

The Mental Health Impact of Idealized Beauty Standards in Media and Advertising on Teenagers

Vedanshee Wadhawan

Abstract:

This research explores the psychological impact of idealized beauty standards perpetuated by media and advertising on teenagers. Drawing from global and Indian contexts, it examines how exposure to digitally altered and socially constructed beauty ideals contributes to body dissatisfaction, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem among adolescents. Studies from the World Health Organization, the Royal Society for Public Health, and the International Journal of Indian Psychology reveal that constant comparison to unrealistic images creates deep emotional insecurities. The paper also highlights the dual nature of beauty marketing, its potential for both empowerment and harm; through campaigns like Dove's Real Beauty and Levi's #IShapeMyWorld. Policy-level solutions such as stricter advertising regulations, media transparency, and the integration of media literacy into school curricula are proposed. Ultimately, the study argues that redefining beauty through authenticity and inclusivity is essential for protecting adolescent mental health in an increasingly image-driven world.

1. Chapter 1: Introduction

Beauty standards, idealized and often unattainable models of physical appearance, have long influenced how people see themselves and others. In recent years, however, the scale and speed of this influence have multiplied due to media and advertising. Whether it is billboards, influencer posts, or digital filters, the message is consistent: beauty is a narrow aesthetic that can be bought, achieved, and displayed. Teenagers, still in the process of forming their identities, are particularly susceptible to such messaging. According to a global survey by the University of Waterloo (2024), 55% of adolescents between ages 10 and 17 report dissatisfaction with their bodies, with many citing media images as a direct cause. In India, the International Journal of Indian Psychology (Khosla, 2024) found that only 66% of adolescents feel confident about their appearance, highlighting the local relevance of what is now a global mental health concern.

Beauty standards are not natural facts but socially constructed ideals. Historically, societies have celebrated different notions of attractiveness, from fuller bodies during the Renaissance to ultra-thin frames during the 1990s fashion era. In today's digital age, these ideals are manufactured by corporations and perpetuated through constant exposure to curated, edited, and filtered images (Perloff, 2021). These standards are further racialized and gendered, valorizing Eurocentric features, lighter skin, and specific body types. They rarely represent real diversity. When these images are internalized as norms, adolescents begin to view their own bodies as projects that must be fixed rather than accepted (Tiggemann & Slater, 2020). What results is not just dissatisfaction but a deep sense of inadequacy tied to self-worth.

Teenagers are uniquely vulnerable to such pressure. Developmentally, adolescence is a time of heightened self-awareness and identity formation. The need for peer validation is strong, and appearance becomes a

major component of social status. Social media platforms intensify this process. Each “like” or comment reinforces the idea that beauty equates to value. Neurodevelopmental research shows that adolescents’ brains are particularly sensitive to social reward cues, meaning they are more affected by appearance-based feedback (Nesi, 2020). Advertising further exploits this sensitivity. Campaigns targeting teens often sell not just products but lifestyles, implying that happiness, popularity, and love are attainable only through physical perfection. This manipulation of aspiration creates a feedback loop: exposure breeds comparison, which breeds dissatisfaction, which in turn fuels more consumption.

The beauty and advertising industries thrive on these insecurities. Forbes (2024) estimated the global beauty industry at over \$570 billion, a figure sustained in part by messages that equate external improvement with self-worth. Critics argue that these messages contribute to body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, anxiety, and depression among teens (National Institutes of Health, 2023). Empirical studies back this claim. A meta-analysis by Grabe et al. (2022) found a consistent correlation between exposure to thin-ideal media and increased body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls. Likewise, a cross-sectional Indian study reported that 77.6% of adolescent girls expressed body dissatisfaction, and over 64% had attempted at least one form of weight control in the past year—most commonly dieting or skipping meals (Bhatia et al., 2019). Such numbers reveal that this is not a cultural anomaly but a widespread psychological pattern.

Supporters of the beauty and fashion industries often defend idealized images as aspirational rather than harmful. They argue that exposure to beauty ideals can inspire self-care, confidence, and creativity, and that advertising merely reflects social preferences rather than creating them. While this argument acknowledges individual agency, it overlooks the asymmetry of influence. A multi-billion-dollar industry with algorithmic reach cannot be equated with the free will of an adolescent navigating identity. Studies consistently show that teenagers exposed to idealized media are more likely to report depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem compared to those exposed to neutral imagery (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Cohen et al., 2020). Thus, even if intentions differ, the psychological outcomes remain damaging.

Social media has amplified this issue beyond what traditional advertising ever could. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat blur the line between authenticity and performance. Filters, editing tools, and influencer culture create a mediated reality where even the “real” is staged. The continuous comparison to peers and celebrities erodes self-acceptance. According to the World Health Organization (2023), prolonged exposure to appearance-focused social media content is associated with a rise in anxiety and depressive symptoms among teenagers. The constant need to curate one’s image fosters perfectionism and chronic dissatisfaction—a modern mental health epidemic fueled by digital aesthetics.

From a public health standpoint, this is not a minor concern. Body dissatisfaction is one of the most robust predictors of depression, disordered eating, and low self-esteem (Rodgers et al., 2021). Given that adolescence is a formative period, these effects can extend well into adulthood. The resulting mental health burden contributes to absenteeism in schools, lower academic performance, and social withdrawal. The issue also carries economic weight, as untreated mental health conditions in youth translate into higher healthcare costs and lower productivity in the long term (OECD, 2024). In India, where mental health remains stigmatized and underfunded, the implications are even more pressing.

Ultimately, the problem is not beauty itself but the commercialization of it. When industries profit from unrealistic ideals, they externalize psychological harm onto vulnerable populations. Addressing this issue requires a multi-pronged approach, combining regulation of digital advertising, body-positive education in schools, and ethical responsibility within media organizations. The research paper “Exploring the

Influence of Social Media on Body Image” (Khosla, 2024) underscores the need for systemic change rather than individual blame, noting that collective awareness can shift how adolescents engage with media and perceive beauty.

This paper will explore how media and advertising construct and perpetuate beauty ideals, how these ideals shape adolescents’ mental health, and what interventions might mitigate the harm. It draws from both global research and Indian data to present a comparative analysis. The goal is not merely to critique the media but to understand the mechanisms that link images to identity, and to suggest pathways toward healthier representation.

2. Chapter 2: The Disconnect and The Opportunity – The Flaw and The Opportunity

For decades, the beauty and advertising industries have thrived on a carefully cultivated illusion: that imperfections are problems waiting to be solved. Freckles become blemishes. Curly hair becomes “unmanageable.” Aging becomes an enemy. These messages are not accidental, they are the backbone of a trillion-dollar business model built on manufacturing insecurity. As feminist theorist Naomi Wolf (1991) argued in *The Beauty Myth*, when societies achieve progress in gender, education, or opportunity, industries often respond by intensifying beauty pressure, keeping individuals, especially women; preoccupied with self-correction. Modern media takes this cycle to an industrial scale, using AI filters, photo-editing, and influencer campaigns to turn ordinary bodies into “before” pictures and commodified ideals into “after” shots. The result is a persistent psychological gap between who people are and who they believe they must become.

The industry’s strategy is sophisticated: it first defines “flawlessness,” then positions its products as solutions to the very flaws it invented. The underlying message is that one’s natural state is inadequate. A single advertisement can trigger a sense of deficiency that keeps consumers coming back for more. The model operates like an emotional subscription, renewed every time a person compares themselves to an idealized image. As Cash and Smolak (2019) note, this cycle of self-objectification reinforces internalized shame and chronic dissatisfaction. In other words, the economy of beauty depends on consumers feeling broken enough to buy repairs.

Here’s the irony: the beauty market is not only thriving, it’s expanding faster than almost any other consumer sector. According to Forbes (2024), the global beauty industry surpassed **\$570 billion** in annual revenue and is projected to exceed **\$800 billion by 2027**, driven by digital advertising and influencer-based marketing. Yet despite this staggering growth, the industry continues to miss a transformative opportunity, to shift from exploiting insecurity to celebrating authenticity. Rather than capitalizing solely on fear and inadequacy, brands could just as easily build loyalty by promoting self-acceptance, mental wellness, and inclusion. The data even supports this pivot: Gen Z consumers increasingly favor brands that reflect diversity and authenticity over perfection (NPD Group, 2023). The economic logic for change already exists; what’s missing is the collective courage to adopt it.

The gap between real bodies and idealized imagery remains the most glaring contradiction in the modern beauty landscape. While the average body mass index of global consumers has steadily increased, the visual representation in advertising has grown narrower, featuring thinner, lighter, and more symmetrical figures (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Filters and AI-generated faces further exaggerate this divide, producing a hyper-real aesthetic unattainable in life but normalized online. When real teenagers look in the mirror, they measure themselves against pixels. This disconnect breeds alienation and a sense of failure, even in those who are otherwise healthy or confident. For adolescents, who rely heavily on external

validation, this becomes a profound psychological wound. The market's refusal to reflect reality has thus created not just a commercial distortion, but a public-health one.

Yet amid this distortion, there are glimmers of change. A growing number of brands are beginning to recognize that authenticity sells—not as a gimmick, but as a cultural reset. Campaigns like Dove's "**Real Beauty**" and Aerie's **#AerieREAL** were among the first to challenge traditional narratives by showcasing unretouched images of women with diverse body types, skin tones, and features. Dove's long-term study with Edelman (2022) found that over **70 % of women** felt more confident when exposed to realistic portrayals, and the brand saw a measurable rise in loyalty and sales. These campaigns signal that inclusion is not just ethical; it is profitable. They reveal an untapped opportunity for the industry to redefine beauty as a spectrum rather than a standard.

This shift aligns with a broader cultural moment. Consumers are increasingly skeptical of perfection and more drawn to honesty, imperfection, and relatability. Social-media creators who share acne, stretch marks, or body hair often outperform those who rely on heavily edited images, precisely because authenticity breeds trust. The new market frontier, then, is not the promise of perfection but the permission to be real. Brands that embrace this transition can lead a mental-health renaissance within beauty culture; transforming an industry long associated with pressure into one associated with empowerment. The question is whether corporations will continue to chase short-term profits from insecurity or recognize the long-term value in promoting self-acceptance.

In essence, the flaw has always been the opportunity. The same machinery that once distorted self-perception can now amplify representation. The same platforms that spread insecurity can spread inclusion. If the beauty industry begins to see authenticity not as a threat but as the next frontier of growth, it could do more than change how people look, it could change how they feel. And for a generation growing up under the lens of perfection, that shift might be the most beautiful transformation of all.

3. Chapter 3: Advertising – Manipulative Beginnings

The beauty industry did not merely respond to existing cultural norms, it actively created them. From the early 20th century onward, advertising has served as one of the most powerful instruments for defining what it means to be beautiful. Historical marketing campaigns, often disguised as public service or hygiene messages, reshaped social values around body image, gender, and self-worth. One of the earliest examples of this manipulation comes from **Gillette's 1915 campaign for Milady Décolleté Razors**, which targeted women for the first time. Until then, shaving body hair was neither a social expectation nor a personal concern for women. Gillette's advertising reframed body hair as "unfeminine" and "unhygienic," linking its removal to sophistication and desirability (Peiss, 2011). Through magazines and posters, the company introduced a cultural narrative that equated smooth skin with modern femininity. Over time, this marketing tactic normalized the practice, embedding it so deeply into everyday routines that it now feels natural rather than constructed.

This pattern of selling products by first manufacturing insecurity, has become a defining feature of beauty marketing. By amplifying fears of imperfection, corporations have learned to turn anxiety into aspiration. Manchester University's research (2020) highlights how advertising has historically influenced women's identities by attaching emotional and social value to physical appearance. The study argues that corporations deliberately redefine cultural norms to expand their markets, often framing natural human diversity as a set of flaws to be fixed. This is not limited to body hair: it extends to skin tone, body size, aging, and even expressions. When beauty is treated as a commodity, self-worth becomes transactional.

The manipulation lies in subtle repetition—enough to make women believe these ideals are their own choices, when in reality, they are learned behaviors shaped by decades of commercial storytelling.

The influence of advertising on young people is especially concerning. Adolescents, who are still developing their self-concept, are particularly sensitive to visual and social cues. The **National Institutes of Health**–funded study “Just One Click: A Content Analysis of Advertisements on Teen Websites” by Amy Slater et al. (2012) found that a majority of teen-focused websites contain cosmetic and beauty advertisements dominated by thin, fair-skinned, and stereotypically attractive models. Many of these ads use direct language implying that attractiveness leads to popularity, love, or success. The study concluded that this constant exposure cultivates unrealistic expectations among teenagers and reinforces the belief that their natural appearance is inadequate. Importantly, Slater’s analysis combined quantitative coding of ad content with qualitative interpretation, demonstrating how repetition and visual dominance of such imagery can directly shape adolescents’ self-evaluation and emotional well-being.

In the Indian context, the same dynamics unfold through culturally specific channels. The **International Journal of Indian Psychology** (Khosla, 2024) conducted interviews with Indian teenagers and found that many compared themselves to beauty influencers and celebrities, often idolizing Indian and Korean pop culture figures. These adolescents expressed desires to emulate their idols’ skin tones, facial features, and body proportions through dieting, skin-lightening, or cosmetic routines. The study revealed a dangerous cycle of comparison and imitation, where social media and advertising merge into a single, persuasive system of aesthetic control.

No discussion of beauty manipulation in India is complete without addressing **Fair & Lovely** (now rebranded as Glow & Lovely). For decades, this product epitomized how marketing could transform colonial colorism into corporate profit. Advertisements consistently portrayed fair skin as synonymous with success, confidence, and desirability, while darker skin tones were associated with failure or rejection. The brand’s commercials often depicted women gaining employment or romantic attention only after their skin “lightened,” thus equating fairness with empowerment. According to Outlook India (2020), the company faced widespread criticism for perpetuating racialized beauty standards and reinforcing the notion that lighter skin equates to higher social value. Although the rebranding attempted to distance the product from overt colorism, critics argue that the underlying narrative, fairness as advancement, remains intact (Srivastava, 2020).

These examples illustrate that advertising has long operated not as a mirror reflecting society, but as a magnifying glass distorting it. What began with simple print campaigns evolved into algorithmic advertising that can now target teenagers with frightening precision. Sponsored posts, influencer partnerships, and AI-generated filters deliver the same old message in a new medium: you are not enough, yet. The difference today is scale. A century ago, a woman saw a few images a day; now, a teenager scrolls through hundreds within minutes. Each image subtly rewires what they perceive as “normal.” As a result, the manipulation once limited to billboards now resides in the intimate space of a phone screen, reaching teenagers in their most private moments.

The link between advertising and mental health cannot be overstated. When cultural ideals are commodified, self-esteem becomes collateral damage. What Gillette began in the early 1900s, defining beauty through deficiency, continues in countless digital forms today. Corporations frame “self-improvement” as empowerment, but it is a carefully constructed illusion designed to sustain consumption. Recognizing this history is crucial because it reveals that beauty standards are not timeless truths—they are products of strategy, profit, and persuasion. The opportunity now lies in dismantling those narratives

and replacing them with ones that celebrate diversity rather than conformity.

4. Chapter 4: The Ugly Side of Beauty Marketing

Beneath the polished façade of glossy advertisements lies a darker truth: beauty marketing often inflicts profound psychological harm. The same campaigns that promise confidence and empowerment can quietly erode mental well-being. By glorifying impossible standards of appearance, they push teenagers into cycles of anxiety, obsession, and self-rejection. The curated images that fill social media feeds are not harmless; they are triggers that tap into the adolescent brain's deepest vulnerabilities. Studies now confirm that exposure to idealized beauty content is not just linked to dissatisfaction; it is directly correlated with diagnosable mental disorders (Cleveland Clinic, 2024; Healthline, 2023).

The rise of image-based social media platforms has intensified this problem. Within just eight minutes of opening a new account, teenagers are likely to encounter content that encourages restrictive eating or body monitoring (Healthline, 2023). The Cleveland Clinic (2024) warns that this constant comparison to filtered and edited imagery leads to heightened anxiety, shame, and the eventual development of **body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)**—a psychiatric condition characterized by obsessive dissatisfaction with perceived physical flaws. In this disorder, individuals fixate on minor or imagined imperfections, often spending hours analyzing or attempting to “fix” them. What begins as a search for inspiration on social media frequently ends in a compulsive need for self-correction.

Academic research confirms this trajectory. A recent study by **Barakat et al. (2023)**, published in the *Journal of Eating Disorders*, identifies social media-induced body dissatisfaction as a primary risk factor for eating disorders across genders. The paper, “Risk Factors for Eating Disorders: Findings from a Rapid Review,” synthesizes data from multiple international studies, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods. Its findings show a consistent pattern: adolescents exposed to appearance-focused digital content report significantly higher levels of self-criticism, dieting behaviors, and depressive symptoms. The authors conclude that beauty marketing, in its digital form, now functions as both trigger and reinforcement—creating the insecurities it later pretends to cure.

The consequences are visible far beyond the screen. According to King University (2024), adolescents who spend extended periods on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are markedly more prone to symptoms associated with **BDD**. The UK's Mental Health Foundation (2023) found that 40 % of teens feel dissatisfied with their bodies because of social media, 36 % would do “almost anything to look good,” 57 % have considered dieting, and 10 % have contemplated cosmetic surgery. These are not superficial numbers; they map onto deeper crises of identity and self-worth. Prolonged exposure to such imagery also fuels dangerous coping behaviors. The foundation's data show a correlation between appearance-based comparison, excessive time online, and an increase in self-harm ideation among young users. In essence, platforms designed for connection have become engines of silent suffering.

Advertising and influencer culture exploit this vulnerability through precision targeting. Algorithms track user engagement, learn emotional patterns, and serve content designed to provoke envy or aspiration. The more insecure a user feels, the more likely they are to engage and, consequently, to buy. This creates a feedback loop of psychological manipulation. As Outlook India (2023) described in its exposé “The Ugly Side of Beauty Marketing,” brands use emotionally charged messaging to blur the line between self-improvement and self-loathing. The piece notes how the industry's language of “empowerment” often masks campaigns that shame natural appearance, subtly suggesting that confidence requires consumption. This duality—where inspiration and harm coexist—defines the moral ambiguity of modern beauty

marketing.

The tension between inspiration and harm deserves closer attention. On the surface, beauty campaigns appear empowering. They tell teenagers to “be their best selves,” to express individuality, to glow. Yet beneath that rhetoric lies a commercial motive: the continual reinforcement of inadequacy. When a person’s sense of worth is tied to a product, self-esteem becomes contingent on purchase. The dopamine rush of transformation the “before and after” narrative; quickly fades, demanding another fix. Scholars describe this as **toxic inspiration**: messages that appear motivational but function as psychological traps (Rodgers et al., 2021).

In India, the same duality is evident but magnified by socio-cultural hierarchies. Research from the International Journal of Indian Psychology (Khosla, 2024) shows that Indian teenagers experience acute distress when attempting to align with globalized beauty ideals circulating online. Many seek validation through likes and comments, equating digital approval with self-worth. Negative feedback, or even lack of engagement, directly damages their self-image. The pressure to conform to lighten skin tone, slim body shape, or mimic influencers’ features—translates into emotional exhaustion. The Times of India (2023) further reports that media portrayals of “alpha males” and hyper-feminine archetypes restrict individuality, forcing teens to suppress authentic traits in favor of performative attractiveness. This suppression often leads to identity confusion and chronic anxiety.

As compared to the loss of identity, the mental health fallout is even more severe. Continuous exposure to unattainable beauty standards contributes to a spectrum of disorders; from mild anxiety and depressive moods to full-scale eating disorders and body dysmorphia. In many cases, these issues remain undiagnosed due to stigma or normalization. When beauty becomes a battlefield, teenagers lose not only confidence but also clarity about who they are outside the mirror. The cumulative evidence points to a public-health emergency disguised as entertainment.

Addressing this crisis requires collective responsibility. Regulators, educators, and corporations must recognize that beauty marketing does more than sell, it shapes minds. Campaigns can, and should, evolve to reflect authenticity and diversity. Some brands have begun this transition, but progress is slow compared to the damage already done. Until media representation becomes inclusive and honest, the “ugly side” of beauty marketing will continue to exact a silent toll on adolescent mental health. The real challenge now is not simply to criticize the industry, but to reclaim beauty itself as something rooted in acceptance rather than anxiety.

5. Chapter 5: Between Inspiration and Harm – Diverging Perspectives

The global conversation around beauty and media is marked by a persistent tension between inspiration and harm. On one hand, beauty campaigns and influencers promise empowerment, creativity, and self-expression. On the other hand, they perpetuate narrow ideals that erode self-esteem and fuel mental distress. Nowhere is this contradiction more visible than among teenagers, whose sense of self is still forming. The World Health Organization (2023) estimates that 10–20 % of adolescents worldwide experience mental-health conditions, and body image ranks among their top concerns. The WHO warns that exposure to unrealistic beauty ideals intensifies feelings of inadequacy and lowers life satisfaction among young people. This aligns with data from the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH), whose report *Social Media and Young People’s Mental Health and Well-Being* (Inkster & Cramer, 2017) found that social-media use contributes to rising anxiety levels, poor sleep, and negative self-image. Produced

in collaboration with Cambridge Neuroscience, the report emphasizes that frequent comparison with curated online personas can sharply reduce self-esteem and heighten depressive symptoms.

The RSPH report remains one of the most comprehensive examinations of this issue, combining survey data with psychological assessment to quantify social media's influence on youth well-being. Its findings are sobering: platforms emphasizing appearance, particularly Instagram and Snapchat, scored highest for negative body image and fear of missing out. It also highlights a gendered pattern: teenage girls are more likely to tie online validation to self-worth. Inkster and Cramer conclude that without active regulation and digital-literacy education, social media will continue to undermine adolescent confidence. What many dismiss as harmless scrolling becomes a constant visual reminder of what one "should" look like rather than a space for authentic connection.

Yet this is not the full story. Many scholars and activists argue that the same platforms and advertising channels that spread insecurity can also serve as tools of empowerment. When used responsibly, media can challenge stereotypes, broaden representation, and foster community. Campaigns such as Dove's "Real Beauty" initiative stand as proof. Introduced in 2004 and continually evolving, it featured women of varied sizes, skin tones, and ages; breaking the long-standing homogeneity of beauty advertising. According to the Dove Self-Esteem Project (2022), 80 % of teenage girls reported feeling more confident after engaging with these body-positive campaigns. Supported by educators and psychologists, the project has reached more than 60 million young people globally, helping them recognize and reject distorted beauty narratives. Instead of selling transformation, such campaigns promote acceptance, a subtle but radical shift in marketing psychology.

This positive side of media influence underscores that representation matters. When adolescents see themselves portrayed authentically, the psychological effect can be restorative. As Tiggemann and Slater (2020) observe, exposure to inclusive imagery correlates with improved self-esteem and reduced body dissatisfaction. Global body-positivity movements build on this principle, using hashtags, art, and storytelling to redefine beauty as plural rather than singular. Aligned with human-rights values, the media has the capacity not only to mirror society but to reshape it for the better.

In India, however, this balance between inspiration and harm remains delicate. Cultural and economic forces often reinforce outdated hierarchies of beauty. Bollywood, fashion magazines, and television advertising continue to equate fairness and thinness with success and desirability (Times of India, 2023). These portrayals are especially harmful in a society where beauty products are aggressively marketed to teenagers, exploiting insecurity under the guise of self-improvement. Fairness creams, weight-loss teas, and "instant-glow" serums dominate advertising spaces, embedding colorism and body-shaming into daily life. For adolescents navigating self-identity in such an environment, beauty becomes less about individuality and more about conformity.

Nonetheless, new campaigns are beginning to counteract this narrative. The #IShapeMyWorld initiative by Levi's India celebrates women from diverse backgrounds, artists, athletes, entrepreneurs, and activists; who embrace their natural forms and challenge stereotypes. The campaign reframes beauty not as appearance but as agency: the ability to define oneself rather than be defined by others. Likewise, Indian influencers now use their platforms to normalize acne, dark skin, and body hair, proving that authenticity can resonate as powerfully as aspiration. These movements show that transformation is possible when the media aligns with inclusion rather than exploitation.

What this ongoing debate reveals is that the relationship between beauty and media is not inherently toxic; it depends on intent and execution. The media can either mirror insecurity or magnify strength. When

handled irresponsibly, it drives adolescents toward self-doubt, anxiety, and disordered behavior. When approached with empathy and diversity, it can nurture belonging and resilience. As Inkster and Cramer (2017) suggest, the challenge for modern society is to shift from consumption-driven validation to value-driven communication. The industry thus stands at a crossroads: it can continue monetizing insecurity; or become an agent of psychological well-being.

Globally and nationally, these forces converge in complex ways. Worldwide, social media amplifies idealized imagery, affecting self-esteem and mental health. In India, cultural traditions and colonial legacies intensify the impact by linking physical traits to moral worth. Yet both contexts share a single truth: teenagers are deeply impressionable, and what they see shapes who they believe they are. The opportunity, therefore, lies not in dismantling beauty itself but in redefining it, making room for imperfection, authenticity, and individuality. Only then can the line between inspiration and harm truly begin to fade.

6. Chapter 6: Setting Boundaries in Beauty Marketing

The influence of beauty marketing on adolescent mental health demands systemic intervention. While awareness campaigns and body-positive movements have created momentum, lasting change requires policy-level boundaries. Two complementary strategies, **stricter regulation of advertising content** and **integration of media literacy education**; offer a path toward reducing the psychological harm caused by unrealistic beauty ideals. Regulation targets the external environment by curbing manipulative content, while media literacy strengthens internal resilience, equipping young people to critically interpret what they see. Together, these strategies address both the cause and consequence of media-induced insecurity.

Regulating Advertising Content

Stricter regulation of advertising content is one of the most direct ways to counteract harmful imagery. Governments and independent watchdogs can collaborate to set clear boundaries on how beauty is represented in the public domain. These regulations should require brands to feature diverse body types, skin tones, and ages, and to refrain from portraying digitally altered or idealized bodies without disclosure. For instance, advertisers could be required to include disclaimers whenever images are retouched or AI-generated. This not only promotes transparency but also reminds audiences, especially adolescents; that the images they consume are often constructed illusions rather than reflections of reality.

Internationally, there are strong precedents for such regulation. Norway's "Retouched Advertising Law" (2021) mandates that influencers and advertisers must label images that have been edited to alter body shape, size, or skin tone. Violators can face significant fines or restrictions on advertising rights. Early studies indicate that this policy has improved public trust in advertising and increased awareness among youth about digital manipulation. Similarly, France introduced legislation in 2017 requiring a "photographie retouchée" (retouched photo) label on all commercial imagery that digitally modifies a model's body (Ministère de la Santé, 2017). The French government implemented these measures to combat rising rates of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction among adolescents. These examples demonstrate that when governments hold corporations accountable for visual honesty, cultural expectations can gradually shift toward authenticity.

In the Indian context, the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) plays a critical regulatory role. Established as a self-regulatory organization, ASCI monitors and evaluates advertising content across television, print, and digital platforms. Its Guidelines for Influencer Advertising in Digital Media (2021) require clear disclosure of paid promotions and truthful representation in digital campaigns. Although

these standards do not yet explicitly address body image or retouching, ASCI has publicly recognized the ethical need to prevent misleading or discriminatory depictions of beauty. Partnering ASCI with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting could institutionalize body-positivity guidelines, mandating disclaimers for edited visuals and penalizing campaigns that promote colorism, extreme thinness, or body shaming.

However, implementation poses practical challenges. Advertising remains a profit-driven industry, and agencies often resist regulations they perceive as creative constraints. Enforcement also requires financial and logistical investment, including the establishment of compliance audits and regular content reviews. While these steps may initially face pushback from corporations, evidence from France and Norway suggests that public support for authenticity eventually outweighs commercial objections. Once consumers begin to reward transparency, market dynamics tend to adapt. Over time, these measures can significantly reduce exposure to harmful beauty ideals and foster healthier norms across media platforms.

Media Literacy as a Preventive Solution

While regulation addresses external triggers, media literacy builds internal protection. Teaching young people to critically evaluate media messages is a long-term, preventive strategy that directly targets the root cause; teenagers' vulnerability to persuasive imagery. By integrating media literacy into school curricula, students can learn how marketing constructs desire, how algorithms amplify certain aesthetics, and how to identify manipulated visuals. These skills empower them to separate commercial intent from personal identity.

Implementation should be collaborative, drawing on educators, psychologists, and media professionals. The first step involves pilot programs in selected schools, allowing for refinement of lesson plans based on student feedback and measurable outcomes. Following this, nationwide rollout can be supported through partnerships with international organizations such as UNICEF and UNESCO, both of which have ongoing initiatives promoting digital well-being and critical thinking. Teacher training programs, funded through these partnerships, can ensure consistency in how media literacy is taught. Beyond classrooms, community workshops and parental engagement sessions can extend these lessons to the home environment, reinforcing resilience outside school.

Empirical studies show that media literacy education significantly improves adolescents' self-esteem and body satisfaction by reducing internalization of unrealistic beauty ideals (Levine & Piran, 2019). Students learn to decode advertisements, recognize the commercial motives behind influencer culture, and question their own social media behaviors. Although the impact is gradual, it is profound, media-literate adolescents become more skeptical consumers and less susceptible to appearance-based anxiety.

Complementary Impact

Regulation and media literacy address different layers of the same problem. Regulation limits the spread of toxic content, while education limits its influence. When applied together, they create a balanced framework that protects adolescents from both manipulation and misinformation. Regulation delivers immediate visibility, setting legal precedents and public accountability, whereas media literacy cultivates long-term psychological immunity. The combination ensures that young people are not only shielded from harmful representations but are also equipped to navigate the complex, image-saturated world around them.

In the end, setting boundaries in beauty marketing is not about restricting creativity; it is about redefining responsibility. Advertisers hold cultural power that can either perpetuate harm or inspire change. Governments, educators, and industry leaders must work together to ensure that beauty no longer thrives

on distortion. When regulation meets education, authenticity becomes the norm; not the exception; and future generations can finally see themselves reflected, not perfected, in the media they consume.

7. Chapter 7: Conclusion & Future Perspective

When this research began, beauty standards appeared to be a matter of individual preference, a shallow concern limited to personal taste and fashion. However, deeper exploration revealed that media-driven beauty ideals are not superficial at all. They shape how young people perceive themselves and others, influencing self-esteem, mental health, and even social opportunity. What initially seemed like a cultural aesthetic issue emerged as a psychological and public-health challenge, driven by the pervasive reach of advertising and social media. Research from the World Health Organization, the National Institutes of Health, and multiple psychological studies made it clear that exposure to unrealistic beauty portrayals correlates strongly with body dissatisfaction, anxiety, depression, and disordered behaviors among teenagers.

Across the chapters, this study traced how the beauty industry and media ecosystems manufacture insecurities to sustain consumer demand. From the manipulative origins of early advertising to the algorithmic precision of social media marketing, it became evident that these standards are systemic rather than incidental. They are upheld by powerful corporate interests, cultural traditions, and technological structures that continuously redefine what is “ideal.” The research also highlighted that while media manipulation is global, its expression varies regionally: in Western contexts through digital enhancement and influencer culture, and in India through colorism and conventional beauty archetypes reinforced by Bollywood and advertising.

Yet, the picture is not entirely bleak. Alongside the harmful impact lies the potential for positive transformation. Campaigns like Dove’s Real Beauty and Levi’s #IShapeMyWorld shows that inclusive representation can rebuild confidence and broaden the social definition of beauty. Media, when used ethically, can serve as a platform for empowerment rather than comparison. Similarly, growing awareness of mental health and body image issues among educators, policymakers, and young activists signals a shift in public consciousness. This evolution—from perfection to authenticity, is both a cultural and moral recalibration that holds promise for the future.

The key insight from this research is that change requires collective, not individual, responsibility. Expecting adolescents to simply “ignore” media influence is unrealistic when entire industries are designed to shape perception. Structural reform, through advertising regulation, ethical branding, and school-based media literacy programs, is necessary to protect and empower young audiences. Countries like Norway and France have already begun implementing legal safeguards requiring transparency about digitally retouched images. India, too, can strengthen the role of the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) and integrate critical media education into national curricula. Over time, these interventions can help replace unattainable ideals with balanced, diverse, and realistic portrayals of beauty.

Looking ahead, the challenge will be sustaining this shift in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. Artificial intelligence and augmented reality are reshaping beauty marketing yet again, creating hyperreal filters and virtual influencers that blur the line between authenticity and fabrication. Regulation will have to evolve alongside these technologies to ensure accountability and transparency. Future research could explore the psychological impact of AI-generated beauty content, the role of algorithms in reinforcing bias, and the ethical implications of virtual identity formation.

At a societal level, promoting media literacy and emotional intelligence will be key to resilience. Schools

can integrate critical-thinking modules that teach adolescents to question visual messaging, understand commercial intent, and practice self-compassion. Mental-health support systems must become proactive rather than reactive, addressing body image distress before it escalates into clinical disorders. On the industry front, brands that choose authenticity over perfection can lead a new economic model rooted in ethical storytelling and consumer trust.

Ultimately, redefining beauty is not just about images; it is about values. The goal is to cultivate a generation that recognizes beauty in diversity, strength in imperfection, and identity beyond appearance. If policy, education, and media converge in purpose, the next decade could mark a cultural shift; from comparison to confidence, from manipulation to mindfulness, and from the illusion of perfection to the celebration of self.

The exploration of media-driven beauty standards reveals that what often appears to be harmless aesthetics is, in reality, a deeply entrenched social and psychological issue. Beauty marketing, powered by digital media and globalized ideals, continues to shape how young people define self-worth, success, and belonging. Its effects, ranging from subtle self-comparison to severe mental distress; underscore the urgent need for ethical accountability. Yet, this research also highlights a path forward. When the media embraces diversity, when schools teach critical awareness, and when policy sets clear boundaries, beauty can evolve from a source of anxiety to a language of empowerment. The future of beauty must not be perfect, it must be true.

8. Chapter 8: Discussion

The findings of this research highlight a complex and deeply interconnected relationship between beauty marketing, adolescent psychology, and societal values. While advertising and social media platforms have revolutionized how people express themselves, they have also blurred the boundary between self-expression and self-critique. Teenagers, whose sense of identity is still developing, are particularly vulnerable to messages that link worth with appearance. The results suggest that repeated exposure to idealized beauty imagery normalizes unattainable standards, leading to heightened self-scrutiny and decreased self-esteem. What began as marketing to sell products has evolved into a powerful cultural system shaping how young people perceive themselves and others.

Across different contexts; global and Indian, the same psychological mechanisms appear to operate: comparison, internalization, and dissatisfaction. Studies by organizations like the World Health Organization (2023) and the Royal Society for Public Health (Inkster & Cramer, 2017) confirm that the continuous flow of edited, filtered, and “aspirational” content contributes to anxiety, body dysmorphia, and depressive symptoms. The ubiquity of such imagery transforms beauty into a measurable social currency, where likes and comments become digital affirmations of worth. This research therefore underscores that beauty marketing is not just a reflection of culture, it is an active producer of identity and emotional value, particularly among adolescents.

At the same time, the data and case studies presented across previous chapters illustrate that the impact of beauty media is not entirely one-dimensional. Campaigns like Dove’s Real Beauty and Levi’s #IShapeMyWorld shows that the same platforms responsible for harm can also serve as tools for empowerment when representation becomes authentic and inclusive. The shift from portraying perfection to embracing diversity signals the beginning of an important cultural recalibration. However, such efforts remain exceptions rather than norms. Most advertising continues to rely on emotional manipulation and standardized aesthetics to drive consumption, suggesting that corporate profit still outweighs social

responsibility.

The discussion also reveals an important contradiction within the beauty industry itself: the simultaneous use of empowerment rhetoric and insecurity marketing. Brands frequently employ slogans about self-confidence and authenticity while continuing to edit images, promote filters, or hire models who conform to narrow physical ideals. This duality mirrors broader societal contradictions; the desire for authenticity within a system that rewards artifice. It indicates that the industry's problem is not merely ethical but structural, requiring changes in how advertising success is measured and regulated.

From a policy standpoint, regulatory interventions in countries like France and Norway demonstrate that transparency laws and digital disclaimers can shift consumer perception and encourage accountability. In India, where the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) operates as a self-regulatory body, the challenge lies in translating voluntary codes into enforceable standards. Without legal mandates or public awareness campaigns, ethical advertising risks remaining optional rather than necessary. The research suggests that collaborative regulation—bringing together policymakers, advertisers, psychologists, and educators, could yield more lasting results than punitive measures alone.

A critical insight emerging from this study is the transformative potential of media literacy education. Unlike regulation, which controls content, media literacy equips individuals to interpret it critically. Educating adolescents to recognize bias, manipulation, and digital editing helps internalize healthier standards of beauty and self-worth. Empirical evidence shows that media literacy programs can improve resilience and decrease the internalization of unrealistic ideals over time (Levine & Piran, 2019). Integrating such programs into school curricula, supported by partnerships with organizations like UNICEF or UNESCO, can help create a generation less susceptible to visual persuasion and more capable of distinguishing between reality and representation.

However, the discussion also acknowledges certain limitations. While awareness and education can mitigate harm, they cannot completely neutralize the pervasive influence of global media networks. Digital algorithms, driven by engagement-based economics, will continue to prioritize visually stimulating content—often the same type that reinforces harmful ideals. Furthermore, beauty ideals are not static; they evolve with cultural, racial, and technological shifts. This means that solutions must also remain adaptive, integrating emerging fields like AI ethics, influencer accountability, and digital wellness into the broader conversation about media responsibility.

Ultimately, the broader implication of this research is that redefining beauty requires redefining success. Aesthetic diversity and emotional well-being must become central measures of progress in both policy and culture. Governments must set clearer advertising boundaries; industries must move beyond aspirational messaging toward ethical storytelling; and education systems must prepare adolescents to navigate the media landscape with awareness and agency. Only when these dimensions work together can society transform beauty from an instrument of comparison into a celebration of authenticity.

The discussion therefore reinforces a central conclusion of this research: the issue of beauty standards is not personal, it is systemic. Combating its harmful effects requires collective, multi-level action across regulation, education, and media reform. By creating systems that value transparency, inclusivity, and empathy, we can move toward a future where media no longer dictates what beauty should be, but instead reflects the diversity of what it already is.

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