



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Impact of Societal Beauty Standards on Mental Health and Body Image of Women From Diverse Backgrounds

Neha Dubey*

Abstract

The persistence of unrealistic beauty ideals remains a significant concern in contemporary society, shaping the perceptions and experiences of women across diverse cultural and social backgrounds. These beauty norms, reinforced through television, film, fashion industries, and especially social media, often promote limited and homogenized standards of attractiveness (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). Research has shown that frequent exposure to such ideals contributes to negative body image, reduced self-esteem, and the development of mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and eating disorders (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). However, the majority of existing research tends to focus on generalized populations, providing limited insight into how these standards differently affect women from varied cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Beauty ideals vary across societies. For example, in some regions, lighter skin may be idealized, while in others, body shape, height, or specific facial features are emphasized (Swami et al., 2010). These culturally shaped expectations lead to different forms of internalized pressure and self-judgment among women. Moreover, intersecting identities such as race, class, and ethnicity shape how women experience and respond to societal beauty norms, influencing their psychological resilience or vulnerability (Moradi & Huang, 2008). This article aims to examine how contemporary beauty standards impact body image and mental health among women from varied backgrounds. By highlighting diverse experiences and contextual influences, the study seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between beauty expectations and women's emotional well-being.

Keywords: Beauty Standards, Body Image, Mental Health, Social Media Influence, Self-Esteem, Societal Expectations, Cross-Cultural Perspectives.

Introduction

People around the world often use terms like beauty standards, body image, and mental health without fully understanding their meanings or the profound impact they have on daily life. Societal beauty standards refer to culturally defined and socially promoted ideals of physical attractiveness, which vary across societies. They often emphasize traits such as youthfulness, thinness, clear skin, hair texture, and facial features. Beauty standards are socially constructed guidelines that determine which physical

characteristics are considered desirable in a given culture, influencing how individuals are perceived and judged. These standards can differ by age, ethnicity, and culture, and are shaped by factors such as media, history, and social norms.

In contemporary society, the representation of beauty is often narrow and restrictive, primarily embracing individuals who fit unrealistic and idealized criteria. Women who do not conform to these standards are frequently labeled as unattractive or undesirable, facing social stigma, discrimination, and marginalization. This societal pressure can lead women to pursue harmful behaviors, such as extreme dieting, cosmetic surgery, or other unsafe practices, in an attempt to align with these ideals (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008).

From birth, women are exposed to societal expectations that shape their behavior, appearance, and self-perception. They are often taught that their value is linked to their ability to conform to beauty ideals, influencing how they dress, behave, and interact with others. Over time, this relentless pressure can reduce women to "puppets" of cultural expectations, striving to meet superficial standards that rarely reflect the diversity of real human bodies and experiences. Societal beauty standards thus play a

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significant role in shaping identity, self-worth, and mental health globally (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Kushwaha, 2024).

Understanding Societal Beauty Standards

Although the saying “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” is widely used, many people believe beauty can be objectively defined. Physical attractiveness heavily influences social judgments, affecting perceptions of intelligence, personality, and even health. Research indicates that individuals deemed attractive often enjoy advantages such as higher employment opportunities, better salaries, and more social recognition, while deviations from societal norms can negatively impact social outcomes (Langlois et al., 2000). In men, height is often a key indicator of desirability, whereas in women, both height and weight play significant roles in perceived attractiveness.

Historically, beauty standards have varied across cultures and time periods. In ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, beauty emphasized youth, fertility, and physical perfection, while the medieval era focused on modesty and spiritual virtues. The Renaissance favored fuller, curvier bodies and symmetrical features, whereas modern Western standards, shaped by Hollywood and advertising, promote thinness, youthfulness, and fair skin (Swami, 2015). Cultural differences remain significant: African societies often value fuller bodies and strength, Asian cultures prioritize delicacy and fair skin, and Latin American societies celebrate expressive, curvy figures. These ideals reflect broader societal values, including health, wealth, and morality.

Exposure to Societal Beauty Standards

Beauty standards are reinforced through multiple channels, including traditional media, social media, family, and peers. Television, advertisements, and magazines frequently feature models and celebrities who adhere to narrow definitions of attractiveness, shaping public perceptions of beauty (Fardouly et al., 2015). Family members and peers influence these perceptions by praising conformity or criticizing deviation, teaching children early on which traits are desirable. Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok amplify these norms through curated images and videos, where influencers dictate trends and reinforce conventional standards.

The consequences of repeated exposure are significant. Individuals may develop negative body image, low self-esteem, and mental health challenges if they perceive themselves as failing to meet societal ideals. Conversely, supportive social networks and exposure to diverse representations can mitigate harmful effects and promote body acceptance (Perloff, 2014; Rodgers et al., 2018).

Theoretical Perspectives

Several theories help explain how societal beauty standards influence body image and mental health:

- Social Comparison Theory suggests individuals evaluate their appearance by comparing themselves to others. Frequent comparisons to unrealistic ideals often produce dissatisfaction and negative self-perception (Festinger, 1954; Fardouly et al., 2015).
- Objectification Theory posits that women are socialized to view themselves as objects, judged primarily by appearance. Self-objectification leads to evaluating oneself against societal ideals, often exacerbated by media portrayals (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).
- Sociocultural Theory emphasizes cultural norms, media, and social pressures in shaping body image. Individuals internalize idealized beauty standards, which can result in negative self-perception (Thompson et al., 1999).
- Self-Discrepancy Theory highlights distress arising from gaps between the actual self and ideal self. Discrepancies between perceived and ideal body image can lead to shame, disappointment, and reduced self-esteem (Higgins, 1987).

Media and Social Media Influence

Traditional and social media are powerful agents in perpetuating beauty standards. Television, magazines, and films often depict idealized and digitally enhanced images, emphasizing flawless skin, thinness, and symmetry. Social media influencers curate lifestyles and appearances that conform to these ideals, generating envy, body dissatisfaction, and feelings of inadequacy, particularly among adolescents (Fardouly et al., 2015). Algorithms amplify content featuring conventionally attractive individuals, reinforcing constant self-comparison (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

Developing media literacy is crucial for mitigating these effects. Recognizing image manipulation and algorithmic biases can empower individuals to resist negative impacts and foster a healthier self-image. Promoting diversity in media representation—across body types, skin tones, and abilities—also supports positive body image (Perloff, 2014).

Mental Health Implications

The pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards has profound mental health consequences. Women are particularly affected, experiencing low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and disordered eating (Grabe et al., 2008). Exposure to thin-ideal images increases body dissatisfaction, negative mood, and desire for weight loss, whereas exposure to plus-sized models can improve mood and self-perception (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

Body Image and Self-Esteem are closely linked, with body dissatisfaction contributing to reduced self-worth. Studies show 40–60% of girls aged 6–12 express dissatisfaction with their weight (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004). Negative body image can persist into adulthood, fostering chronic self-criticism, anxiety, and depression.

Disordered Eating Behaviors are another consequence, including restrictive dieting, bingeing, purging, and excessive exercise. Social media perpetuates these behaviors through constant comparison and reinforcement of idealized images (Levine & Smolak, 2015).

Embracing Body Positivity and Self-Acceptance

Promoting body positivity and self-acceptance is essential for improving mental health and body image. Body positivity encourages acceptance of all body types and sizes, while self-acceptance involves embracing one's strengths and unique qualities without judgment. Strategies include challenging negative self-talk, practicing self-compassion, focusing on inner qualities, seeking supportive communities, and engaging in self-care. Advocacy for diverse media representation further promotes inclusivity, particularly for women of color and marginalized groups facing intersecting forms of discrimination.

In conclusion, societal beauty standards exert pervasive influence over women's mental health, self-esteem, and behaviors. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, including media literacy, inclusive representation, mental health support, and education on body positivity. Embracing diversity and self-acceptance empowers women to feel valued and respected, regardless of appearance.

Literature Review

A literature review is a systematic summary and analysis of existing research on a specific topic, helping to develop a theoretical framework or conceptual model. Most reviews follow an introduction-body-conclusion structure, synthesizing findings to identify patterns, gaps, and implications for future research. This review examines the influence of societal beauty standards on women's body image and mental health across diverse cultural, social, and age groups.

Abdoli et al. (2024). *Cultural differences in body image: A systematic review* conducted a systematic review on cultural differences in body image, highlighting how cultural and societal expectations influence body perception and mental health. Western and non-Western beauty ideals differ, and pressures to conform can lead to body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, with future interventions suggested to improve coping mechanisms.

French (2024). *What is the connection between beauty standards and mental health?* explored the link between beauty standards and mental health, emphasizing that early exposure through media, family, and peers shapes young women's self-perception. Societal praise for appearance over behavior contributes to anorexia, bulimia, depression, social isolation, and long-term mental health consequences.

Merino, Tórnoro-Aguilera, et al. (2024). *Body perceptions and psychological well-being: A review of the impact of*

social media and physical measurements on self-esteem and mental health with a focus on body image satisfaction and its relationship with cultural and gender factors analyzed social media's role in promoting idealized body images, noting that cultural norms and gender expectations amplify unrealistic standards, resulting in low self-esteem and increased psychological stress.

Miralrio (2024). *How do beauty standards affect mental health?* highlighted that exposure to idealized beauty leads women to self-critique and internalize negative judgments, contributing to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, emphasizing the importance of professional support.

Re and Bruno (2024). *Exploring the influence of social media and beauty filters on body image in adolescents and young women* focused on beauty filters and social media, finding that manipulated images distort body perception, increasing body dissatisfaction and risk of psychological disorders among adolescents and young women.

Aqilah and Trihandayani (2024). *The toxicity of beauty standards: Body image perception among women acne fighters* studied women with acne, showing that societal standards negatively affect confidence and social interactions, leading to persistent body dissatisfaction and feelings of inadequacy.

Dey (2024). *Social inequalities in beauty and appearance: An in-depth analysis* examined social inequalities in beauty, revealing how Western beauty standards dominate globally, causing discrimination and reduced opportunities for those who do not conform, impacting mental health and social functioning.

Kertechian (2024). *The impact of negative body image on turnover intention: The mediating and amplifying role of perceived discrimination* investigated workplace implications, demonstrating that negative body image increases perceptions of discrimination, contributing to higher turnover intentions and emphasizing the need for positive body image interventions in professional settings.

Rodgers, Laveway, et al. (2023). *Body image as a global mental health concern* highlighted global risks of body image pressures, especially among vulnerable populations, noting psychological and physical health consequences related to weight and appearance.

Ranjan et al. (2023). *Effect of body image on self-esteem: A systematic literature review and future implication* reviewed the connection between body image and self-esteem, showing that positive body image enhances confidence, whereas low self-esteem often results from negative body perceptions.

Verma and Ray (2023). *A phenomenological exploration of Indian women's body image within intersecting identities in a globalizing nation* examined Indian women's experiences, revealing that unattainable beauty ideals lead to continuous monitoring of the body, unhealthy behaviors, and long-term body dissatisfaction.

Dahlianti (2023). *Interpretation of beauty: Researching society norm and its impact on body image and self-esteem* explored societal constructions of beauty, showing how social norms and media perpetuate pressures to conform, negatively impacting self-esteem and mental health.

Wang et al. (2023). *Body image construction and mental health levels among college students: A data survey of Chinese university students* surveyed Chinese college students, showing that higher body acceptance correlates with better mental health, while students in certain fields experience higher psychological burdens.

Laughter, Anderson, et al. (2023). *Psychology of aesthetics: Beauty, social media, and body dysmorphic disorder* emphasized social media's role in intensifying body dissatisfaction, potentially causing body dysmorphic disorders, depression, and eating disorders, and motivating cosmetic interventions.

Mady, Biswas, et al. (2022). *"A whiter shade of pale": Whiteness, female beauty standards, and ethical engagement across three cultures* examined the role of skin-lightening and whiteness as dominant beauty ideals, highlighting their impact on self-esteem and cross-cultural variations.

Sari et al. (2022). *Beauty of women from ideal appearance and understanding of beauty standards: A literature review* reviewed social media's influence on appearance standards, showing that adherence to societal beauty norms affects self-worth, career opportunities, and personal relationships.

Lowy et al. (2021). *Body image and internalization of appearance ideals in Black women: An update and call for culturally-sensitive research* highlighted the need for culturally sensitive approaches to body image research among Black women, addressing the internalization of Eurocentric beauty ideals.

Sotiriou and Awad (2020). *Cultural influences on body image and body esteem* examined cultural influences on body image, showing that ideals vary globally and affect psychological outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.

Winter, Gillen, et al. (2017). *Body appreciation, anxiety, and depression among a racially diverse sample of women* found that body appreciation is inversely related to anxiety and depression, with higher satisfaction linked to improved mental health.

Stokes et al. (2016). *Brown beauty: Body image, Latinos, and the media* discussed acculturation effects among Latina women, revealing increased body dissatisfaction and disordered eating with prolonged exposure to U.S. cultural ideals.

Kilpela et al. (2015). *Body image in adult women: Moving beyond the younger years* indicated that body dissatisfaction persists in adulthood, impacting mental health, quality of life, and health behaviors.

Zhang (2012). *A Chinese beauty story: How college*

women in China negotiate beauty, body image and mass media explored Chinese college women, demonstrating pressures to conform to societal ideals, leading to distorted self-perception, yet participants actively negotiated these standards to cope with societal expectations.

Overall, these studies collectively highlight that societal beauty standards, reinforced through media, culture, and social interactions, significantly affect women's mental health and body image across diverse contexts. Persistent exposure to unattainable ideals contributes to low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and social challenges, underlining the importance of culturally sensitive interventions, media literacy, and body positivity initiatives.

Methodology

Title: The Impact of Societal Beauty Standards on the Mental Health and Body Image of Women from Diverse Backgrounds

Significance of the Study

This study seeks to deepen understanding of how societal beauty standards affect women's mental health and body image, particularly across diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts. While previous research has examined the influence of media and societal norms on women's perceptions of their bodies, there is limited exploration of these experiences among women from different backgrounds. The findings of this research hold practical significance for areas such as education, healthcare, and media, as they can inform the development of culturally sensitive interventions and awareness campaigns. By focusing on women from a variety of ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, the study emphasizes the unique challenges faced by marginalized groups and aims to amplify diverse voices. Ultimately, the study promotes body positivity, self-acceptance, and empowerment, encouraging women to critically engage with and challenge unrealistic societal beauty standards.

Objectives

- To examine the impact of societal beauty standards on mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and body dysmorphic disorder.
- To analyze differences in the relationship between beauty standards, self-esteem, and mental health outcomes across demographic factors.
- To identify specific aspects of societal beauty standards (e.g., media representation, cultural norms) that most significantly influence mental health and body image in women from diverse backgrounds.
- To explore the lived experiences and perceptions of women regarding the effects of societal beauty standards on mental health and body image.

Research Questions

- How do societal beauty standards affect body image satisfaction and disturbances among women from diverse backgrounds?
- What is the relationship between societal beauty standards and mental health outcomes in these women?
- Which specific aspects of societal beauty standards have the most profound impact on women's mental health and body image?

Research Design

This study follows a qualitative research design, which provides a structured framework for investigating the phenomena under study. It uses descriptive and statistical methods to identify patterns and relationships among variables, enabling a systematic understanding of women's experiences and perspectives regarding societal beauty standards.

Tools of Data Collection

Data will be collected through a structured questionnaire administered via Google Forms, allowing for both surveys and interviews with participants.

Universe

The population for this study includes women aged 18–65 from diverse backgrounds who have been exposed to societal beauty standards through media, social interactions, and cultural norms.

Sampling

A non-probability convenience sampling approach was employed to recruit participants. The online questionnaire was distributed through social media platforms and forums. Inclusion criteria required participants to provide informed consent and complete the questionnaire. A minimum of 42 participants is expected to ensure sufficient data for meaningful analysis.

Variables

Independent variables

- Societal beauty standards – assessed through questions on exposure to and internalization of societal beauty norms, such as frequency of seeing beauty ideals in media.
- Cultural background – assessed through questions on participants' ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Dependent Variables

- Mental health – measured through questions on symptoms of anxiety, depression, and self-esteem.
- Body image – assessed through questions on body satisfaction and perceptions of physical appearance.

Limitations

- Data is self-reported and may be subject to bias or inaccuracies.
- The study did not examine intergenerational influences on self-esteem, disordered eating behaviors, or body perception.
- Certain physical features such as lips and eye color were not included, despite some women feeling societal pressure to conform in these areas.
- Limited ethnic diversity due to online and school-based data collection; participants included 90.5% Africans and 9.5% Asians.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Section 1: Demographics

The above Table 1 the age of respondents that were included in this study. The maximum number of respondents were from the age group of 18-24 and were 73.8% (n=31) the second age group that participated was 25-39 and had 21.4%. (n=9) Then after was the age group of 40-54 and were 4.8% (n=2). The group that had the least number of participants is of 55-65 years.

The maximum number of respondents are age 18-24 and they were 31 (73.8%).

The above table shows the ethnicity of the respondents. They were four options to choose from which included Asian, African, Biracial, White and other. The majority of the female respondents were African and they were 90.5% (n=38) the other group of females that participated in this study were Asians and they were (n = 4) 9.5%.

Table 1: showing the age of the respondents

serial number	age	frequency	percentage
1	18-24	31	73.81%
2	25-39	9	21.43%
3	40-54	2	4.76%
4	55-65	0	0
total		42	100

frequency and percentage

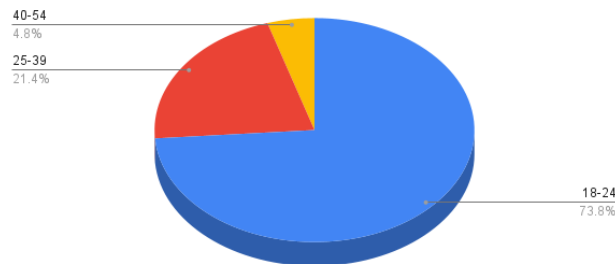


Figure 1: showing respondent age.

The table above shows that 14.29% (n=6) of the participants have graduated with a high school diploma. 71.43% (n=30) have earned or graduated with a bachelor's degree, 11.90% (n=5) have earned a vocational or technical degree and one individual (2.38%) (n=1) has a postgraduate degree.

The above table presents the occupational distribution of the respondents. Among the total participants (n = 42), the largest group, 38.1% (n = 16), consists of students, indicating that a significant portion of the sample is engaged in education. This is followed by 26.2% (n = 11) categorized as "others," which may include various occupations not specified in the main categories. Participants involved in service and sales make up 14.3% (n = 6), while those in management and administration account for 11.9% (n = 5). Professionals represent 7.1% (n = 3), and skilled traders form the smallest group at 2.4% (n = 1). Overall, the data show a diverse sample, with a predominance of students, reflecting that the survey largely captures the perspectives of younger or academically engaged individuals.

Section 2: Societal beauty standards

The table shows how frequently participants encounter beauty standards in the media, including TV, magazines, and social media. Among the total respondents (n = 42), a majority of 61.9% (n = 26) reported seeing these standards always, indicating that exposure to societal beauty ideals is a constant presence in their daily lives. An additional 23.8% (n = 10) reported seeing them often, while 11.9% (n = 5) encountered them sometimes. Only a very small proportion, 2.4% (n = 1), reported seeing beauty standards rarely, and none of the participants reported never seeing them. These

Table 2: table showing ethnicity of respondents

sr no	ethnicity	frequency	percentage
1	Asian	4	9.5%
2	African	38	90.5%
3	Biracial	0	0
4	White	0	0
total		42	100

frequency and percentage

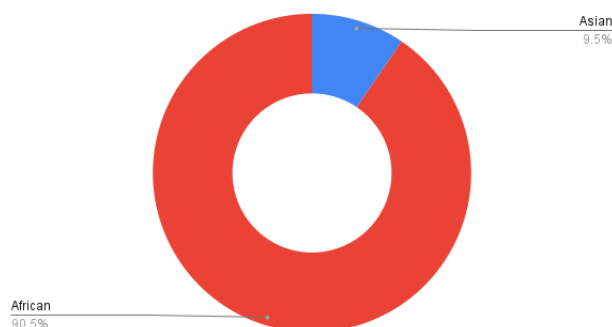


Figure 2: Showing ethnicity of respondents

Table 3: table showing the educational level of the respondents.

serial number	education level	frequency	percentage
1	high school diploma	6	14.29%
2	bachelor's degree	30	71.43%
3	vocational or technical	5	11.90%
4	postgraduate degree	1	2.38%
total		42	100

frequency and percentage

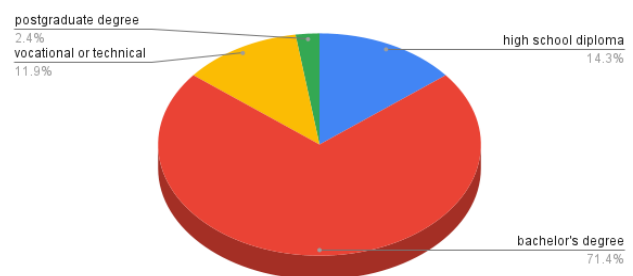


Figure 3: Showing the educational level of the respondents

Table 4: showing respondents occupations

serial number	occupation	frequency	percentage
1	management and administration	5	11.90%
2	professionals	3	7.14%
3	service and sales	6	14.29%
4	skilled traders	1	2.38%
5	student	16	38.10%
6	others	11	26.19%
total		42	100

frequency and percentage

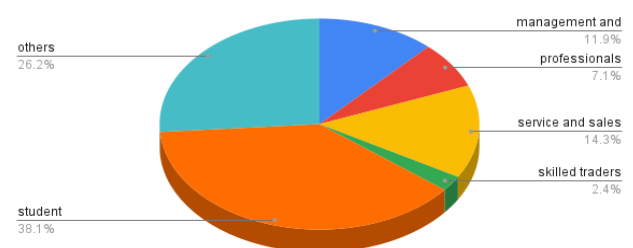


Figure 4: Showing respondents occupations

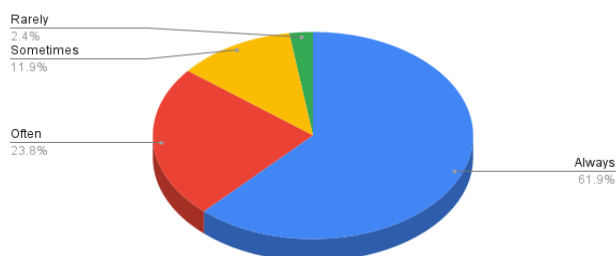
findings highlight that media is a pervasive source of beauty standards, with most participants exposed regularly, which may influence their self-perception and body image.

The table illustrates how frequently participants compare their appearance to others. Among the total respondents (n = 42), 40.5% (n = 17) reported that they sometimes engage in such comparisons, indicating that this is a fairly common behavior for a substantial portion of participants. Additionally, 19% (n = 8) stated that they often compare

Table 5: How often do you see beauty standards portrayed in the media? (E.g. TV, Magazines, Social Media)

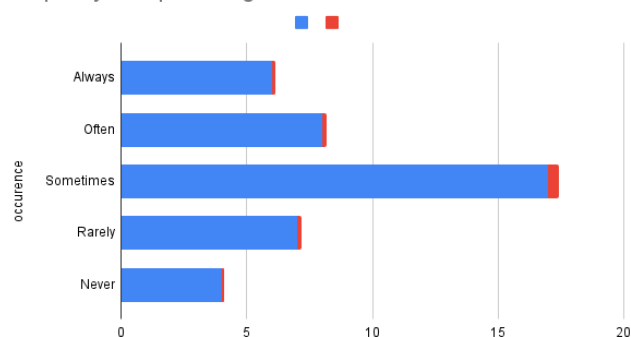
Sr. No.	Occurrence	Frequency	Percentage
1	Always	26	61.9%
2	Often	10	23.8%
3	Sometimes	5	11.9%
4	Rarely	1	2.4%
5	Never	0	0

frequency and percentage

**Figure 5:** Showing how often do you see beauty standards portrayed in the media? (E.g. TV, Magazines, Social Media)**Table 6:** How often do you compare your appearance to others?

Sr. No	Occurrence	Frequency	Percentage
1	Always	6	14.3%
2	Often	8	19%
3	Sometimes	17	40.5%
4	Rarely	7	16.7%
5	Never	4	9.5%

frequency and percentage

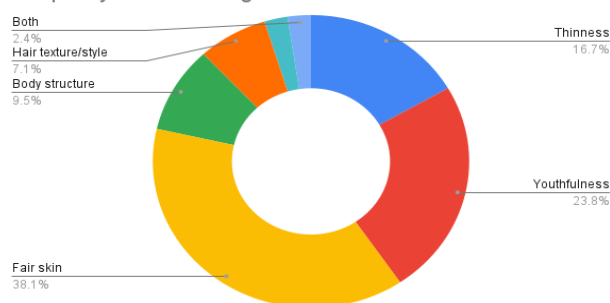
**Figure 6:** Showing, how often do you compare your appearance to others Interpretation.

themselves, while 14.3% (n = 6) reported doing so always, suggesting that a smaller yet notable group frequently evaluates their appearance against others. Conversely, 16.7% (n = 7) reported rarely engaging in comparisons, and 9.5% (n = 4) never do so, indicating that some participants are less influenced by social comparisons. Overall, these

Table 7: Which of the following beauty standards do you feel pressure to conform to?

Sr. No	Pressure to conform to	Frequency	Percentage
1	Thinness	7	16.7%
2	Youthfulness	10	23.8%
3	Fair skin	16	38.1%
4	Body structure	4	9.6%
5	Hair texture/style	3	7.1%
6	Beauty	1	2.4%
7	Both	1	2.4%

Frequency and Percentage

**Figure 7:** Showing which of the following beauty standards do you feel pressure to conform to

findings reveal that comparing one's appearance to others is a prevalent behavior, with most participants engaging in it at least occasionally, which may have implications for body image and self-esteem.

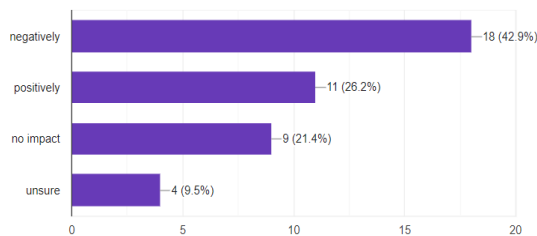
The table presents participants' experiences of pressure to conform to various societal beauty standards. Among the total respondents (n = 42), the highest proportion, 38.1% (n = 16), reported feeling pressure to have fair skin, indicating that skin tone is the most influential standard affecting self-perception. This is followed by 23.8% (n = 10) who felt pressure to maintain youthfulness and 16.7% (n = 7) who experienced pressure to be thin. Smaller proportions of participants reported pressure related to body structure (9.6%, n = 4), hair texture or style (7.1%, n = 3), overall beauty (2.4%, n = 1), or pressure in multiple areas (2.4%, n = 1). These findings suggest that while societal expectations around physical appearance are varied, fair skin, youthfulness, and thinness are the most commonly felt pressures among the participants, highlighting the specific beauty standards that may most strongly influence self-image.

The table illustrates participants' perceptions of how societal beauty standards influence their self-perception. Out of the total respondents (n = 42), 42.9% (n = 18) reported that these standards affect them negatively, suggesting that nearly half of the participants experience pressure or dissatisfaction related to societal expectations of beauty. Meanwhile, 26.2% (n = 11) indicated a positive impact, reflecting that some individuals may feel motivated or

Table 8: How do you think societal beauty standards affect your self-perception?

Sr. No	Occurrence	Frequency	Percentage
1	Negatively	18	42.9
2	Positively	11	26.2
3	No impact	9	21.4
4	Unsure	4	9.5

42 responses

**Figure 8:** How do you think societal beauty standards affect your self-perception

inspired by prevailing beauty ideals. About 21.4% (n = 9) reported no impact, suggesting that a portion of participants remain unaffected by societal pressures, while 9.5% (n = 4) were unsure of the effect. These findings highlight that societal beauty standards have a varied influence on self-perception, with a significant proportion experiencing negative effects, while others perceive either positive influences or no impact at all.

Section 3: Self-esteem and body image

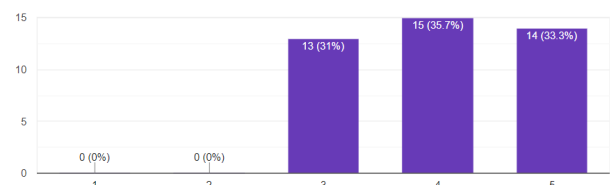
The table presents participants' self-reported levels of self-esteem. Among the total respondents (n = 42), 31% (n = 13) rated their self-esteem as moderate (3 on the scale), indicating a balanced sense of self-worth with occasional self-doubt. A slightly higher proportion, 35.7% (n = 15), rated their self-esteem as 4, reflecting a generally positive self-perception and confidence. Additionally, 33.3% (n = 14) reported the highest level of self-esteem (5), demonstrating strong self-confidence and a positive self-image. Notably, no participants rated their self-esteem at the lowest levels (1 or 2), suggesting that extremely low self-esteem is absent among the respondents. Overall, these findings indicate that most participants possess healthy self-esteem, with a smaller portion experiencing moderate levels that may benefit from further support or confidence-building initiatives.

The table presents respondents' satisfaction with their body image (n = 42). The majority of participants reported moderate to high levels of satisfaction: 35.7% (n = 15) rated their satisfaction as 3, 28.6% (n = 12) as 4, and 31% (n = 13) as 5. Only 4.8% (n = 2) rated their satisfaction as 2, while no respondents (0%) reported the lowest satisfaction level of 1. This indicates that most respondents feel generally satisfied with their body image, with only a small portion expressing lower satisfaction.

Table 9: How would you rate your self-esteem?

Sr. No	Rating self-esteem	Frequency	Percentage
1	1 (lowest)	0	0
2	2	0	0
3	3	13	31%
4	4	15	35.7%
5	5 (highest)	14	33.3%

42 responses

**Figure 9:** How would you rate your self-esteem**Table 10:** How satisfied are you with your body image?

serial number	satisfaction with	frequency	percentage
1	1	0	0%
2	2	2	4.8%
3	3	15	35.7%
4	4	12	28.6%
5	5	13	31%
total		42	100%

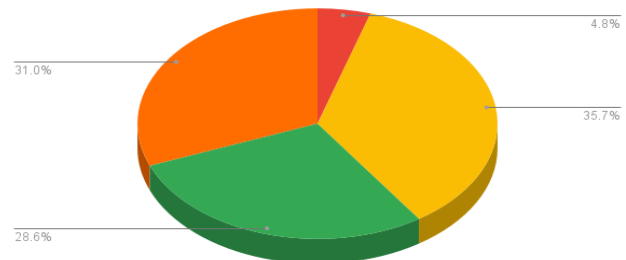
**Figure 10:** Showing How satisfied are you with your body image

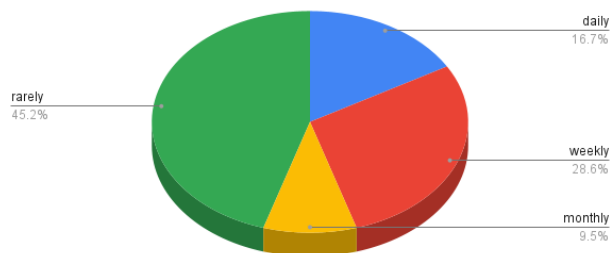
Table 11 illustrates the frequency of negative self-talk among 42 respondents. Nearly half of the participants (45.2%, n = 19) reported experiencing negative self-talk rarely. Weekly occurrences were reported by 28.6% (n = 12), daily by 16.7% (n = 7), and monthly by 9.5% (n = 4). This suggests that while negative self-talk is present among respondents, it occurs infrequently for the majority.

Out of 42 respondents, half (50%, n = 21) reported concerns about their weight. Body shape and skin tone concerns were each reported by 28.6% of participants (n = 12), while size was a concern for 11.9% (n = 5) and height for 4.8% (n = 2). Only 2.4% (n = 1) indicated no body image concerns. This suggests that weight, shape, and skin tone

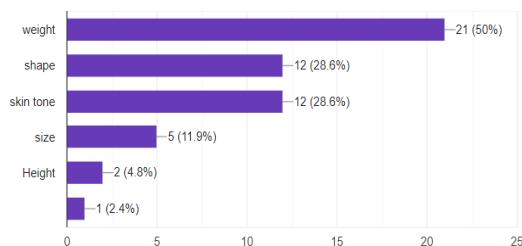
Table 11: How often do you experience negative self-talk?

Sr. No	Occurrence of negative self-talk	Frequency	Percentage
1	Daily	7	16.7%
2	Weekly	12	28.6%
3	Monthly	4	9.5%
4	Rarely	19	45.2%

frequency and percentage

**Figure 11:** Showing often do you experience negative self-talk**Table 12:** Which of the following body image concerns do you experience?

Sr. No	Occurrence	Frequency	Percentage
1	Weight	21	50%
2	Shape	12	28.6%
3	Skin tone	12	28.6%
4	Size	5	11.9%
5	Height	2	4.8%
6	None	1	2.4%

**Figure 12:** Showing which of the following body image concerns do you experience

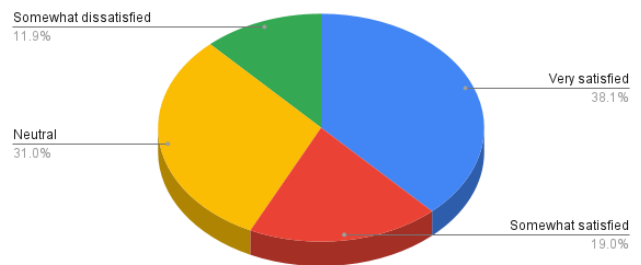
are the most common areas of body dissatisfaction among participants. The majority of the respondents indicated that their major body concerns was their weight and the minority's concerns were others issues apart from the listed ones.

Out of 42 respondents, 38.1% (n = 16) reported being very satisfied with their appearance, 19% (n = 8) were somewhat satisfied, 31% (n = 13) felt neutral, and 11.9% (n = 5) were somewhat dissatisfied. No respondents reported being very dissatisfied. This shows that while a majority of participants have a positive or neutral view of their appearance, a small portion experiences dissatisfaction.

Table 13: Which of the following statements best describes your attitude towards your appearance?

Sr. No	Attitude towards appearance	Frequency	Percentage
1	Very satisfied	16	38.1%
2	Somewhat satisfied	8	19%
3	Neutral	13	31%
4	Somewhat dissatisfied	5	11.9%
5	Very dissatisfied	0	0

Frequency and Percentage

**Figure 13:** Showing statements best describes respondents' attitude towards their appearance

Section 4: Mental health outcomes

Out of 42 respondents, 28.6% (n = 12) reported experiencing anxiety or depression due to body image, another 28.6% (n = 12) were unsure (*maybe*), and 42.9% (n = 18) reported no such experience. This indicates that a significant portion of participants are affected psychologically by how they perceive their bodies. These findings reveal that while a notable portion of participants have felt psychological distress linked to body perception, there is also a significant number who either have not experienced such impacts or may not be fully aware of how body image influences their mental health.

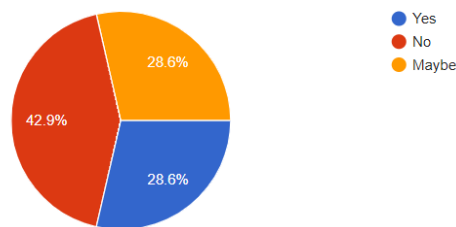
Table 15 indicates that a majority of respondents have experienced body shaming or negative comments about their appearance. Specifically, 73.8% of participants (n = 31) reported having faced such experiences, while 26.2% (n = 11) stated that they had not. This suggests that negative remarks about physical appearance are common and may contribute to challenges in body image and self-esteem among respondents.

The table shows the prevalence of various mental health outcomes reported by respondents over the past year. Anxiety was the most commonly reported outcome, with 26.2% of participants (n = 11) indicating they experienced it, followed closely by depression and body dysmorphic

Table 14: Have you ever experienced anxiety or depression due to how you view your body and/ yourself?

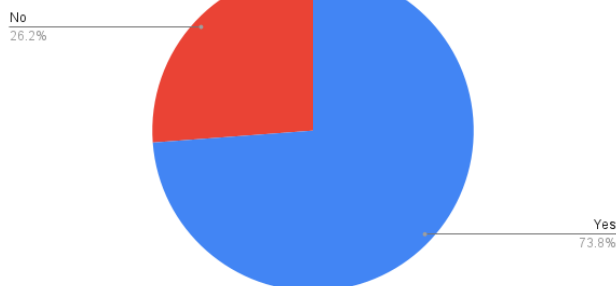
Sr. No	Experiences of anxiety or depression	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	18	28.6%
2	No	12	42.9%
3	Maybe	12	28.6%

42 responses

**Figure 14:** Showing Experiences of anxiety or depression**Table 15:** Have you ever experienced body shaming or negative comments about your appearance?

Sr. No	Occurrence	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	31	73.8%
2	No	11	26.2%

Frequency and Percentage

**Figure 15:** Showing ever experienced body shaming or negative comments

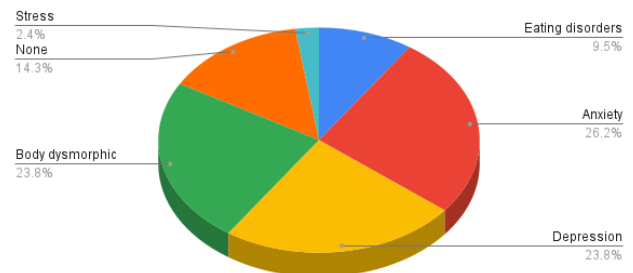
disorder, each reported by 23.8% of respondents (n = 10). Eating disorders were reported by 9.5% of participants (n = 4), stress by 2.4% (n = 1), while 14.4% (n = 6) indicated they did not experience any of these mental health issues. These findings highlight that anxiety, depression, and body image-related concerns are the most prominent mental health challenges among the respondents.

Table 17 presents respondents' perceptions of the ways societal beauty standards affect their mental health. A total of 26.2% of participants (n = 11) reported decreased self-esteem, 19% (n = 8) experienced increased anxiety, and 14.3% (n = 6) indicated negative body image as a

Table 16: Which of the following mental health outcomes have experienced in the past year?

Sr. No	Mental health outcomes	Frequency	Percentage
1	Eating disorders	4	9.5%
2	Anxiety	11	26.2%
3	Depression	10	23.8%
4	Body dysmorphic disorder	10	23.8%
5	None	6	14.4%
6	Stress	1	2.4%

Frequency and Percentage

**Figure 16:** Showing mental health outcomes have experienced

result of these standards. About 23.8% of respondents (n = 10) felt that societal beauty standards had no impact on their mental health, while 16.7% (n = 7) were unsure. These findings suggest that societal beauty standards primarily influence self-esteem and anxiety among women, although a notable portion of respondents either did not perceive an effect or were uncertain about the impact.

Section 5: Coping mechanisms

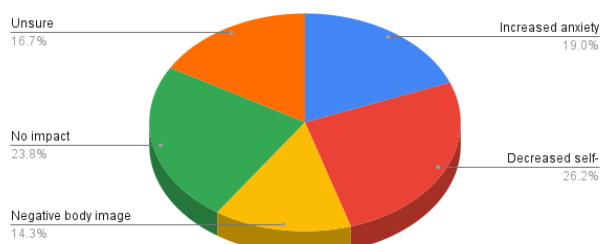
Table 18 illustrates the coping mechanisms respondents use to manage negative body image or low self-esteem. Half of the participants (50%, n = 21) reported using meditation as a strategy, followed by talking to friends (33.3%, n = 14), and exercise (14.3%, n = 6). Only a small proportion of respondents (2.4%, n = 1) sought professional help. These findings indicate that self-guided practices like meditation and social support through friends are the most commonly used strategies, whereas formal professional support is less frequently utilized among the participants.

Table 19 presents respondents' perceptions of the effectiveness of coping mechanisms in improving their mental health and body image. A combined 90.4% of participants (n = 38) reported that the coping strategies were very effective (45.2%) or somewhat effective (45.2%), suggesting that most respondents find these methods beneficial in managing the psychological impact of societal beauty standards. Only 9.5% (n = 4) felt that the coping mechanisms were not very effective, and no respondents reported them as not at all effective.

Table 17: How do you think societal beauty standards contribute to your mental health?

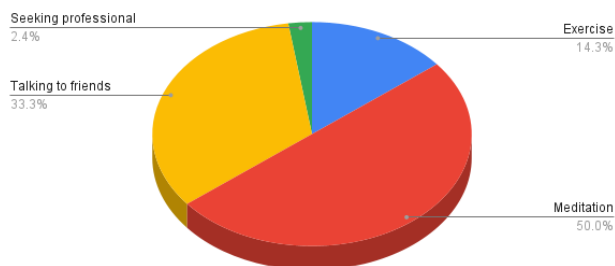
Sr. No	Contribution of societal beauty standards	Frequency	Percentage
1	Increased anxiety	8	19%
2	Decreased self-esteem	11	26.2%
3	Negative body image	6	14.3%
4	No impact	10	23.8%
5	Unsure	7	16.7%

Frequency and Percentage

**Figure 17:** showing societal beauty standards contribute to your mental health**Table 18:** How do you cope with negative body image or low self-esteem?

Sr. No	Coping mechanisms	Frequency	Percentage
1	Exercise	6	14.3%
2	Meditation	21	50%
3	Talking to friends	14	33.3%
4	Seeking professional help	1	2.4%

Frequency and Percentage

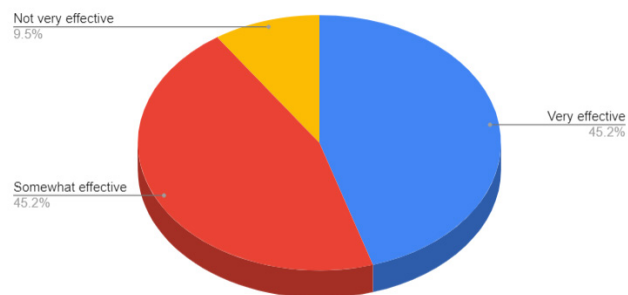
**Figure 18:** Showing, cope with negative body image or low self-esteem

Section 6: Open ended questions

Table 20 presents respondents' views on how media and societal beauty standards can be changed to promote positive body image and mental health outcomes. Out of the total responses, 19% of participants (n = 8) emphasized

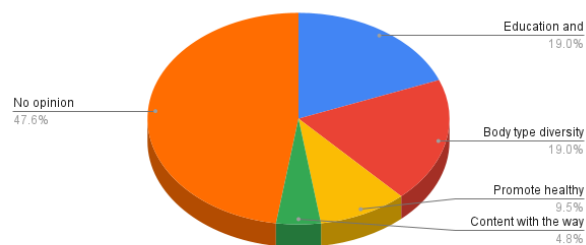
Table 19: How effective do you think these coping mechanisms are improving your mental health and body image?

Sr. No	Improvement	Frequency	Percentage
1	Very effective	19	45.2%
2	Somewhat effective	19	45.2%
3	Not very effective	4	9.5%
4	Not at all	0	0%

**Figure 19:** Showing improving your mental health and body image**Table 20:** How do you think the media and societal beauty standards can be changed to promote positive body image and mental health outcomes?

Sr. No	Occurrence	Frequency	Percentage
1	Education and awareness	8	19%
2	Body type diversity	8	19%
3	Promote healthy societal beauty standards	4	10%
4	Content with the way things are	2	5%
5	No opinion	20	48%

Frequency and Percentage

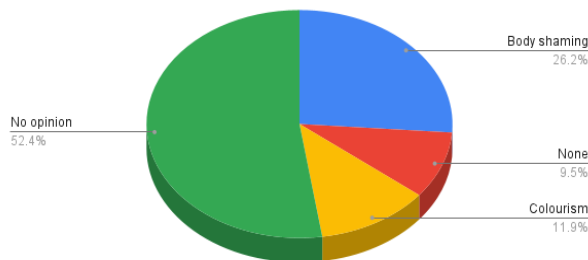
**Figure 20:** Showing the media and societal beauty standards can be changed to promote positive body image and mental health outcomes

the importance of education and awareness, suggesting that increasing knowledge about the harmful effects of unrealistic beauty standards could help individuals develop healthier body image perceptions. Similarly, 19% (n = 8) highlighted the need for body type diversity, indicating that showcasing a wider range of body shapes and sizes in media could reduce pressure to conform to narrow beauty

Table 21: Can you share a personal experience where you felt like societal beauty standards affected your self-esteem and mental health?

Sr. No	Occurrence	Frequency	Percentage
1	Body shaming	11	26.2%
2	None	4	9.5%
3	Colourism	5	11.9%
4	No opinion	22	52.4%

Frequency and Percentage

**Figure 21:** Showing share a personal experience where you felt like societal beauty standards affected your self-esteem and mental health

ideals. A smaller proportion, 10% ($n = 4$), recommended promoting healthy societal beauty standards, reflecting the need for culturally and socially acceptable ideals that prioritize well-being over appearance. Only 5% ($n = 2$) expressed satisfaction with current standards (content with the way things are), while a substantial 48% ($n = 20$) reported no opinion, which may indicate either uncertainty or lack of engagement with this issue.

Table 21 illustrates respondents' personal experiences regarding the impact of societal beauty standards on their self-esteem and mental health. A notable 26.2% of participants ($n = 11$) reported experiencing body shaming, indicating that negative comments or judgments about their body shape or size have affected their self-worth. Colourism, or discrimination based on skin tone, was identified by 11.9% ($n = 5$) of respondents as having an impact on their self-esteem. Only 9.5% ($n = 4$) indicated that they had no such experience, suggesting they have not felt negatively affected by societal beauty standards. A majority of 52.4% ($n = 22$) expressed no opinion, which may reflect either reluctance to share personal experiences or lack of awareness about the influence of beauty standards on their mental health.

Findings

- The highest age group of the females who participated in this study were between the age group of 18-24 and consisted 73.8% of the study. The other age groups were also available but to a limited extent.
- The only gender that took part in this study were females as the study focused solely on women from diverse backgrounds and they consisted 85.7% of the study

excluding those who preferred to not disclose their gender.

- The majority of the ethnicity that participated in the study were Africans (90.5%), followed by Asians (9.5%) and due to the survey being conducted online, there was inadequate access to other ethnicities.
- The largest educational group were the bachelor's degree students (71.4%) followed by the high school diploma (14.3%). The majority are in the process of completing their tertiary education.
- The largest employment status category is students (38.1%), including a significant number of other occupations like service and sales, professionals (doctors, lawyers), skilled traders and others like housewives.
- The largest number of women expressed that they always see societal beauty standards portrayed in the media and it takes a toll on them. Other women expressed that they often and sometimes notice these beauty standards portrayed or shown in the media.
- Majority of the women indicated that they sometimes compare their appearances to others leading to some mental health issues. A significant number of women highlighted that they continuously often, always and rarely compare their appearance to others. 9.5% indicated that they never compare themselves to others.
- The women who participated in this study felt pressure to conform to beauty standards that included thinness, youthfulness, fair skin, a particular hair texture, a thick body structure and overall beauty. The women highlighted that they feel the need to look a certain way in order to be accepted in society. Some of the women highlighted that they feel the pressure to change their whole look as a way to conform to societal beauty standards.
- 42.9% of the women indicated that societal beauty standards have negatively affected their self-perception. Some were positively, unsure of how societal beauty standards affect their self-perception. Other individuals highlighted that societal beauty standards had no impact on their self-perception and how they perceive themselves.
- On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being the lowest they could rate themselves and 5 being the highest, majority of the women rated their self-esteem at 4/5 showing that they have confidence in their own abilities, mental and physical health. 31% rated their self-esteem moderately and the second largest number (33.3%) they rated that they have the highest self-esteem.
- The majority of women indicated that they were moderately satisfied with their body image. Out of a total of 42 participants, 2 participants had the lowest satisfaction of their body image.

- The majority of people experience negative self-talk as indicated on the chart with higher percentage of (42.2%) out of the 42 responses. The second group of people to experience negative self-talk are those that does it on a weekly basis with a percentage of (28.6%). The third group of people to experience negative self-talk are those that do it on a daily basis with the total percentage of (16.7%) out of the 42 responses. The last group of people to experience negative self-talk are those that do it on a monthly basis with a percentage of (9.5%).
- The graph shows the total number of people who participated in the survey which talks about their experience concerning body images. The first group of people were 21 out of 42 and their concern was about their weight with a percentage of (50%). The second group of people who participated in the survey were 12 and their body image concern was the shape with a percentage of (28.6%). The third group of people to participate with a concern of size were 5 and their percentage was (11.9%). The last group were having a concern of the height and they were only 2 with a percentage of (4.8%). Lastly the 2.4% were not sure about their concern.
- The number of people who participated in the survey indicated the attitude towards their appearance and out of 42 the first group of women were very satisfied with their appearance with a percentage of (38.1%). The second group of people were neutral about their appearance with a percentage of (31%). The third group of people were somewhat satisfied with their appearance with a percentage of (19%). The last group of people were somewhat dissatisfied with their appearance.
- The majority of the women were not experiencing anxiety or depression about how they view their body and/ themselves and their percentage was (42.9%). The second group was experiencing anxiety or depression on how they view their body with a percentage of (28.6%) and third group of people were not sure about their experience and their percentage was (28.6%).
- The majority of the group of women claimed that they had experienced body shaming or negative comments about their appearance.
- The majority of the respondents highlighted that they had experienced anxiety in the past year due to societal beauty standards.
- The majority of the participants claimed that societal beauty standards had decreased their self-esteem and that contributed negatively to their mental health.
- The majority group of the females stated that they cope with negative body image or low self-esteem through meditation (mindfulness).
- The majority of the respondents stated that the coping

mechanisms they were using to improve their mental health and body image were very effective and somewhat effective.

- The majority of the females stated that they thought it was best for body type diversity and education and awareness to be spread through the media and societal beauty standards as a way to promote positive body image and mental health outcomes.
- The majority of females stated that they had experienced body shaming in their workplaces, at school, vegetable markets and other public places because they were either "too fat", "too slim" or other petty things people would label them and this affected and lowered their self-esteem and mental health.

Conclusion

This study explored how the impact of societal beauty standards on the mental health and body image of women from diverse backgrounds. The findings revealed a strong link between exposure to unrealistic beauty ideals and negative mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and even suicidal thoughts. The study highlighted how women are pressured from a young age to conform to unattainable ideals such as fair skin, smooth hair, or curvaceous bodies, with these standards varying across cultures and races. Women are taught not only how to act or dress but also how they are expected to look, and those deemed "attractive" often receive more social acceptance and opportunities than those considered "unattractive." Exposure to media, family comments, and societal expectations reinforces perfectionism and flawlessness, leading some women to pursue costly and emotionally draining interventions like skin bleaching, cosmetic procedures, or surgeries, yet many still experience dissatisfaction and diminished self-worth. Cultural differences were observed, such as American beauty ideals emphasizing youthfulness and flawless skin, while African standards often celebrate natural hair and curvy figures. Despite the overwhelming negative pressures, some women reported that awareness of these ideals motivated them to adopt healthier lifestyles, practice self-acceptance, and develop pride in their bodies. Observing unrealistic or altered images of women also encouraged some to embrace their natural appearance, promoting a sense of empowerment and self-appreciation.

Summary of Key Findings

The study focused on young women from diverse backgrounds, many of whom were students pursuing higher education. Participants reported that societal beauty standards, as portrayed in the media, strongly influenced how they viewed themselves. These standards often encouraged comparisons of appearance, leading to concerns about body weight, shape, and overall physical

image. Some women described experiencing body shaming in public and social spaces, which negatively affected their confidence and emotional well-being.

While many participants had a generally positive level of self-esteem, others experienced periods of negative self-talk and uncertainty about their appearance. To cope with these challenges, several women practiced mindfulness and other self-care strategies, which they found helpful. The majority expressed that promoting body diversity and increasing awareness through the media are essential steps toward fostering healthier body image and improving mental well-being among women.

Suggestions

- In order to challenge societal beauty standards, there should be more organizations that support women and men with initiatives that help them with self-acceptance, body positivity and self-love.
- During this study it was noticed that the impact of societal beauty standards is more focused on women and yet they are not the only ones, they should be studies on the beauty studies men are pressure to conform to.
- The media should continue to encourage industries and companies who advertise their franchise to be inclusive of all body type diversity.
- There should be support policy changes that promote body positivity and challenge unrealistic societal beauty standards.
- In African countries there should be more awareness and education about the impact of societal beauty standards and support for individuals struggling with body image issues such as therapy, counseling and access to more mental health resources.
- Encourage the development of diverse beauty standards that celebrate individuality and uniqueness.

Recommendation

It is recommended that media and social platforms promote body diversity by representing women of different body types, skin tones, and appearances to reduce unrealistic beauty expectations. Educational institutions and workplaces should create awareness programs and enforce policies against body shaming to ensure supportive environments. Providing accessible mental health support, along with encouraging mindfulness and self-care practices, can help women cope with negative self-perception. Creating safe peer support groups and confidence-building activities will further empower women to develop a positive body image and improve their overall well-being.

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