

The Influence of Appearance Comparison and Fear of Negative Evaluation on Self-Esteem among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

Negative Evaluation on Self-Esteem. The research targeted individuals aged 18-30 years, purposively selected from various districts in Kerala. The objective was to examine how appearance comparison and fear of negative evaluation affect self-esteem. A total of 120 participants, comprising an equal number of females and males (60 each), were included in the study. Data collection was carried out using the Physical Appearance Comparison Scale (PACS-R), the Fear of Negative Appearance Evaluation Scale (FNAES), and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. These instruments were administered both directly and via online Google Forms. The collected data were analyzed using Spearman correlation and the Mann-Whitney U test. The findings indicated that self-esteem is negatively correlated with physical appearance comparison and fear of negative appearance evaluation. Furthermore, the results revealed significant gender-based differences in physical appearance comparison, fear of negative appearance evaluation, and self-esteem.

Keywords: *Self-esteem, Physical Appearance Comparison, Fear of Negative Appearance Evaluation*

Self-esteem, a crucial element of psychological well-being, represents an individual's overall assessment of their worth and value. It significantly shapes how people perceive themselves and manage various life aspects, including relationships, academic or professional endeavors, and emotional resilience. Self-esteem is notably influenced by external factors such as appearance comparison and the fear of negative evaluation concerning physical appearance. Festinger's social comparison theory (1954) offers a foundational framework for understanding how individuals assess themselves relative to others, extending beyond opinions and abilities to include personal attributes like physical appearance. According to this theory, humans have an inherent drive to evaluate their opinions, abilities, progress, and life standing, often relying on comparisons with similar others in the absence of objective standards. Social comparison theory has become a valuable tool for understanding self-knowledge acquisition across various domains, emphasizing the importance of comparisons in shaping self-evaluation processes.

The fear of negative evaluation related to appearance also significantly impacts self-esteem. This fear involves anxiety about how one's physical appearance is judged by others. In social

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interactions, professional settings, or personal relationships, individuals with this fear may exhibit heightened self-consciousness, social anxiety, and avoidance behaviors. This ongoing fear can reinforce negative self-beliefs and erode confidence and self-worth over time. The effects of appearance comparison and the fear of negative evaluation on self-esteem extend beyond individual perceptions, affecting broader aspects of psychological well-being. Research indicates that those who frequently engage in appearance comparisons and experience high levels of fear of negative evaluation are more likely to develop lower self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and mental health issues such as depression, anxiety disorders, and eating disorders.

Physical appearance comparison refers to the tendency to evaluate one's physical attributes relative to others. This phenomenon is prevalent in modern societies influenced by media representations of idealized beauty standards and social platforms showcasing curated images of attractiveness. Appearance comparison can occur in face-to-face interactions or through exposure to mediated images, such as those on social media. There are two primary forms of body image comparisons: upward and downward. Upward comparison occurs when individuals compare themselves to those perceived as having more desirable physical attributes, often resulting in increased anxiety and diminished perceived status. Conversely, downward comparison involves evaluating oneself against those perceived as less physically favorable, potentially reducing immediate appearance-related anxieties. The process of physical appearance comparison is rooted in social comparison theory. Individuals often engage in upward comparisons, measuring themselves against those perceived as more attractive or socially desirable, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy, lower self-esteem, and heightened body dissatisfaction. Research shows that appearance comparison is particularly common among adolescents and young adults, who are more vulnerable to societal pressures regarding physical appearance. Exposure to idealized images of beauty in the media and the extensive use of social media platforms intensify appearance-related comparisons, leading to increased body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors among youth.

Fear of negative appearance evaluation (FNAE) is a psychological construct involving anxiety and distress about how one's physical appearance is perceived and judged by others. This fear is rooted in societal emphasis on physical attractiveness and the potential consequences of not meeting idealized standards. FNAE is closely linked to self-esteem and body image, influencing various aspects of interpersonal relationships and psychological well-being. The development of FNAE often begins in adolescence, a period marked by heightened social comparison and peer scrutiny. Individuals experiencing FNAE may excessively monitor their appearance and adopt avoidance behaviors in social contexts to mitigate potential negative evaluations. This can lead to social withdrawal, anxiety disorders, and diminished self-esteem. Several factors contribute to the development and exacerbation of FNAE, including media portrayal of idealized beauty standards, societal emphasis on physical appearance, and experiences of bullying or teasing related to appearance. Additionally, certain personality traits, such as perfectionism and social anxiety, may predispose individuals to heightened FNAE.

The impact of FNAE on self-esteem is significant. Individuals with high FNAE often experience lower self-esteem and greater dissatisfaction with their appearance. Self-esteem is a fundamental aspect of mental health and well-being, reflecting an individual's overall evaluation of their worth and capabilities. It encompasses feelings of self-worth, self-

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acceptance, and confidence in one's abilities. Self-esteem influences how individuals perceive themselves, their relationships with others, and their resilience in facing life's challenges. The concept of self-esteem is shaped by various factors, including personal experiences, social interactions, and cultural influences. Appearance comparison and fear of negative evaluation are two significant factors that can profoundly affect self-esteem. Appearance comparison involves evaluating one's physical attributes relative to others, often based on societal beauty standards. Frequent upward comparisons, where individuals compare themselves to those perceived as more attractive or successful, can lead to lower self-esteem and increased body dissatisfaction. Conversely, downward comparisons, where individuals compare themselves to those perceived as less attractive or successful, may temporarily boost self-esteem but can result in a reliance on external validation and a fragile sense of superiority.

The fear of negative evaluation related to appearance can lead to heightened self-consciousness, social anxiety, and avoidance of social interactions. Individuals who experience fear of negative appearance evaluation may develop negative self-beliefs and perceptions of inadequacy, ultimately impacting their self-esteem and overall well-being. Research suggests that appearance-related concerns, including appearance comparison and fear of negative evaluation, are associated with lower self-esteem and increased vulnerability to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety disorders, and eating disorders. These issues can further undermine self-esteem and perpetuate a cycle of negative self-perception.

Aim

The study aims to investigate The Influence of Appearance Comparison and Fear of Negative Evaluation on Self- Esteem among young adults.

Objectives

- A study on how physical appearance comparison and fear of negative appearance evaluation affects the self-esteem of young adults in Kerala.
- To find out if there exists a significant relationship between physical appearance comparison and self-esteem of young adults.
- To find out if there exists a significant relationship between fear of negative appearance evaluation and self-esteem of young adults.
- To find out whether there exists any significant difference between males and females with respect to physical appearance comparison.
- To find out whether there exists any significant difference between males and females with respect to fear of negative appearance evaluation.
- To find out whether there exists any significant difference between males and females with respect to self-esteem.

Hypotheses

- H01: There is no significant relationship between physical appearance comparison and self- esteem of young adults.
- H02: There is no significant relationship between fear of negative appearance evaluation and self-esteem of young adults.
- H03: There is no significant difference between males and females with respect to physical appearance comparison.

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- H04: There is no significant difference between males and females with respect to fear of negative appearance evaluation.
- H05: There is no significant difference between males and females with respect to self- esteem.

Variables

- **Independent variable:** Fear of Negative Appearance Evaluation, Physical appearance comparison
- **Dependent variable:** Self-Esteem

Sample

The sample consists of 120 individuals and it included 60 males and 60 females. The age range of the participants ranged from 18-26 years of age. The participants were selected from different districts in Kerala.

Inclusion Criteria

1. Participants should be young adults, typically defined as individuals aged 18-30 years.
2. Current students or graduates from high school, college, or university to ensure a relatively homogeneous sample in terms of exposure to social comparison environments.
3. Participants residing in specific geographical areas or regions, if the study aims to explore cultural or regional differences.
4. Proficiency in the language in which the study is conducted (e.g., English), to ensure participants fully understand the survey or interview questions.
5. Active users of social media platforms, as these are significant sources of appearance comparison.
6. Participants must provide informed consent to take part in the study, understanding the purpose and procedures involved.

Exclusion Criteria

1. Individuals under 18 or over 30 years old, to maintain a focus on young adults.
2. Exclusion of individuals with diagnosed severe mental health conditions (e.g., severe depression, schizophrenia) that might confound the study results.
3. Individuals who do not use social media at all, as they may not experience the same level of appearance comparison as active users.
4. Individuals who are unable to understand the consent form or the study procedures due to language barriers, cognitive impairments, or other reasons.
5. Exclusion of participants who have experienced significant life changes (e.g., major weight loss/gain, plastic surgery) within the past six months, as these events could significantly influence self-esteem and skew the results.
6. Individuals who have recently participated in similar research studies, to avoid potential biases and respondent fatigue.
7. Participants who provide inconsistent or unreliable responses during the screening process or in preliminary surveys.

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Instruments

- **Physical Appearance Comparison Scale -Revised** - The Physical Appearance Comparison Scale –Revised (PCAS-R), developed Schaefer and Thompson (2014) is a 11-item self-report questionnaire widely used to assess frequencies of appearance comparison, it is to measure ones tendency to compare his or her appearance to the others.
- **Fear of Negative Appearance Evaluation Scale** - The Fear of Negative Appearance Evaluation Scale (FNAES) (1998) developed by Thomas et al., is a 6 item self- report inventory. It is used to assess apprehension about appearance evaluation.
- **Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale**- The Self- Esteem Scale (1965) developed by Rosenberg. Is a 10 item self- report inventory. It is used to measure of global Self-Esteem and general feelings of self-worth.
- **Personal Data Sheet**
 - Name • Age • Gender • Place • Educational Qualification • Occupation, if any • consent.

Statistical Analysis

Spearman correlation and Mann Whitney U test is used in this statistical analysis, and it is done on Jamovi software.

Spearman Correlation: Measures the strength and direction of association between two ranked variables, assessing monotonic relationships without assuming specific data distributions.

Mann-Whitney U Test: Compares two independent groups to determine if their distributions differ, based on rank order of observations, suitable for non-normally distributed continuous or ordinal data.

Administration

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant authorities. The selected questionnaires were converted into Google Forms, and data was collected from participants aged 18 to 30 years. Three scales were employed in the study: the Physical Appearance Comparison Scale (PACS-R), the Fear of Negative Appearance Evaluation Scale (FNAES), and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. These instruments served as the primary measurement tools.

Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. All queries and concerns raised by the participants were thoroughly addressed. Respondents were instructed to answer the questionnaire based on their genuine feelings, without influence from friends or others.

The scores were calculated and interpreted following the instructions provided in the manual for each scale. Subsequently, the data was subjected to statistical analysis to derive meaningful insights.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Spearman Rank Correlation between Physical Appearance Comparison and Self- Esteem

Variables	Median	QD	w	PACS	SE
Physical appearance comparison (PACS)	31.0	6.5	0.933***	_____	
Self-esteem (SE)	19.0	4.65	0.892***	-0.995***	_____

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Social comparison theory suggests that individuals often assess themselves by comparing their appearance to others. In a society saturated with media images that depict unattainable beauty standards, constant exposure to these idealized images can result in negative self-evaluation when individuals see themselves as less attractive. This ongoing comparison may lead to feelings of inadequacy and, consequently, lower self-esteem.

Table 1 illustrates the relationship between self-esteem and physical appearance comparison among individuals. The median scores for physical appearance comparison and self-esteem were 31 and 19, respectively, with quartile deviations of 6.5 and 4.65. The Shapiro-Wilk test produced significant values for both physical appearance comparison (0.933) and self-esteem (0.892), indicating normal distributions. Spearman rank correlation analysis ($\rho = -0.995$, $p < .001$) confirmed a strong negative relationship between self-esteem and physical appearance comparison, supporting the alternative hypothesis. As individuals engage more in physical appearance comparison, their self-esteem tends to decrease, possibly due to increased focus on perceived flaws or imperfections. This intensified self-criticism often leads to body dissatisfaction and a negative body image, further lowering self-esteem.

Psychological factors, such as the negative emotions and self-doubt triggered by constant comparisons, play a crucial role in this negative relationship. External evaluations based on physical appearance, including criticism from others, can significantly affect an individual's self-perception and self-worth. Additionally, societal and cultural factors, particularly unrealistic beauty standards propagated by media and advertising, contribute to feelings of inadequacy when individuals fail to meet these ideals. The observed negative correlation between self-esteem and physical appearance comparison has broader implications beyond individual well-being. Lower self-esteem is linked to increased social anxiety, reduced self-confidence, and a higher risk of mental health issues like depression and anxiety. It can also affect interpersonal relationships and academic or professional performance, emphasizing the need for interventions that promote positive body image and self-acceptance.

Table 2: Spearman Rank Correlation Between Fear of Negative Appearance Evaluation and Self-Esteem.

Variables	Median	QD	w	FNAES	SE
Fear of negative appearance evaluation (FNAES)	22.0	3	0.884***	___	
Self-esteem (SE)	19.0	4.65	0.892***	-0.674***	___

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

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Table 2 illustrates the relationship between self-esteem and fear of negative appearance evaluation, examining how societal pressures and self-perception affect this connection. The median scores for fear of negative appearance evaluation and self-esteem were 22 and 19, respectively, with quartile deviations of 3 and 4.65. The Shapiro-Wilk test showed significant values for both fear of negative appearance evaluation (0.884) and self-esteem (0.892), indicating normal distributions. Spearman rank correlation analysis ($\rho = -0.674$, $p < .001$) confirmed a negative relationship between self-esteem and fear of negative appearance evaluation, supporting the alternative hypothesis.

The findings emphasize the negative impact of fear related to negative appearance evaluation on individuals' self-esteem. As fear of negative appearance evaluation increases, self-esteem tends to decrease, indicating a focus on external perceptions over internal self-worth. Participants with higher levels of fear of negative appearance evaluation also showed lower self-esteem, highlighting the complex interplay between societal standards and individual self-concept.

Fear of negative appearance evaluation is often linked to increased self-consciousness and social anxiety, causing individuals to focus excessively on external validation and perceived flaws. This heightened self-criticism and fear of judgment lead to a negative body image and reduced self-esteem. Moreover, individuals with lower self-esteem may be more vulnerable to negative evaluations, creating a cycle of self-doubt and self-criticism.

Various factors contribute to the observed negative relationship between self-esteem and fear of negative appearance evaluation. Social comparison and unrealistic beauty standards promoted by media and culture foster fear of not meeting societal norms, impacting self-esteem. Dissatisfaction with body image further exacerbates negative self-perception, intensifying the fear of being negatively judged based on appearance.

Table 3: Gender Differences in Physical Appearance Comparison

Variables	Sex	N	Median	QD	w	U	sig
Physical Appearance Comparison	Male	60	28.5	5.1	0.953***		
	Female	60	35.0	5.5	0.854***	1061	<.001

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 3 highlights the gender differences in physical appearance comparison among a sample of 120 participants (60 males and 60 females). The median scores for physical appearance comparison were 28.5 for males and 35.0 for females, with quartile deviations of 5.1 and 5.5, respectively. The Shapiro-Wilk test showed significant values for both males (0.953) and females (0.854), indicating normal distributions. The Mann-Whitney U test revealed a significant difference in physical appearance comparison scores ($U = 1061$, $p < .001$), supporting the hypothesis that gender differences exist in this area.

The findings highlight significant gender disparities in physical appearance comparisons. Historically, women have faced objectification and unrealistic beauty standards, leading to higher rates of body dissatisfaction and comparison. Societal pressures emphasizing slim figures, flawless skin, and specific body proportions push women to frequently compare their bodies as they strive to meet these unattainable ideals.

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Conversely, men may experience pressures related to muscularity, physical strength, and height, influencing their body comparisons for reasons such as athleticism or muscle mass, which are often idealized traits in male stereotypes.

These gender-specific ideals and expectations contribute to differences in body comparison behaviors between men and women. However, it is important to recognize that body comparisons, regardless of gender, can lead to adverse psychological outcomes. Individuals should prioritize self-acceptance and body positivity, embracing their unique features and disregarding societal expectations or comparisons with others.

The observed gender differences in body comparison behaviors are multifaceted, influenced by societal norms, media portrayals, cultural expectations, peer influences, and personal insecurities. Society's distinct expectations and standards for men and women significantly shape individuals' perceptions of their bodies and their propensity to compare themselves to others.

Table 4: Gender Differences in Fear of Negative Appearance Evaluation.

Variables	Sex	N	Median	QD	sig
Fear of negative	Male	60	21.0	2	0.845**
Appearance evaluation	Female	60	34.0	3	0.851**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 4 shows the gender differences in fear of negative appearance evaluation among 120 participants (60 males and 60 females). The median scores for fear of negative appearance evaluation were 21.0 for males and 24.0 for females, with quartile deviations of 2 and 3, respectively. The Shapiro-Wilk test values were significant for both males (0.845) and females (0.851), indicating normal distribution. The Mann-Whitney U test indicated a significant difference in fear of negative appearance evaluation scores ($U = 1102$, $p < .001$), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This result confirms that there is a gender difference in fear of negative appearance evaluation.

The results clearly show a gender difference in fear of negative appearance evaluation. This non-parametric test uses the median instead of the mean. Although the median score is higher for females, it does not necessarily mean that females have a higher fear of negative appearance evaluation than males. Gender differences in fear of negative appearance evaluation are complex, influenced by societal expectations, cultural norms, and personal preferences. Societal expectations and cultural norms surrounding beauty standards significantly shape how men and women perceive their bodies. Historically, women have faced objectification and unattainable beauty standards, contributing to a culture of body dissatisfaction and comparison. Women are often judged more harshly for their appearance and their bodies are scrutinized in various social and professional settings. This constant pressure to conform to certain beauty ideals can lead to a heightened fear of negative appearance evaluation, where women feel their worth is tied to their physical appearance.

Men, on the other hand, may not experience the same level of pressure regarding their appearance. Societal expectations and cultural norms surrounding masculinity often emphasize traits such as strength, power, and dominance rather than physical appearance. While men may still face appearance-related pressures, these are often less intense than those faced by women. Men may compare their bodies for reasons such as athleticism or

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muscle mass, which are desirable traits in male stereotypes. Men are expected to be strong, muscular, and athletic, and may face pressure to meet these body standards. However, men may also experience stigma for expressing concerns about their appearance, leading to feelings of shame and embarrassment.

Personal preferences also influence how men and women perceive their bodies. Men and women may have different personal values and goals that affect their view of physical appearance. For example, a woman may prioritize her appearance over other aspects of her life, while a man may place more importance on his career or athletic abilities. These personal preferences contribute to differences in the level of fear of negative appearance evaluation between men and women.

Table 5: Gender Differences in Self Esteem

Variables	Sex	N	Median	QD	w	U	sig
Self esteem	Male	60	21.5	3.5	0.914***		
	Female	60	16.5	4.65	0.807***	1065	<.001

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 5 illustrates the gender differences in self-esteem among 120 participants (60 males and 60 females). The median self-esteem scores were 21.5 for males and 16.5 for females, with quartile deviations of 3.5 and 4.65, respectively. The Shapiro-Wilk test values were significant for both males (0.914) and females (0.807), indicating normal distributions. The Mann-Whitney U test revealed a significant difference in self-esteem scores ($U = 1065$, $p < .001$), leading to the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis that gender differences in self-esteem exist.

Various societal and cultural factors contribute to the gender difference in self-esteem. Gender stereotypes, socialization, and media influence individuals' self-perception and self-worth. Additionally, gender-based discrimination and experiences of marginalization can negatively impact self-esteem.

Promoting body positivity, challenging harmful beauty standards, and supporting individuals of all genders in developing healthy self-esteem are essential. A general tendency to focus on negative information often extends to self-evaluations, with women appearing more self-critical than men. Low self-esteem can lead to problems in studying, physical health issues, mental health problems, relationship difficulties, and worries about appearance and body image.

Encouraging body positivity and self-love is crucial for both men and women to overcome the fear of negative appearance evaluation. This involves challenging societal expectations and cultural norms surrounding beauty standards and promoting a more inclusive and diverse definition of beauty. It also includes encouraging individuals to prioritize their mental and physical health over their appearance and recognize that their worth is not tied to their physical appearance. By promoting body positivity and self-love, we can create a more accepting culture that values individuals for who they are, rather than how they look.

Major Findings and Suggestions

- The study illustrated that there exists a significant relationship between physical appearance comparison and self-esteem on an individual.

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- The study illustrated that there exists a significant relationship between fear of negative appearance evaluation and self-esteem on an individual.
- The study illustrated that there exists any significant difference between males and females with respect to physical appearance comparison.
- The study illustrated that there exists any significant difference between males and females with respect to fear of negative appearance evaluation.
- The study illustrated that there exists any significant difference between males and females with respect to self-esteem.
- The study illustrated that Self-esteem negatively correlated to physical appearance comparison.
- The study illustrated that Self-esteem negatively correlated to fear of negative appearance evaluation.
- This study includes on three variables, adding more variables can provide more explanation.
- There is a chance of bias due to the collection of responses through online method. It will be better when we conduct as a offline method. Bias can be reduced.
- Gender is the only demographic variable included in this study. So, it is suggested to take a holistic approach, by not only taking in to consideration the gender, but also socio-economic status, occupation, health issues. It could be more reliable.

CONCLUSION

This study elucidates the negative relationships between physical appearance comparison, fear of negative appearance evaluation, and self-esteem, with insights into gender differences. Findings confirm a significant negative correlation between physical appearance comparison and self-esteem, aligned with social comparison theory. Similarly, individuals experiencing higher fear of negative appearance evaluation tend to exhibit lower self-esteem, reflecting concerns about social approval and self-perception. Gender disparities highlight women's higher engagement in appearance comparison and greater fear of negative evaluation due to societal beauty standards. Addressing these dynamics is crucial for promoting positive body image and self-acceptance across diverse populations. The study concluded that there is a significant relationship between physical appearance and self-esteem and also between fear of negative appearance evaluation and self-esteem. At the same time, there is a significant gender difference in physical appearance comparison, fear of negative appearance evaluation and self-esteem. Thus, the findings of the study indicate that physical appearance comparison and fear of negative evaluation affects self-esteem of an individual.

Scope for Further Research

- **Inclusion of Additional Variables:** Future research could include a broader range of variables such as social media usage, body mass index (BMI), cultural background, and psychological factors like anxiety and depression. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting self-esteem.
- **Longitudinal Studies:** Conducting longitudinal studies would help in understanding the long-term effects of physical appearance comparison and fear of negative appearance evaluation on self-esteem.
- **Diverse Demographics:** Including a more diverse demographic profile, such as different age groups, socio-economic statuses, occupations, and individuals with various health issues, would provide a more holistic view of the phenomena.

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- **Offline Data Collection:** Implementing offline methods of data collection can help reduce bias associated with online surveys and ensure a more representative sample.

Implications of the Study

- **Mental Health Interventions:** The findings can inform the development of targeted mental health interventions aimed at reducing the negative impact of physical appearance comparison and fear of negative appearance evaluation on self-esteem.
- **Educational Programs:** Schools and universities can incorporate body positivity and self-esteem building programs to help students develop a healthier self-image.
- **Media Literacy:** Increasing awareness about the unrealistic beauty standards propagated by media can help individuals critically assess these standards and reduce the pressure to conform.
- **Policy Making:** Policymakers can use the insights to create regulations that promote diversity and inclusivity in media representations, thereby reducing the societal pressure to meet unattainable beauty standards.

Major Limitations

- **Limited Demographic Variables:** The study included only gender as a demographic variable, which limits the understanding of how other factors like socio-economic status, occupation, and health issues influence the relationships between the variables.
- **Online Data Collection Bias:** The reliance on online surveys may introduce bias, as it excludes those without internet access or those who are less likely to participate in online studies.
- **Cross-Sectional Design:** The cross-sectional nature of the study means it can only capture a snapshot in time, limiting the ability to draw conclusions about causality or long-term effects.
- **Self-Report Measures:** The use of self-report measures may lead to social desirability bias, where participants provide responses they believe are socially acceptable rather than their true feelings or behaviors.
- **Sample Size and Diversity:** With a relatively small and homogeneous sample, the generalizability of the findings is limited. Future studies should aim for larger and more diverse samples to enhance the reliability and applicability of the results.

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Conflict of Interest

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