

Media Influence on Unrealistic Beauty Standards and Their Effect on Body Image

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Abstract

This study analyzes how various media, including films, television, and advertisements, shape and reinforce unrealistic beauty standards. Through a literature review, this research identifies theoretical frameworks on body image and gender. A case study of the film *The Substance* (2024) is used to explore the impact of unrealistic beauty standards on women. Furthermore, this study investigates the effect of such beauty standards on men and the queer community through an in-depth analysis of popular advertisements and television programs. The findings show that media, in its various forms, play a central role in fueling body image disturbances and widespread self-dissatisfaction across gender groups, affecting both women and men.

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Introduction

Media—including television shows, films, advertisements, and social media—serve as primary sources of information and entertainment. Media shape how individuals perceive the world and themselves. The way gender is portrayed in the media significantly influences how individuals view and express their gender identity. As Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex* (1989), gender is a social construct, heavily influenced by societal norms. Any expression of gender that deviates from these norms is often considered “abnormal” or deviant (Butler, 1999). This perception reflects strong societal pressures to conform to established expectations, where any deviation from widely accepted standards can result in judgment or exclusion.

The media hold power in producing knowledge about the body and gender, one way being the creation of idealized body images that become social standards. A study by *Dove's Self-Esteem Project* (2023) notes that constant exposure to idealized representations can distort self-perception, making it difficult for individuals to appreciate their unique traits. Western beauty standards—such as slim body types and fair skin—have long been imposed not only on women but also on men and LGBTQ+ individuals. The idealized body image, promoted massively through media, serves as a “template” for measuring beauty. Over time, these standards have evolved, from the hourglass figure of classic Hollywood to the slim body ideal of the 1960s. Despite these changes, the pressure imposed by beauty standards remains harmful (Nassar, 2024; Dove, 2023).

In today's digital age, individuals are easily exposed to and influenced by social media, which frequently features influencers with seemingly flawless appearances. Social media algorithms selectively filter content to prioritize specific beauty standards, making it difficult to see diverse and realistic representations (Gepp, 2023).

Research Methodology

This research employs a literature review method. As defined by Mirzaqon (2017), a literature review involves collecting data by analyzing references from previous research, books, journals, and academic sources relevant to the research topic. To enrich the analysis, the study also examines media representations in films, advertisements, and television shows, including the 2024 film *The Substance*, which is relevant to this study's theme.

Results And Discussion

The Role of Media in Shaping Unrealistic Beauty Standards

Media have long perpetuated unrealistic beauty standards, presenting idealized versions of attractiveness that are often unattainable. Women, in particular, are frequently the primary targets of these standards. A study analyzing media consumption has shown a strong correlation between exposure to idealized images in television and films and the decline in self-esteem among young women. For instance, the popular TV series *Friends* has been criticized for its depiction of Monica's past weight as a recurring joke. Research by Stephen (2009) found that even brief exposure to such media representations can significantly lower self-perception among female audiences. In this case, the media reinforce the idea that a woman's value is largely tied to her physical appearance, perpetuating a toxic cycle of body dissatisfaction (Media Smarts, 2022).

Social media platforms further amplify these unrealistic standards. Originally designed as interactive spaces, social media have instead become a breeding ground for harmful comparisons. A 2023 *Pew Research Center* survey found that 59% of teenagers in the U.S. have experienced cyberbullying, with many receiving negative comments about their physical appearance. Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, through their algorithm-driven content, consistently prioritize posts that align with narrow beauty ideals. Hashtags such as #Fitspo and #Thinspo encourage extreme fitness goals and dieting, reinforcing the message that physical perfection is necessary for social acceptance (Cleveland Clinic, 2024).

The Impact of Beauty Standards on Mental Health

The negative effects of unattainable beauty standards extend beyond self-esteem issues—they have profound mental health consequences. A significant number of individuals, especially teenagers, report experiencing anxiety and depression due to their inability to meet the beauty ideals promoted by media. Constant exposure to filtered and edited images creates unrealistic expectations, leading to body dysmorphia and disordered eating behaviors (Gepp, 2023).

A striking example of this phenomenon is the rise of Snapchat dysmorphia, where individuals seek plastic surgery to resemble their digitally altered images. Studies indicate that this psychological trend is fueled by the pressure to present an idealized version of oneself on social media, distorting the perception of natural beauty (Nassar, 2024). The

increasing use of beauty filters, which smoothen skin, enlarge eyes, and slim facial features, exacerbates self-esteem issues by making real-life appearances seem inadequate.

The Film Industry's Reinforcement of Beauty Standards

Hollywood and the global film industry have historically played a significant role in shaping beauty ideals. The film *The Substance* (2024), starring Demi Moore, explores the darker side of the entertainment industry's obsession with youth and physical perfection. The film portrays an aging actress who feels pressured to maintain her beauty to remain relevant in the industry. She turns to an experimental product that promises eternal youth, but this ultimately leads to disastrous consequences. The film highlights how society equates beauty with success, pushing women to extreme measures to conform to these unrealistic standards.

Such narratives reflect real-life industry expectations, where female actors often struggle to secure roles as they age. In contrast, male actors continue to be cast in leading roles well into their later years. This double standard further reinforces the notion that a woman's worth is largely determined by her youthfulness and appearance, creating additional pressure to conform to unattainable beauty ideals.

The Influence of Media on Male Body Image

While much of the discourse around beauty standards focuses on women, men are also significantly affected. The *Mental Health Foundation* (2019) found that 28% of men aged 18 and above experience body image-related anxiety. The portrayal of hypermasculinity in media, with muscular physiques being the norm, has contributed to rising levels of body dissatisfaction among men. Social media exacerbates this issue by promoting workout routines, diet trends, and supplement use aimed at achieving an idealized male physique (Optimale, 2021).

The fitness industry, heavily driven by media representation, has played a key role in reinforcing these standards. Advertisements featuring muscular men as symbols of success and attractiveness send the message that masculinity is defined by physical strength. The brand L-Men, for example, has consistently marketed protein supplements as essential for achieving an ideal male body type. The popularity of gym culture in Indonesia has further cemented these ideals, with many young men feeling pressured to conform to the expectation of having a well-defined physique (Gopos, 2021).

The Impact on the LGBTQ+ Community

Unrealistic beauty standards do not only affect cisgender individuals; they also have profound consequences for the LGBTQ+ community. Research by Mishkind (1986) indicates that non-heterosexual men report higher levels of body dissatisfaction than their heterosexual counterparts. Many feel compelled to maintain an idealized body type both to gain social acceptance and to fit within perceived community norms. Events such as Pride celebrations often heighten these pressures, as individuals strive to present the most "attractive" versions of themselves (Ironmonger, 2023).

Additionally, transgender individuals face unique challenges regarding body image. Many struggle to find gender-affirming clothing that accommodates diverse body types, reinforcing societal beauty standards that fail to account for non-conforming identities (Blakely, 2022). This highlights the need for a broader, more inclusive conversation about body positivity that extends beyond traditional gender binaries.

Conclusion

This study underscores the significant role of media in shaping and reinforcing unrealistic beauty standards, which have far-reaching consequences on individuals' mental health and self-esteem. The pervasive nature of idealized images in film, television, advertisements, and social media creates unattainable expectations that affect both women and men, as well as non-binary and LGBTQ+ individuals.

The impact of these beauty standards extends beyond aesthetic concerns, influencing individuals' confidence, self-worth, and overall mental well-being. Women face pressures to maintain youthful appearances, men are encouraged to build hyper-masculine physiques, and LGBTQ+ individuals often struggle with expectations imposed by both mainstream society and their own communities.

To mitigate these negative effects, there must be a collective effort from media producers, advertisers, and consumers to promote diverse and realistic representations of beauty. Media literacy programs should be implemented to encourage critical engagement with media content, helping individuals recognize and resist the pressures of unrealistic beauty ideals. Furthermore, brands and media companies must commit to fostering inclusivity by showcasing a wider range of body types, ages, and gender identities in their campaigns.

Ultimately, addressing the detrimental effects of media-driven beauty standards requires a shift towards a more inclusive and accepting cultural narrative—one that values individuals for their unique qualities rather than their adherence to narrow aesthetic ideals.

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