

# The Impact of Internalized Thin Ideals and Empathy on Victim-Blaming Behavior on Social Media Profiles

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## Abstract

People often look for social and emotional support from online communities and social media platforms. Unfortunately, often social media comments are hurtful and negative. The current study sought to investigate the factors that lead to negative and positive comments in online spaces. Results hint at how the physical features of the target (e.g., the person soliciting support on social media) and internalized ideals of the respondent (e.g., the person replying to social media posts) interact to predict the negative or positive responses in online spaces.

## Background

This study investigates the complex relationships between internalized thin ideals, empathy levels, and victim-blaming behavior on social media profiles. The purpose of this study is to deeper an understanding of how societal beauty standards impact social attitudes and behaviors, particularly within the context of online interactions. Our research found studies that investigated the effects of social media and problematic social media use on feelings toward body image and body satisfaction. Research on the effect of internalized thin ideals. However, we found a gap in the literature on how specifically individuals perceive others in online spaces based on body type.

## Research Design

Participants were recruited from university campuses and willingly participated in our study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental groups. Each group was presented with an online survey presenting a manipulated social media profile that depicted either a thin or heavier individual, both experiencing a hypothetical breakup. After viewing the assigned image participants were asked to leave a comment on the post and share their attitudes towards the woman; rating her based on positive characteristics (i.e., kindness). Participants then completed self-report measures of the THINNA assessment and an empathy scale to create the baselines for analysis.

## Predictions

**Hypothesis 1:** We predict a main effect of profile type such that respondents will rate the thin target more favorably than the heavy target.

**Hypothesis 2:** We predict a main effect of empathy on ratings such that respondents high in empathy will rate the target more favorably than those low in empathy.

**Hypothesis 3:** Interaction effect between profile type and internalized thin ideal such that those with high levels of internalized thin ideal will express the least favorable ratings toward the heavy target.

## Methods

To start the participants completed demographic questionnaires covering age, gender identity, race, and marital/relationship status.

Next, they were randomly assigned a social media post to view and asked to engage with it by commenting as if they were a regular user.

After viewing the post participants were asked to rate how well the woman in the profile depicted positive characteristics (i.e., kind, beautiful, confident, etc.)

Participants completed the Internalized Thin Ideal Scale questionnaire which measured individuals' societal standards of thinness and their attitudes toward body shape and weight concerning these ideals.

Lastly, there was The Empathy scale, which was a self-report questionnaire, used to give a baseline measure an individual's level of empathy.

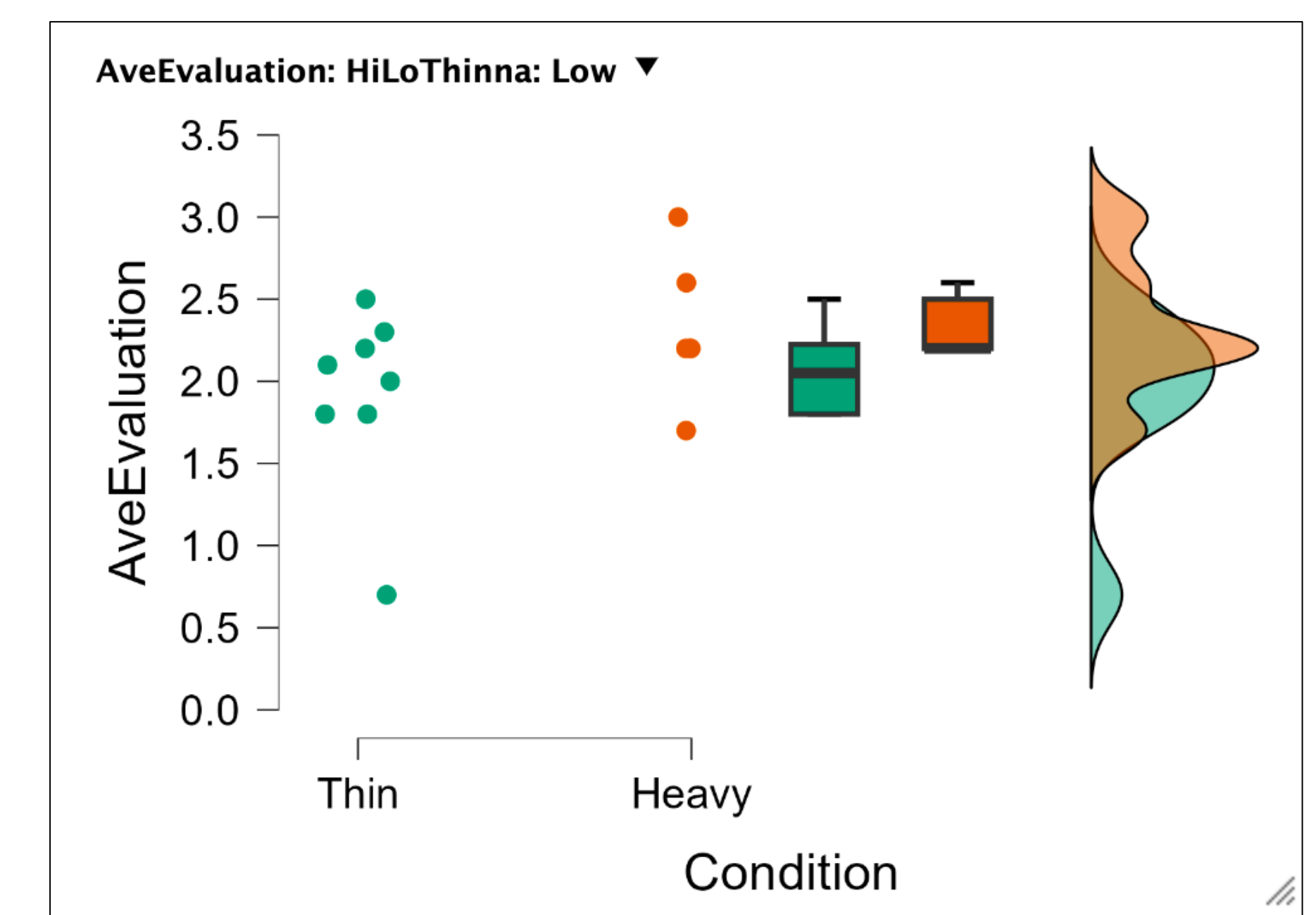
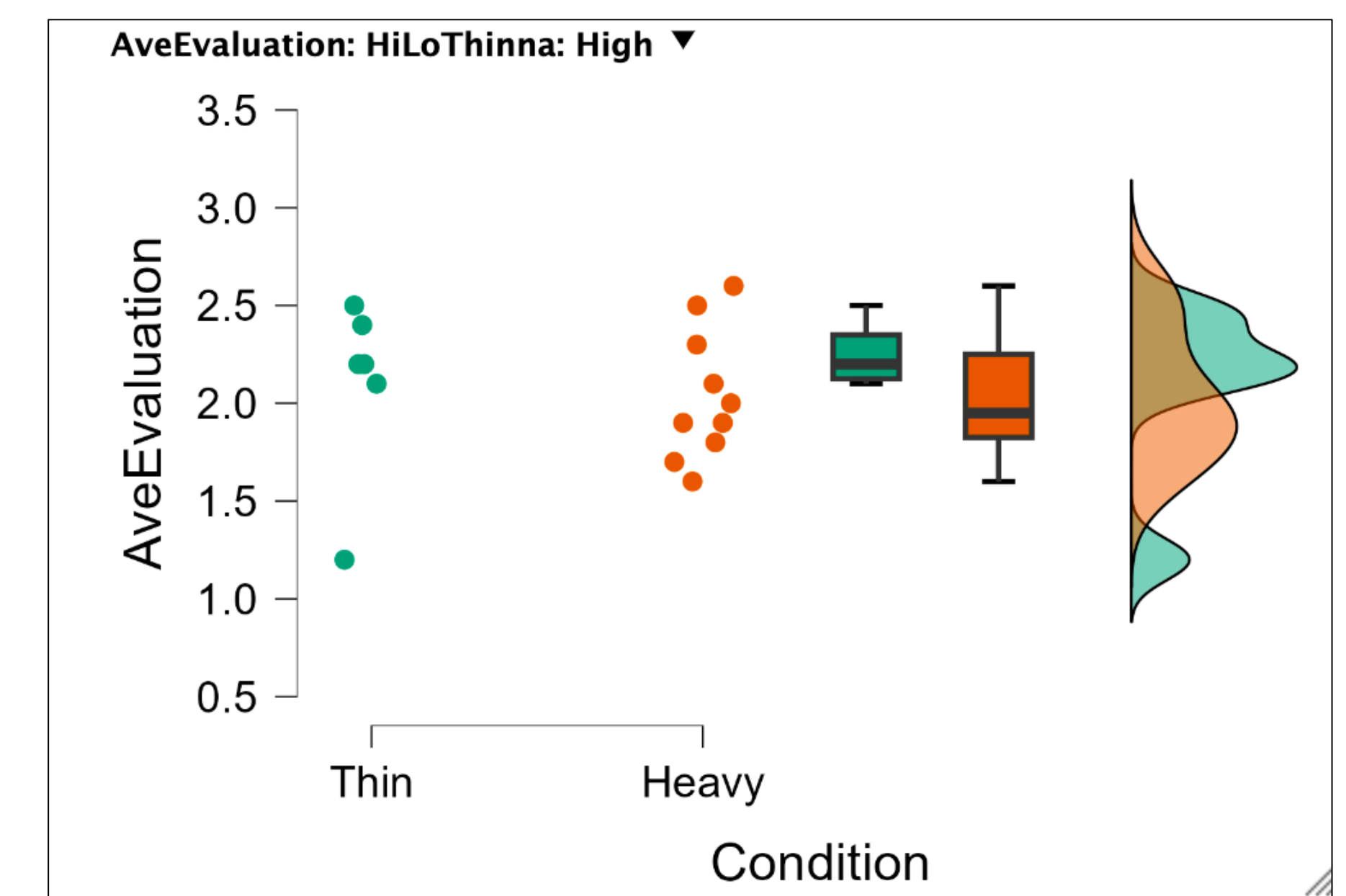
## Condition Images



Fig. 1. Respondents were randomly assigned to see a fictitious profile where a woman was posting about a recent breakup. The only difference between the two conditions was whether the post appeared with the photo on the left (thin target) or the right (heavy target).



## Results



A factorial ANOVA analysis supported our hypothesis that those with higher levels of internalized thin ideal rated the thinner individuals more favorably and those with lower levels of internalized thin ideal rated the heavier target more favorably. There was no main effect of empathy, although there was a slight positive correlation with age (older participants were higher in empathy levels). The results of our research have a societal impact as it furthers the understanding of online judgment and the impact of societal beauty standards.

## References

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