BODY IMAGE SAFE *CERTIFICATION*

In-store criteria

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Intro

Shops are filled with size-zero mannequins, airbrushed posters, and racks that stop at 'large'. It sends a quiet message about who belongs and who doesn't.

We've normalised spaces that quietly shame us. For too long, fashion has treated insecurity as strategy — designing stores and imagery that make people question their worth. These environments don't just reflect beauty standards, they reinforce them, shaping how people see themselves without even realising it. Shopping shouldn't leave anyone feeling smaller, lesser, or unwelcome.

The Body Image Safe certification exists to change that. It recognises and celebrates shops that make fashion feel inclusive, respectful, and safe for everybody. It's a movement towards stores that reflect real people and reject the pressure to conform.

Created by Index:MH, the certification translates years of psychological research into visible, practical changes — from the images on walls to the mirrors, mannequins, and changing rooms people use every day. It's the first step in transforming how fashion environments shape mental health and self-image, building the foundation for wider change across marketing, social media, and brand culture.

The *People* Behind the Criteria

The Body Image Safe criteria were developed with input from the Index:MH Advisory Board, which brings together internationally recognised academics specialising in body image research and appearance-related wellbeing.

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Criteria Outline

The Body Image Safe criteria cover eight key areas of the in-store environment. Each one focuses on practical, visible changes that make shopping feel more inclusive and supportive for everyone.

Certified shops can display the Body Image Safe mark on their shopfront, website, and social media. Clear visibility helps customers recognise spaces that meet these standards and encourages others to follow.

1. **IMAGES THAT REFLECT REAL PEOPLE**
    Photos of people should look real and relatable, not edited, filtered, or AI-generated. They should show a mix of body types, ages, and identities, without objectifying or sexualising anyone. Shops that use only product imagery meet this point if visuals stay body-neutral and focus on the clothes.

2. **REALISTIC MANNEQUINS (OR NONE AT ALL)**
    Mannequins should reflect realistic body proportions and a range of sizes. They shouldn't exaggerate thinness, muscularity, or sexualised features. Shops without mannequins automatically meet this point.

3. **LANGUAGE THAT RESPECTS EVERY BODY**
    Wording on signage, tags, and packaging should avoid appearance-based terms and focus on comfort, quality, and personal style. See the appendix for language guidelines.

4. **MIRRORS THAT SERVE A PURPOSE**
    Mirrors should be used only where needed, ideally inside private fitting rooms, and provide a clear, accurate reflection with neutral lighting. Mirrors across the shop floor or beside advertising should be avoided.

5. **CHANGING ROOMS THAT FEEL SAFE AND COMFORTABLE**

   Changing rooms should offer privacy and space for all body sizes. Include a stable seat, hooks at different heights, and full-closing curtains or doors. Where possible, at least one room should accommodate mobility aids or a companion.

6. **INCLUSIVE AND VISIBLE SIZING**

   Stock a wide range of sizes and make them easy to find. Larger sizes should be available and displayed alongside smaller ones, not separated into "plus-size" sections.

7. **GENDER INCLUSIVE LAYOUT**

   Organise clothing by style or type rather than gender. Use neutral signs like "shirts," "outerwear," or "casual." If full reorganisation isn't possible, add signs making it clear that anyone is welcome to browse any section.

8. **RESPECTFUL, WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT**

   Staff should avoid commenting on appearance and focus on comfort, fit, and personal style. Everyone in the space should feel respected and at ease, no matter their body, gender, or ability. See appendix for language guidelines.

Criteria *Breakdown* & Rationale

Each part of the *Body Image Safe* standard is grounded in research on how shop environments affect body image and mental wellbeing

This section explains the reasoning behind every criterion — what the evidence shows, why it matters, and how small changes in store design and language can make a real difference to how people feel while shopping.

1. Imagery

The images we see in shops quietly shape how we see ourselves. Research shows that constant exposure to idealised or edited photos fuels body dissatisfaction, comparison, and low mood [1, 2]. Knowing an image is digitally altered doesn't protect us; our brains still treat it as real and absorb it as the standard to live up to [3]. In shops, where we're already face-to-face with mirrors and sizing, that impact hits even harder.

THE PROBLEM WITH EDITED OR AI IMAGERY

Edited and AI-generated images sell a version of beauty that doesn't exist. Research shows that they keep unrealistic standards alive and make us feel worse about how we look, even when they're clearly labelled as edited [4]. Labels don't undo the harm because our brains react emotionally before we can think critically.

AI brings the same problem, only amplified. It defaults to light skin, slim bodies, and youth unless someone actively intervenes [5]. These systems learn bias from the world and then feed it straight back to us. The result is a blurred line between real and artificial, creating an image of beauty no one can ever reach. That's why the Body Image Safe certification does not accept heavily edited or AI-generated human imagery in any form.

WHAT COUNTS AS REALISTIC, INCLUSIVE, AND DIVERSE

Realistic imagery means showing people as they actually look. That includes a visible mix of body sizes, shapes, ages, skin tones, gender expressions, and visible differences such as scars or disabilities. Diversity should feel real, not performative, and roughly reflect the people who shop there. Images should also match the size range sold in-store, so customers see bodies the clothes are truly made for. No single body type should dominate the space.

Imagery that meets this standard uses real, unedited people who look like people. It shows comfort, confidence, and individuality instead of perfection. Product-only or body-neutral images that focus on the clothes themselves are equally welcome, as they remove the pressure to compare bodies altogether. Research from the Centre for Appearance Research and others has shown that seeing diverse or body-neutral imagery can improve body satisfaction and reduce appearance-based self-criticism [6].

If diverse, realistic imagery isn't available, it's better to use none. Avoid glossy stock photos or anything retouched. Choose images that feel relatable and honest — something that looks like your customers, not a fantasy version of them.

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2. Mannequins

==Mannequins quietly shape what we see as normal.== Research shows that most shop mannequins represent body sizes well below a healthy weight, setting a physical ideal that few people can achieve [7]. Male mannequins show the same pattern in reverse — exaggerated muscles, broad shoulders, and narrow waists. These displays act as visual standards that encourage comparison and body dissatisfaction.

In shops, that effect is amplified by mirrors, lighting, and fitting rooms. Adding a mannequin that represents a single, unrealistic body type deepens the sense of exclusion. People in larger bodies, disabled bodies, or with visible differences rarely see themselves represented, which signals who the clothes are meant for and who is left out.

Research suggests that realistic mannequins have commercial benefits. Customers report higher trust and stronger connection to brands that show relatable body types, while unrealistic figures are viewed as outdated and unappealing [8].

HOW TO GET CLOTHING DISPLAYS RIGHT

==Stores that remove mannequins altogether remove that trigger too==. Mannequin-free spaces are calmer, more inclusive, and still allow creativity through thoughtful display. Clothes can be folded, hung, or styled on tables and rails without being shown on a body at all. For small retailers, this is often cheaper and more flexible.

If mannequins are used, they should reflect real body diversity, including shapes, sizes, and abilities that resemble the customers who shop there. Proportions should match the clothing actually sold, and poses should stay natural rather than exaggerated or sexualised. Using disabled or adaptive mannequins where available challenges narrow ideas about what a shopper looks like.

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3. Language

Terms like "slimming," "flattering," or "perfect fit" might sound harmless, but studies show that language like this reinforces the idea that some bodies need to be fixed or disguised, increasing body dissatisfaction and self-criticism [9, 10]. Even when shoppers don't consciously register the words, they affect how people feel about their own appearance.

<mark>Language like this also teaches subtle rules about worth and belonging.</mark> "Flattering" tells us we look better when we appear smaller. "Anti-ageing" tells us that aging is a flaw. "Body sculpt" suggests that bodies are projects to be managed. Together, these phrases make shopping less about choice and more about measuring up. Consumer research shows that this kind of language lowers self-esteem and increases self-objectification, especially in women exposed to idealised imagery and weight-focused marketing [11].

HOW TO GET LANGUAGE RIGHT

Neutral, descriptive language helps undo that pressure. Words that focus on comfort, function, and quality (e.g. relaxed fit, soft stretch) let customers decide what feels good for them. This shift might seem small, but research suggests that reframing clothing descriptions away from appearance can support healthier self-perception and reduce comparison [12].

For shops, this means reviewing signage, tags, packaging, and even staff language. Swap any phrase that implies improvement or fixing for one that simply describes the product. Avoid assumptions about customers' goals, like wanting to look slimmer, curvier, younger, or more toned.

<mark>Body-neutral language builds trust and changes the tone of the space</mark>. It tells customers that clothes are there to serve them, not the other way around. When people can shop without judgement or hidden messaging, they make freer, more confident choices, and that's what creates real brand loyalty.

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4. Mirrors

Mirrors are one of the most powerful parts of any shop environment. Seeing our reflection in public spaces increases self-objectification and comparison [1, 2]. When mirrors are scattered across walkways or placed beside advertising, they keep us in a constant state of self-awareness that quietly drains confidence and enjoyment.

Research shows that viewing ourselves in mirrors makes us evaluate our bodies from an external perspective, which is linked to higher body dissatisfaction and lower mood [14,15]. Studies in perception and neuroscience also find that mirrors can subtly alter how we perceive our own shape and size, often exaggerating existing concerns [16].

PLACEMENT, LIGHTING, AND DESIGN

Placement and lighting make a significant difference. Research in environmental psychology finds that mirrors in open spaces heighten social comparison and self-evaluation anxiety, while private fitting-room mirrors reduce that effect and help people focus on clothing and comfort instead [17, 18].

Lighting interacts with mirrors to shape how we see ourselves. Directional or overly bright lighting can create shadows, change skin tone, and make features appear harsher [16]. Diffuse, neutral lighting provides a more accurate and balanced reflection, supporting steadier mood and body perception [19]. Tilted, curved, or poorly maintained mirrors distort proportions and are consistently reported by shoppers as uncomfortable and untrustworthy.

Many people change their behaviour in response to mirror exposure. Some avoid entire sections of a shop or leave without trying clothes on because they don't want to see their reflection from every angle. These small environmental cues can have a big impact on how welcoming a space feels.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

Mirrors should be used intentionally, not decoratively. Keep them inside fitting rooms, positioned upright, flat, and evenly lit to give a clear, undistorted reflection. Use neutral lighting and avoid harsh spotlights or tinted bulbs. If mirrors are on the shop floor, avoid placing them next to body-focused advertising or appearance-based slogans, which intensify comparison.

These are small but realistic changes that make a significant difference. Shops don't need to rebuild their spaces; just be deliberate about where mirrors go and how they're lit. Purposeful mirror placement helps create a calmer, more body-neutral environment where customers can focus on how clothes feel, not how they measure up.

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5. Changing rooms

Changing rooms are one of the most sensitive parts of any shop. They combine physical exposure, confined space, and self-judgment, all of which heighten body awareness and comparison [20, 9]. Small, harshly lit, or poorly designed spaces have been shown to lower mood, increase body dissatisfaction, and make people avoid trying things on altogether [21, 22]. In contrast, spaces built around comfort, privacy, and a sense of control help customers feel more at ease and leave with higher confidence in both the clothes and themselves.

LIGHTING

Lighting has one of the biggest effects. Bright, directional lights exaggerate shadows and texture, making reflections feel harsher and less accurate [16]. Softer, neutral lighting gives a clearer, calmer view that supports steadier mood and a more balanced sense of one's body [19].

ACCESSIBILITY & PRIVACY

Accessibility is part of feeling safe. When changing rooms aren't built for all bodies, they send a clear message about who is expected to belong there. Not every shop will have the space or resources to make large structural changes, but small adjustments — a stable seat, hooks at different heights, or clear space to move — can still make a difference. These details signal that everyone is welcome

Privacy matters just as much. Thin curtains or shared spaces create discomfort and anxiety, discouraging people from trying clothes on at all [21]. Uncomfortable or exposing spaces drive avoidance, while private, well-lit, and inclusive ones encourage exploration and confidence [22, 18]. A sense of safety and control in these spaces is directly linked to higher self-esteem and more positive body image [17].

HOW TO MAKE CHANGING ROOMS FEEL SAFE

Changing rooms should always offer full privacy, with doors or curtains that close completely. Lighting should be soft and neutral, without harsh shadows or colour distortion. Each room should have enough space to move freely, with at least one accessible option wherever possible. Seating, hooks at different heights, and simple design can make customers feel more comfortable.

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6. Sizing

The way clothes are stocked and displayed sends a message about who belongs in a store. When sizes stop at a certain point or larger sizes are hidden away, the message is clear: some bodies are welcome, and others are not. Research shows that **when people can't find their size in-store, they feel excluded**, frustrated, and less confident about their bodies [23]. Segregating "plus-size" clothing into separate or hidden sections reinforces that divide, making shoppers feel like outsiders in a space that should serve everyone [23].

The problem isn't just limited stock; it's also visibility. Many shops display smaller sizes more prominently, keep larger ones in the back, or use mannequins that don't match the range they actually sell. This kind of layout quietly teaches people that only certain bodies are meant to be seen. **Lack of clear size signposting adds to the discomfort.** People hesitate to ask for their size because doing so feels like drawing attention to difference.

Making sizing visible and equal changes that dynamic. Inclusive stores clearly show which sizes they carry and where to find them. Larger sizes aren't hidden or treated as separate; they're displayed together with smaller ones, on mannequins, racks, and windows alike. Simple adjustments like equal display space, clear signage, and mixed-size presentation create an environment where everyone can see themselves represented. Research from the University of Bath [24] shows that visible size diversity improves customer confidence and overall experience, even among shoppers who already fit standard sizes.

THE BEST WAY TO HANDLE SIZING

Not every shop can stock every size, but visibility and honesty matter most. A simple sign showing the size range available is better than leaving customers to guess or ask. If space or stock is limited, be open about it while keeping the tone neutral and respectful. Inclusion doesn't require a full refit; it starts with simple, visible cues that make everyone feel seen.

The most inclusive approach is to keep all sizes together, clearly visible, and equally accessible. Avoid labels like "regular" or "normal," which imply others are not. Using a variety of mannequin sizes and showing the full range near the entrance or fitting area signals that every body is equally valued.

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7. Layout

The way a shop is organised shapes who feels welcome in it. Most retail spaces still divide clothes into "men's" and "women's" sections, a system that assumes everyone fits neatly into those categories. For anyone who doesn't, shopping can become an uncomfortable or even alienating experience. Research shows that gendered signage and store design increase anxiety and reduce willingness to shop, especially among non-binary and trans customers [25].

<mark>Gendered environments reinforce outdated stereotypes.</mark> "Women's" areas are often designed to feel delicate or decorative, while "men's" sections use dark tones and angular layouts, reflecting old marketing ideas rather than real customer needs [26]. These visual and spatial cues quietly teach people that style and self-expression should follow gender rules.

Inclusive, style-based layouts change that. Organising clothes by type, fit, or colour instead of gender helps create an environment where anyone can browse freely without judgment or confusion. Research in retail design shows that gender-neutral layouts increase comfort, dwell time, and perceived openness [23]. When shops remove unnecessary gender cues, they stop asking customers to fit the space and start letting the space fit them.

HOW TO MAKE LAYOUT GENDER-INCLUSIVE

<mark>Gender-inclusive layout doesn't require a full redesign.</mark> It starts with how space and language are used. The simplest change is to stop dividing stock into "men's" and "women's" sections. Instead, group clothes by style, fit, or product type, for example, "shirts," "outerwear," or "casual." This small shift makes the space easier to navigate for everyone, including non-binary and trans shoppers, and removes the pressure of having to choose which side of the store to enter.

Signage and visual cues matter just as much. Avoid gendered language or colour coding, and use neutral, descriptive terms that focus on the clothes, not who they're for. If full reorganisation isn't possible, shops can still add a simple note on signage such as "shop freely across all sections" to signal that browsing anywhere is welcome.

Fitting rooms should follow the same principle. Where possible, make them unisex or clearly state that customers are free to use whichever they feel most comfortable in.

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8. Store environment

Everyday interactions can either reinforce or challenge appearance norms. Weight stigma and appearance-based bias have been linked to higher levels of shame, anxiety, depression, and disordered eating [27, 28]. Clothing and fashion spaces are among the most common settings where people report feeling judged or excluded [29, 30].

Research shows that **both negative and seemingly positive appearance comments can harm body image**. Negative remarks are directly associated with greater body dissatisfaction and self-criticism [31]. Even compliments that focus on looks, for example "you look so skinny" or "you look great like this" can increase comparison and body preoccupation [32].

Weight stigma often operates subtly. It includes unsolicited comments about weight loss or gain, assumptions about health or discipline, and differences in tone or patience toward customers of different body types [28, 33].

CULTIVATING A RESPECTFUL ATMOSPHERE

The most effective change is simple: **focus on how clothes feel and function, not how bodies look**. A respectful shop environment avoids appearance-based language entirely. Staff do not comment on their own or customers' bodies and avoid humour or "banter" about size, weight, or age. Help is offered through neutral, functional language focused on comfort, fit, and style. Clear expectations should apply to staff and customers alike, with zero tolerance for body-based judgement.

Creating a respectful environment benefits everyone. Research shows that customers who feel treated with respect report higher satisfaction, stronger brand loyalty, and a more positive body image after shopping [34, 35].

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Appendix

LANGUAGE GUIDELINES

Words influence how people feel about their bodies and their place in a shop. These guidelines help make in-store language more body-neutral and supportive.

Where possible, avoid wording that focuses on body shape, weight, or appearance, or language that implies a "better" or "ideal" body, for example:

❌Avoid terms that judge or change how a body looks; e.g.

- *Slimming*
- *Flattering*
- *Perfect fit*
- *Sculpting*
- *Body-hugging*
- *Tummy control*
- *Contouring*
- *Hides flaws*
- *Enhances curves*
- *Cinching*
- *Streamlining*
- *Figure-fixing*
- *Creates shape*
- *Enhances silhouette*
- *Shaping*
- *Snatched*
- *Lifts and tones*
- *Defines waist*
- *Smooths lumps and bumps*
- *Accentuates*
- *Camouflages*
- *Minimises*
- *Maximises*
- *Anti-ageing*
- *Youthful look*

✅Instead, use neutral, descriptive terms that focus on comfort, function, and design; e.g.

- *Relaxed fit*
- *Soft stretch*
- *Tailored*
- *Flexible feel*
- *Adjustable fit*
- *Regular fit*
- *Straight leg*
- *Wide leg*
- *Cropped*
- *High-rise / mid-rise*
- *Oversized*
- *Lightweight*
- *Breathable*
- *Supportive*
- *Flexible*
- *Durable*
- *Comfortable*
- *Classic cut*
- *Everyday style*
- *Minimal*
- *Modern*
- *Structured*
- *Laid-back*
- *Statement piece*
- *Active fit*