearance.

The Associated Press article about Grande's more recent music release presents a similar conflict: "Some saw yet more body-shaming being aimed, no surprise, at a woman in a society that constantly judges them; others said it was simply concerning" (Hajela). By placing these interpretations side by side, the article presents body commentary as contested. The same discussion can be understood as concern or as another instance of public judgment. The language of concern does not automatically settle whether a comment reinforces harmful assumptions about women's appearances.

The AP article also quotes Johanna Kandel asking people to consider "the intent versus the impact of it" (Hajela). This distinction invites readers to consider not only why someone makes a comment but also what it reinforces. A viewer may intend to protect others from an idealized image while still treating a celebrity's body as evidence of health or illness. The intention may be

critical of harmful beauty standards, yet the language may reproduce the assumption that those standards can be evaluated through an individual's appearance.

Analysis III: Thinness as Cultural and Professional Value

Public commentary is only one part of how thinness acquires cultural meaning. Media representations also show how institutions that reward particular appearances sustain beauty ideals. Vogue's article "How Have GLP-1s Affected the Modeling Industry?" shifts the discussion from celebrity body commentary to the professional structures of fashion. Through interviews with models, agents, designers, and casting professionals, the article presents thinness not simply as an individual preference but as a potential condition of professional success. This suggests that the perceived return of thinness cannot be understood only through changing audience tastes; it must also be examined in relation to the industries that select, represent, and reward particular bodies.

Former model Samantha Benjamin states, "Girls are getting called fat. Nobody is mincing words" (Satran). This direct language frames thinness as an explicit professional expectation rather than an unspoken aesthetic preference. In modeling, where sample garments are often designed around very small sizes, thinness can influence which models are selected for jobs and which bodies are considered suitable for particular forms of representation. When appearance becomes connected to employment, the pressure to conform to a dominant body ideal can have material consequences.

Grace Breuning, a curve model interviewed in the article, describes the reasoning some models reportedly faced: "If I want to do these higher shows, if I want to work for these brands, then do I get skinnier?" She follows this question by observing, "And then a lot of models got skinnier" (Satran). The sequence connects an institutional incentive to an individual decision.

The possibility of securing more prestigious work becomes linked to changing one's body, suggesting that professional advancement may depend on how closely a model approaches the industry's preferred appearance.

Brooks Nader's account reinforces this relationship between appearance and professional reward. Reflecting on losing weight, she says, "When I lost weight, I started to confirm a lot more work," then adds, "I was like, okay, I guess [the industry] likes me thinner" (Satran). The word "confirm" links body change to getting work, while "likes me thinner" frames professional approval as a response to a particular appearance. The testimony does not prove that every fashion employer rewards thinness equally, but it illustrates how one model interprets the relationship between her body and her career opportunities.

The article complicates the assumption that the modeling industry responds to consumer demand. Former casting director James Scully argues, "If we've gone back to skinny girls, it's because that is what the people who are running these houses and their casting directors and their stylists are dictating." He adds, "It has nothing to do with what a customer wants" (Satran). Scully shifts responsibility from an abstract public preference to the people who decide representation. Rather than treating beauty standards as the inevitable result of what audiences desire, he presents them as actively shaped by industry gatekeepers.

Sociologist and former model Ashley Mears offers a related criticism: "Everybody's saying the market gets what it wants, but they are the market" (Satran). This statement challenges the idea that the market is an independent force that fashion professionals merely obey. Designers, casting directors, agents, and other industry participants help determine which bodies appear in fashion imagery, meaning that the industry's decisions also shape what audiences repeatedly encounter. The market is not separate from those who control representation; its preferences are

partly produced through the decisions used to justify them.

The article's discussion of GLP-1 medications introduces another dimension to this institutional pressure. Latta describes the shift as "a combination of GLP-1s and a pendulum swing to extreme thinness being an idealized look again" (Satran). This statement presents medication use as one possible factor within a wider cultural and professional shift, rather than as its sole cause. The article offers accounts of industry perceptions and reported pressures. Still, those accounts do not show that GLP-1 medications alone drove changes in fashion or that every model who becomes thinner uses them.

Analysis IV: Who Gets to Define a Woman's Body?

In her ELLE interview, Grande describes growing up under constant observation: "I've been kind of doing this in front of the public and kind of been, you know, a specimen in a Petri dish, really, since I was 16 or 17" (Puckett-Pope). The metaphor of a "specimen in a Petri dish" positions her as an object of examination. Others observe and interpret a specimen, while the examiner assumes the authority to determine what the evidence means. Grande's description suggests that celebrity visibility can turn an individual into an object of collective analysis, with her appearance treated as something the public is entitled to investigate.

Her description of hearing "every version of it-of what's wrong with me-and then you fix it, and then it's wrong for different reasons" further exposes the instability of public expectations (Puckett-Pope). The phrase "every version" suggests that criticism does not depend on a consistent standard. Instead, the criteria for acceptable appearance can change, leaving women subject to criticism even when they attempt to meet prevailing expectations. Grande's experience illustrates how the evaluation itself can become the problem: whatever changes a woman makes to her appearance, the public may still see something that needs correction.

The authority to define a woman's body becomes more complicated when you consider Cynthia Erivo's experiences. Although Grande and Erivo have both faced commentary about their appearances, Erivo's account emphasizes the racialized assumptions that shaped reactions to her during the Wicked: For Good premiere. After intervening when a fan approached Grande, Erivo became the subject of online jokes and descriptions that framed her as Grande's "bodyguard." Erivo argues that the public reaction reflected "the insidious nature of how we view Black women" (Lewis).

Erivo explains that the jokes focused on "my physique; it was my shape; it was the fact that I was bald; it was about what I looked like" (Lewis). Her account shows that body commentary does not operate the same way for all women. Intersecting ideas about race, gender, and femininity shape the meaning assigned to physical appearance. Erivo argues that people assumed she must have protected Grande because they saw her as larger than her co-star. She challenges this interpretation's presumed neutrality by suggesting the response might have differed if the situation were reversed (Lewis).

Avery and colleagues' study of hegemonic feminine beauty ideals among Black women provides an intersectional framework for this comparison. Their research examines the relationship between acceptance of dominant feminine beauty ideals and sexual well-being among Black women (Avery et al.). This framework helps establish why a single standard of femininity cannot adequately explain every woman's experience of body scrutiny. Grande's coverage frequently centers on whether her appearance meets expectations of health and conventional feminine beauty. At the same time, Erivo describes how her physique and baldness became the basis for racialized assumptions about her role. These experiences overlap in their exposure to public judgment, but they are not interchangeable.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that media coverage frequently challenges the practice of judging women's bodies while continuing to make those bodies central to public discussion. Grande's own statements challenge the assumption that appearance reliably indicates health, while medical experts reinforce the limits of making such judgments from visual information. Yet the persistence of commentary about her body demonstrates how difficult it is for celebrities to escape public evaluation. As the discussions in The Cut, Dazed, and the Associated Press reveal, concern and criticism are not always clearly separated. Commentary intended to protect audiences from harmful beauty ideals can still reproduce the assumption that women's appearances are appropriate subjects for public interpretation.

Modeling-industry coverage extends this argument by showing how thinness can be linked to professional opportunity and institutional power. The accounts in Vogue suggest that casting decisions, sample sizes, and industry expectations can shape which bodies gain visibility and employment. These accounts complicate the idea that beauty standards reflect audience preferences. If industry professionals help determine which bodies are represented, they also help shape the cultural environment in which thinness becomes desirable. The perceived return of thinness must therefore be understood in relation to the institutions that assign value to particular appearances, not only the individuals who respond to them.

The comparison with Erivo further shows that body scrutiny does not operate the same way for all women. Erivo's account identifies how race and gender shape the interpretations attached to her physique and appearance. Her experience complicates any assumption that a single beauty ideal explains every form of public judgment. An intersectional analysis reveals that the meanings assigned to women's bodies are shaped by overlapping expectations surrounding race,

femininity, and physical appearance.

Ultimately, challenging restrictive beauty standards requires more than condemning individual acts of body-shaming. It also requires questioning the cultural and institutional conditions that make women's appearances seem like evidence of their health, value, or character. By examining the discourse surrounding Ariana Grande alongside representations of Cynthia Erivo and the modeling industry, this project shows how thinness acquires meaning through repeated observation, interpretation, and evaluation. The central issue is not simply whether thinness is returning as a beauty ideal, but how the media continues to assign cultural significance to women's bodies and position appearance as a measure of their worth. Recognizing these processes lets us move beyond debating whether individual bodies are acceptable and toward questioning the standards that make such judgments seem necessary in the first place.

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