

How can visual storytelling increase awareness about female body representation & beauty standards?

Master of Arts in Graphic Communication Design
Alexandra Hochguertel, 31. May 2024

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*How can visual
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Abstract

Everybody has their numbers. To be more precise, each body has its own numbers, calculated in height, weight, age, or other measurement units. As people have tried to measure beauty, numbers become instruments and tools to validate a subjective truth. Then, as the conversation goes on and time passes, beauty standards change - so do the numbers.

Having worked as a fashion model for most of my adult life, I became acutely aware of the numbers by which my body is measured. Whether it was hip size, weight, or height, I knew them by heart, as it was my job to understand and control them. Looking at my career, I noticed that when I measured myself in numbers, I also became just another number. When I stopped thinking about them, I felt more human again.

My personal journey, intertwined with my professional experience, has led me to delve into the connections between the pictorial and numerical visualisation of female beauty standards. This exploration has inspired me to develop a system or body of work that offers unconventional ways to measure female bodies. My practice combines data visualisation, user-generated design, illustration, and filmmaking.

My aim, born from this line of enquiry, is to empower women to perceive their bodies in a way that is both empowering and vulnerable. I believe this project holds value for women who have felt the pressure to conform to certain body expectations or cultural beauty standards. Specifically, it resonates with girls and women in the critical phase of their lives, when their body awareness is significantly influenced by beauty magazines and cultural beauty standards. Hence, my focus group encompasses women and girls between the ages of twelve and twenty-five, while it does also extend to older age generations.

At the beginning of this Unit, I focussed solely on female high fashion models and sourced information from my network from to the fashion industry. I identified fashion models are under immense pressure to fulfil certain body size requirements and are more likely to have or develop the syndrome of body dysmorphia throughout their careers.

As I progressed in this project and received feedback from my peers at university, I observed a shift in my audience. Through interactions and idea exchanges with individuals from diverse backgrounds, I realised that the pressure to conform to today's beauty standards extends beyond the fashion industry, affecting women from all walks of life.

Projections 1

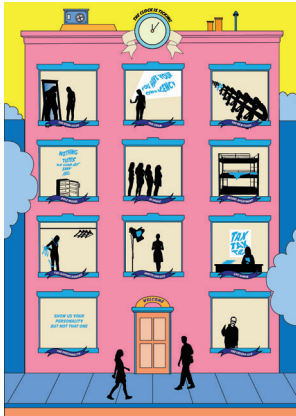
1. Introduction

At the beginning of Unit 3, I reflected on my practice to date, noting my focus on topics, methodologies, and the audiences I sought to engage. By mapping out these interests and considering my journey as a designer, I connected the diverse fields I have been navigating: fashion, design, and the arts. Hence, I decided to leverage my unique position as a nearly retired fashion model with expertise in curatorial and graphic communication design.

2. Process

I began by choosing illustration as my primary medium to depict the experiences of fashion models, including my own, to raise awareness of their inherent struggles. However, my first tests alone felt biased and misaligned with my intentions. Despite using baby blue and pink illustrations to critique existing gender biases, I inadvertently reinforced the stereotypes I sought to critique.

Consequently, I shifted my practice towards more user-generated design choices. Using a mundane-looking template, I distributed a questionnaire via social media to my fashion model colleagues. The questions revealed the industry's most pressing challenges and the responses were individualised through various means of crossing, underlining, or highlighting answers.



First illustration experiments



First illustration experiments


THIS OR THAT		AS A FASHION MODEL HAVE YOU EVER EXPERIENCED:		WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES OF BEING IN THIS INDUSTRY		COMPLETE THE SENTENCE	
				YES	NO	I am a Fashion model and	
Going Out	Staying In	Getting last minute cancelled from a job		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Constant Rejection Social Media Pressure Financial Instability Industry Stancards & Trends Personal Safety & Boundaries Balancing Personal & Professional Life Diversity & Inclusion Standards Objectification of the body Unrealistic Body Expectations Exploitation and Scams Nepotism	<input type="text"/> and <input type="text"/>
High Heels	Sneakers	Feeling self conscious about your height		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
High Fashion Job	Commercial Job	Sexism		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Facebook	Instagram	Feeling self conscious about your weight		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Dieting	Workout	Getting asked out on a date by an agent/photographer		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
No Sun	Tan	Loneliness while travelling		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Model/apartment	Airbnb	Racism		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Early Bird	Sleep In	Getting clothes as payment		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
On Stay	Permanent Home	Objectification of the body		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Paris	New York	Struggles balancing personal & professional life		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Ecom	Fitting Model	a #Metoo moment		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Fashion Week	Haute Couture	Social Media Pressure		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Studies	Focus on Modelling	Getting bodyshamed		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Feminist	Environmental						
Vegan/Vegetarian	No dietary restrictions						

The interview templates

From this point, I gathered the evidence and considered ways to illustrate it visually. Articulating the multitude of challenges and traumas shared by my colleagues proved difficult. One recurrent issue, which I have also experienced, is the biases people hold about the modelling profession. Having often concealed my job due to these preconceptions, I became interested in exploring these prejudices further.


I delved into my feelings of shame (due to societal expectations), hypocrisy (as a self-proclaimed feminist who chose to be objectified for her job), and the privilege I felt throughout my career. This led me to explore what an AI model might reveal about fashion models, given that AI often mirrors public opinion. I transformed this exploration into a publication, challenging my audience to consider how AI influences our body awareness through stereotyping. This project allowed me to critically view AI models, revealing their inherent biases.

She is the model*



*of all the other models


She is the model*



*having struggles balancing personal & professional life
*feeling the pressure of social media
*having experienced getting cancelled last minute
*of all the other models

She is the model*

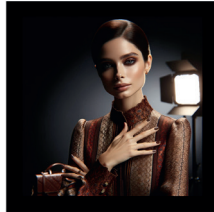
*thinking financial instability is one of the biggest challenges of the modelling industry



*having struggles balancing personal & professional life
*feeling the pressure of social media
*having experienced getting cancelled last minute
*of all the other models

She is the model*

*thinking financial instability is one of the biggest challenges of the modelling industry




*having struggles balancing personal & professional life
*feeling the pressure of social media
*having experienced getting cancelled last minute
*of all the other models

She is the model*

*having learned that reputation is one of the biggest challenges

*thinking financial instability is one of the biggest challenges of the modelling industry



*seeing unrealistic body expectations as problematic in the industry
*thinking that objectification of the body a huge problem
*believing that social media is one of the biggest challenges

*having struggles balancing personal & professional life
*feeling the pressure of social media
*having experienced getting cancelled last minute
*of all the other models

Publication about models by AI models

My research then expanded to include female artists and designers addressing issues of body image, proportional studies, forms, and visual identity. This extensive research helped me overcome my apprehension about incorporating my body image into my work. In an experiment I then conducted, I etched the phrase 'Protect me from what I want' (1985), a quote by the artist Jenny Holzer, across my sedcard - a model's business card containing essential descriptors such as measurements, hair, and eye colour.



This experience brought me back to user-generated design. I decided to create an AR filter to simulate being in a fashion campaign.

3. Conclusion

Reflecting on the challenges faced by fashion models and how these shape societal perceptions of the female body, I finally asked myself: Does it maybe all come back to sizing? These explorations led me to create a newspaper and a tote bag aimed at educating readers about specific fashion model terminologies and reflecting on the evolution of standard female body types. I envisioned this piece as thought-provoking, challenging characteristic fashion industry standards and encouraging people to review their necessity to conform to a certain size.



Publication 'the mōdel'

Projections 2

Building upon the research and experiments I undertook in Projections one, I was compelled to delve deeper into the societal pressure of conforming to certain norms and sizes in order to 'fit in'. Trying a new approach, I began to juxtapose objective data with a subjective narrative about beauty standards and body proportions—distorting their meaning while enhancing their aesthetic and emotional appeal.

Conducting simultaneous investigation and experimentation, I will, for the sake of clarity, first present my research and then delve into the experimentations and iterations I conducted during this period.

Research:

1. **Personal narrative**
2. **Systems and networks**
3. **Female body proportions**

1. Personal narrative

As an (almost retired) fashion model, I have collected many personal stories and experiences that have influenced my self-awareness and positioning within this industry. Eating disorders, loneliness and mental health struggles are only a few of the many challenges my colleagues and I shared in these stories.

Conducting interviews with other models made me even more mindful of the problematic infrastructure of the fashion industry, which is rooted in a top-down hierarchical system. Fashion models have to follow a very rigid set of rules that often require them to fulfil unhealthy beauty standards if a size 0 does not come naturally to them. This system enables and encourages the ill-treatment and objectification of our bodies.

Since I started modelling, I have been constantly reminded of the numbers and norms that dictate my relationship with my body. My expectations for fashion jobs are shaped by the contemporary standards of the fashion industry, which often reinforce unhealthy beauty bodies.

Through my interactions with other women, I have noticed similar insecurities. Their confidence in their bodies is often tied to weight, age, height, or bust size. These observations prompted me to question the existing beauty ideals. I began to understand that these measurements and cultural standards are often arbitrary and subjective, varying significantly across different cultures and time periods. This realisation fueled my advocacy for a more inclusive and diverse understanding of beauty.



My Sedcard from Premier Models

2. Objective Systems and Networks

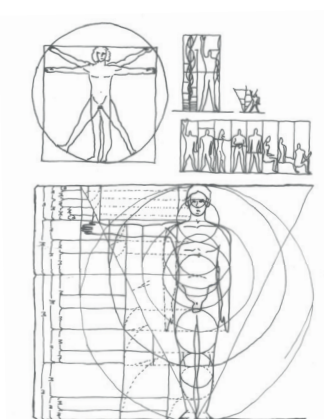
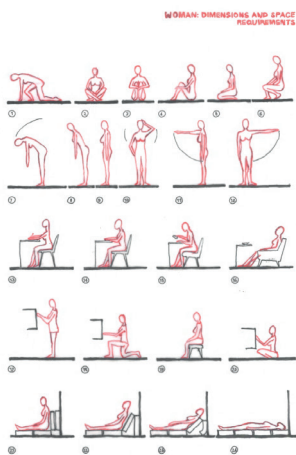
Focusing my research on the illusion of the perceived ideal of women, I delved into historic measurement systems developed over time. Thereby, I discovered links between systems and norms, revealing an underlying connection to proportions.

The rules of proportions are essential guidelines used in art and design to create balance and harmony in compositions. The golden ratio, roughly 1:1.618, and the rule of thirds help place elements aesthetically. Proportions also involve scaling elements relative to each other, maintaining symmetry or balanced asymmetry to achieve visual coherence.

Throughout history, the majority of human-built environments have used the rules of proportions and defined human scales based on the average measurements of men, perpetuating a gender bias. From Leonardo da Vinci's 'Vitruvian Man' (c. 1490) to Le Corbusier's 'Modulor' (1954), the concept of an ideal human body (of a man) defined by precise physical dimensions has been the cornerstone of design history. However, these systems, while intended to humanise architecture and improve functionality, often impose a mathematical rigidity and gender inequality that starkly contrasts with the natural comfort we should strive for.

Despite the long record of attempts to objectively define human proportions, inclusivity remains a challenge. The need for more female representation in design and architecture is essential, as the homogeneous approach in models like those found in the Neufert architecture guide (Neufert, 2000) is concerning. These guides need to offer more flexibility to accommodate diverse body shapes, highlighting the demand for a more inclusive mindset in design that embraces all human forms.

Fashion arguably has the closest connection to our body's proportions in design, as clothing is constantly attached to our shapes and proportions. When the fashion industry underwent upheaval in the 19th century - driven by advances in textile manufacturing and sewing technology - standard sizes were introduced. These metrics helped to streamline production and reduce costs, leading to the widespread adoption of standardised measurements. The change from manufacturing processes to mass production not only influenced body image but also profoundly impacted self-perception and societal standards of beauty (Eicher et al., 2008).







Pen on paper sketches of proportions

3. Female body proportions

Continuing on the idea of measuring beauty, I began investigating the role of proportions and ratios in determining female beauty standards. I found that the hip-to-waist ratio is considered a measure of fertility and attractiveness of women in certain cultures. Similarly, the bust-to-waist ratio, the height-to-weight ratio, and many other ratios are regarded as a mark of health and beauty (Eicher et al., 2008).

As I delved deeper into the proportions of beauty standards across different eras, I employed ChatGPT to estimate the measurements of common female beauty ideals. My aim was to investigate their measurements and compare their sizes in what seemed to be an objective manner.

Among the figures I examined were iconic representations such as the Venus of Willendorf (28 000 – 25 000 BCE), Botticelli's Venus (1484 – 1486 CE), Marilyn Monroe (1954), and Kim Kardashian (2024). It is important to note that the figures generated by ChatGPT were estimations and may not align precisely with actual measurements. For instance, in the case of the Venus of Willendorf, one of the earliest known depictions of the female form, the figure is only 11.1 centimetres tall (Dixon, 2011). To include the ratios in my measuring system, I had to multiply the figures by a factor of 15, highlighting the need for caution in interpreting these figures as estimations, not precise measurements. The numbers revealed through this research can be reviewed below in the table. I would later use these figures to compare them in my own measuring system.

					
	Kim Kardashian	Marilyn Monroe	Venus by Botticelli	The Venus of Willendorf	
Time	2024, when she took this selfie	1954, when this picture was taken of her	1483 - 1486 CE, when Botticelli finished the painting	28 000 - 25 000 BCE when the statue was made	(Weight, height, waist, hip and bust) multiplied by the factor of 15
Body Measurements					
Age	43 years	29 years	30 years	27 years	27 years
Weight	57 kg	53 kg	63 kg	0.1 kg	1.5 kg
Height	157 cm	165 cm	180 cm	11.1 cm	166.5 cm
Waist	66 cm	61 cm	70 cm	5.5 cm	82.5 cm
Hip	104 cm	87 cm	105 cm	5.5 cm	82.5 cm
Bust	97 cm	91 cm	140 cm	5.5 cm	82.5 cm

Experimentations:

1. **Installation and typography iterations**
2. **Finding the common threads**
3. **Conditional design workshop**

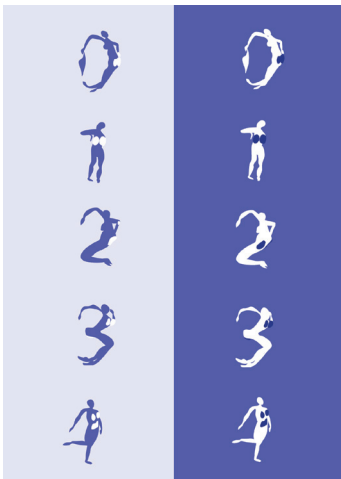
1. Installation and typography iterations

As part of my research into female beauty norms, I explored various options and graphic communications design tools aligned with my investigation. Therefore, I delved into alternative systems of measuring bodies, collecting data from women I knew and situating them in diverse contexts. The data I compiled in the beginning encompassed the age, weight, height, shoe size, waist, hip, and bust size of my classmates.

My initial experiments sought to encapsulate these diverse measurements of women folded into cubes. By attempting to display the diverse measurement units of bodies into a seemingly neutral and cubic framework, I was mirroring the very issue of the fashion industry and our perception of beauty I aimed to critique—confining female bodies into metaphorical boxes.

I continued experimenting with typography and placed or folded female bodies into numbers. This experiment was inspired by the paintings of Ives Klein - an artist who used nude women as 'human paintbrushes' (2011, Russell). To Klein, the work symbolised the anthropometric ideal, serving as a pure representation of human proportion. Some feminist movements later critiqued that by directing the movements of nude female models, Klein exerted ultimate control over his subjects, reducing the female body to an object for the male gaze and a tool for reinforcing patriarchal values.

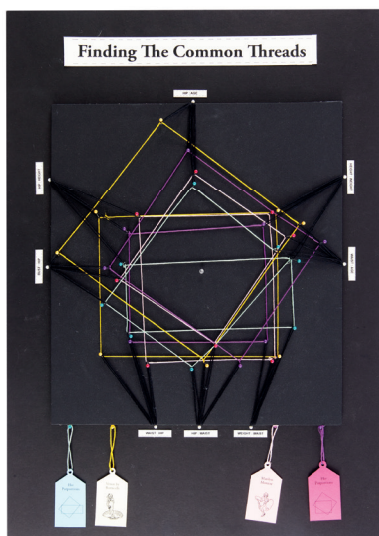
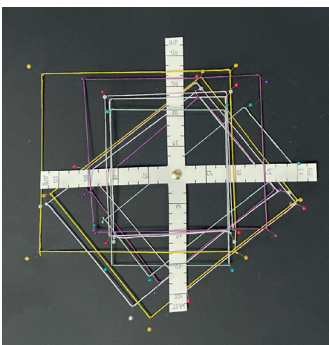
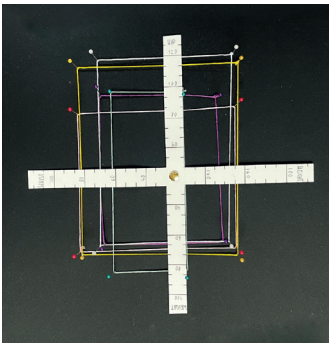
Ultimately, these experiments served as a catalyst for deeper contemplation about the medium I wished to employ and the message I aimed to convey. By using women's bodies and numbers and imposing my own system upon them, I inadvertently revealed a power dynamic that I was actually aiming to critique. This realisation provoked me to reconsider how I wanted to communicate my message.



Graphic design iterations

2. Finding the common threads

After experimenting with installation and typographic methods to represent female body forms, I narrowed my multidisciplinary approach. This helped me integrate my ideas more cohesively. Recognising that my interests lay within the fashion industry, I chose only to employ methodologies standard in that field: from then on, weaving, sewing, and searching for common threads became my leitmotifs. I extended this approach to the materials I used, all of which are typical for the fashion industry: measurement bands, scissors, needles, pins, mood boards, styrofoam boards, labels, fabric, and threads.



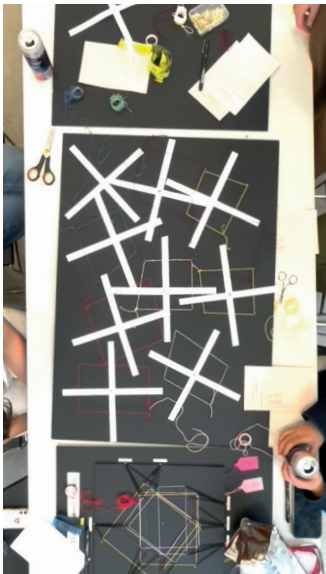
My measuring system including beauty ideals

In the subsequent experiments, and based on my research about proportions, I devised my own measuring system, arranging body proportions on two coordinate axes. By distributing all measurement units of bodies on these, the proportions and ratios were thus visible — for example, the height-to-weight ratio or the hip-to-bust ratio. I placed the axes on black styrofoam boards and used differently coloured threads to represent the various female forms. Each female beauty ideal had a unique thread and pin colour, with labels attached to the threads.

The figures for the experiments were derived from my earlier research with ChatGPT's assistance. These included the body measurements of the Venus of Willendorf (blue-coloured thread), Botticelli's Venus (yellow), Marilyn Monroe (pink), and Kim Kardashian (violet).

By exploring the relationships between their body proportions, I created a design that resembled a flower, abstractly revealing the measurements of beauty ideals and providing a fresh perspective on body representation.

However, the piece still lacked human interaction. Therefore, I decided to conduct a workshop with my female peers from our Graphic Communication Design course, adding a necessary element of personal engagement to the exploration.



Our workshop

3. Conditional Design workshop

To incorporate the proportions and experiences of my female peers, I turned to user-generated design, aiming to create a space for honest conversations about beauty norms. My goal was to foster a sense of connection and vulnerability among the participants (Armstrong et.al, 2011).

Following the 'Conditional Design Workshop' (2013) by Wouters et al., I knew that the more rules and restrictions I would put in place, the more information I would gather. Therefore, I developed an instructional model for the participants to determine their body proportions and provided everyone with the same materials and rules.

On the 9th of March, I conducted a workshop with seven women from our course. Using the exact measurement systems and materials I had previously developed, I asked the women to measure their own body proportions, including their bust, waist, and hip sizes, as well as to write down their weight, height, and age. Crucially, to ensure their comfort, anonymity was rigorously maintained throughout the process.

In earlier attempts, asking women for their measurements without promising anonymity led to discomfort and self-consciousness. This experience highlighted the importance of creating a safe environment for sharing such personal information. It became apparent that each woman had her own insecurities and perceptions of the 'ideal' numbers.

The workshop, which evolved into a sociological experiment, revealed the high expectations we place on our bodies. Despite its serious undertones, the task was designed to be playful and collaborative, fostering a supportive atmosphere. The feedback indicated that participants not only enjoyed the cooperative endeavour but also felt a strong sense of community and understanding.



Our workshop board with measuring system



Our board without measuring system



Our board with solid patterns

The discussions and feedback from the workshop reminded me of the video 'Tapestry of Truth' (2015) by Mexican artist Teresa Margolles, which I saw at the Barbican exhibition 'Unravel' (2024). In this video, women from various Latin American communities embroider fabric stained by contact with the bodies of women who had suffered violent deaths. Margolles encouraged them to create patterns, sparking conversations about violence and its impact on their communities. This collaborative process produced powerful visual work and reflected the emotional and social contexts of the embroiderers' lives.

Margolles' artwork helped me understand the profound power of collaborative creation and the value of sharing experiences and reflecting on trauma together. In this process, the journey and collective narrative are as significant as the final outcome, allowing us to discuss and understand subjective awareness of proportions.

Final Design

Finally, I decided to transform the multicoloured shapes that emerged during our workshop into a quilt with highly visible white threads. These threads, under tension — metaphorically akin to female bodies — held the very body proportions we had determined in our workshop within a wooden frame. Thus, the shapes emerged into a tapestry of shared proportions and narratives.

My choice of sewing and quilting is rooted in historical practices: quilting has traditionally served as a medium for conveying messages, expressing viewpoints, and transmitting information to future generations. It provided women with a sense of accomplishment and a creative outlet, enabling them to contribute to their communities in tangible ways (2020, Liberty Hall). The final design was further influenced by a quote from an exhibition on Louise Bourgeois: 'The act of sewing is a process of emotional repair' (Bourgeois, 2022). This notion of sewing as emotional repair aligns with my project's aim to reframe our bodies as a unique piece of art rather than a mere medium.

Given the quilt's conceptual nature, which may not be immediately apparent to the audience, I created a video that delves into the key elements of its creation. The video serves as a visual guide, shedding light on the intricate layers of the concept. In just over four minutes, the design process of Projections 2 from beginning to end becomes visible. Meanwhile, subjective and objective narratives get juxtaposed, merged and contextualised.

All in all, I have managed to generate a unique sizing system that has helped us to overcome the discomfort of having to share our body proportions. Thereby, it was possible to construct a tapestry of female proportions—a quilt of vulnerabilities woven into a collective representation of female bodies. This process invited us to reconsider how we measure and perceive our bodies.

Ultimately, my research and iterations in the fields of female body representation showed that the concept of beauty transcends numerical definitions. It resides in the ongoing dialogue of cultural exchange and the recognition of diverse forms. My work thereby underscores the importance of embracing individuality and fostering a deeper understanding of beauty beyond standardised metrics.



The final quilt



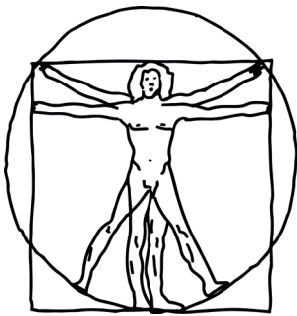
Projected contribution

Understanding the interplay between ,forms' - a design's physical or visual elements - and ,norms' - the accepted standards or expectations within a society- is crucial for grasping the evolution of cultural and societal expressions. This dynamic is central to graphic communication design, where the challenge often lies in creating forms that resonate with existing norms while pushing boundaries to inspire new ways of thinking. Giving the model/body/medium a voice to contradict the status quo and scrutinising ways of measuring bodies is a valuable exercise for designers working with human proportions across various fields.

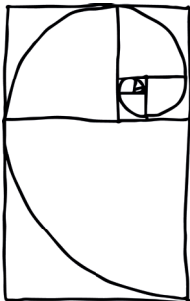
To experiment with the interplay between ,numerical representations' - so data-driven depictions of beauty ideals, and ,pictorial representations' - visual interpretations of beauty ideals, helps us to consider what is communicated and how the medium impacts our understanding and behaviour (Rock, 2003). My multidisciplinary approach involved initially dehumanising the body to affirm an objective truth with numbers and then ,rehumanising' it again. This exploration of the inherent contradictions in design became visible through my experimentations at the start of of Projections 2, culminating in my final project—a quilt that served as a data visualisation of our proportions.

One of the key insights I gained from this project is that numbers are merely a means to an end. When dealing with subjective matters such as beauty, a pure fixation on numerical rigidity is not the solution. Understanding the rules and the numbers is important, but the inclusion of empathy, imperfection, and human qualities truly brings design to life. As the designer Giorgia Lupi said in her TED talk: ,Instead of using data just to become more efficient, we argue we can use data to become more humane and connect with ourselves and others at a deeper level.' (2017)

Through critically examining my work as a model and creating a project about it, I also embarked on a profound journey of self-discovery. This work has been essential for me in combining my roles as a fashion model and graphic communication designer. Before exploring this subject, working at the intersection of the fashion and design industries often felt separated. On one hand, I was the medium/outcome/image (model); on the other, I was the messenger/input/image creator (designer). Merging these modes of visual communication has been a very insightful exploration.



This process has allowed me to reflect on my past, and simultaneously gave me an outlook for my future practice beyond this course. I have come to understand that my work is data-driven and human-centred, and I thrive in environments of co-creation and helping people voice their needs. In the future, I hope to work at the intersection of art and design, further exploring my ability to critically reflect on my positioning within these industries and engage with existing biases and societal norms. Position yourself and critically reflect, I believe, is crucial for every responsible design practice.



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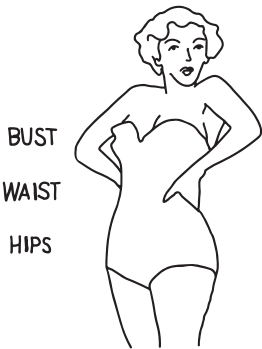
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