Beyond the Filter: TikTok's Role in Shaping Body Image and Self-Esteem in Asian and Asian American Girls and Women

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between TikTok content consumption and body image concerns among Asian and Asian American females, focusing on the influence of cultural beauty standards. The research explores how exposure to TikTok videos featuring attractive influencers affects body image and self-esteem of participants. Participants included 26 Asian and Asian American women, aged 15-43, who completed surveys incorporating the Body Shape Questionnaire and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale. The data were analyzed using correlation and regression analyses. Results indicated a significant negative relationship between the frequency of TikTok consumption and self-esteem, with increased exposure to influencer content correlating with lower levels of body satisfaction. Qualitative findings also revealed cultural tensions between Western and traditional Asian beauty ideals as key factors in shaping participants' body image concerns. The study results suggest that TikTok may exacerbate body image issues in this demographic, highlighting the need for targeted media literacy programs.

Keywords: social media, TikTok, body image, self-esteem, Asian and Asian American women, beauty standards

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Body image and self-esteem are critical aspects of overall mental health and are closely linked to a range of psychological disorders, including depression and eating disorders, which can have enduring effects on an individual's life (Yazdani et al., 2018). Understanding how social media exacerbates these issues is essential for developing effective interventions that can mitigate these negative impacts and promote healthier self-perceptions. The significance of this issue has become increasingly evident in the context of social media's pervasive influence. Platforms like TikTok have emerged as cultural phenomena, presenting users with curated images and videos that often adhere to narrow beauty standards. Research indicates that women are particularly susceptible to the negative effects of these idealized representations compared to men (Kumar & Desai, 2024). This heightened vulnerability is attributed to societal pressures and gender-specific expectations that disproportionately emphasize physical appearance for women, leading to greater body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem (Poudel & Son, 2021). Therefore, this study focuses on Asian/ Asian American female participants to explore the relationship between social media consumption and body image/self-esteem concerns, addressing the need for targeted research on this demographic.

Literature Review

Choukas-Bradley et al. (2022) provide a comprehensive analysis of the factors contributing to body image concerns among adolescent girls. Their study highlights the societal pressures that place a heavy emphasis on physical attractiveness, often reducing the value of women and girls to their appearance. This focus on appearance leads to objectification and sexualization, where individuals are judged primarily on how they look rather than on their abilities or character. The pressure to conform to these beauty standards intensifies during puberty, a period when girls become more aware of their bodies and how others perceive them. As a result, they are particularly vulnerable to these societal expectations. Choukas-Bradley et al. (2022) discuss how peer relationships and social status gain importance during this developmental stage, which heightens self-consciousness and creates an "imaginary audience" effect. This effect leads girls to feel as though they are constantly being observed and judged by others, even when this is not actually the case.

These societal pressures are exacerbated by the pervasive influence of social media. Platforms such as TikTok, known for their algorithm-driven content, amplify these pressures by curating videos that feature influencers who embody idealized beauty standards (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022). They promote a narrow definition of beauty, often emphasizing a slim, toned physique as the epitome of attractiveness, which is commonly referred to as the "thin ideal" (Levine & Murnen, 2009). This ideal contributes to body dissatisfaction among viewers, as users frequently engage in upward social comparisons—comparing themselves to those perceived as more attractive or successful—which often leads to feelings of inadequacy (Perloff, 2014; Vogel et al., 2014). Social media also encourages constant self-presentation, driving girls to seek validation through likes and comments, which reinforces unrealistic beauty standards and leads to self-objectification and internalization of the thin ideal (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022). This cycle of comparison and validation-seeking behavior can result in body dissatisfaction and shame, leading to mental health problems such as depressive symptoms and disordered eating (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022).

Furthermore, Asian and Asian American women are subjected to both Western and traditional Asian beauty ideals, creating a complex environment where they must navigate often conflicting standards. In the 21st century, Western beauty ideals emphasize an hourglass, toned physique, while contemporary Asian standards prioritize a petite frame, fair skin, and delicate features (Lee et al., 2018). Cultural and societal expectations within many Asian communities place significant emphasis on physical appearance as a measure of success and discipline (Ryu et al., 2018). This dual pressure from both Western and Asian beauty ideals adds layers of complexity, further intensifying body image concerns and self-esteem issues for Asian and Asian American women.

Research Questions

This study aims to explore the impact of TikTok content consumption on body image and self-esteem among Asian and Asian American girls and women. Specifically, it seeks to understand how engagement with TikTok influences their perceptions of body image and self-esteem. Additionally, the study will investigate the role of cultural and societal expectations in shaping how TikTok content affects these aspects of self-perception.

Hypotheses

This study hypothesizes that higher consumption of TikTok content negatively impacts body image among Asian and Asian American girls and women. Additionally, we hypothesized that increased TikTok use negatively affects self-esteem in this demographic. Furthermore, we posit that cultural and societal expectations may intensify these negative effects, amplifying the impact of TikTok consumption on both body image and self-esteem.

Methodology

The study will employ a mixed-methods study design, using surveys to assess body image and self-esteem among participants. The Body Shape Questionnaire and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale will be utilized to measure these constructs. Participants will view a series of TikTok videos featuring influencers who epitomize traditional beauty standards. The collected data will be analyzed to assess the relationship between social media consumption and body image/self-esteem issues.

Participants

The study recruited 26 female participants aged 15 to 43 years through convenience and random sampling. Participants identified primarily as Vietnamese, Chinese, or of other Asian descent. The majority were raised in Canada, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The diverse age range and cultural backgrounds of the participants allowed for a comprehensive examination of the influence of TikTok across different stages of development and varying cultural contexts.

Measures

To assess body image and self-esteem among participants, three key instruments were used in the survey: the Body Shape Questionnaire, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and demographic questions.

The Body Shape Questionnaire (Cooper et al., 1987) is a 14-item self-report measure specifically designed to assess feelings of dissatisfaction with body shape. Participants rate each item on a 6-point scale, ranging from "Never" (1) to "Always" (6). Higher scores on the

Body Shape Questionnaire indicate greater levels of body shape dissatisfaction. This measure was selected due to its established reliability and validity in capturing body image concerns, which is crucial for understanding how social media content impacts perceptions of body shape.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) is a widely recognized self-report instrument used to evaluate individual self-esteem. It consists of a 10-item list, with responses rated on a 4-point scale from "Strongly Agree" (1) to "Strongly Disagree" (4). A higher score indicates a higher self-esteem. This scale was chosen for its strong psychometric properties and its ability to provide a comprehensive assessment of self-esteem, a key variable in examining the effects of social media on self-perception.

The demographic questions asked about participants' age, ethnicity, cultural background, admired figures, and ideal beauty standards. This contextual information is essential for analyzing how demographic factors may influence the relationship between social media content consumption and body image/self-esteem concerns. The questionnaire included open-ended questions to capture a broad range of demographic and behavioral data.

Procedure

The experiment was conducted via an anonymous online survey posted on a public platform, allowing interested individuals to voluntarily participate. Emphasis was placed on the anonymity of the survey to encourage honest responses and minimize response bias. Participants were not aware that the survey was specifically assessing their self-perception, which helped ensure that their responses were genuine. The researcher did not know the participants personally, and their decision to participate was entirely voluntary.

Pre-Assessment. Participants began by completing a demographic questionnaire, which collected information on their age, ethnicity, cultural background, admired figures, and ideal beauty standards. Then, they rated their own attractiveness on a self-assessment scale ranging from "Very unattractive" (1) to "Very attractive" (10). Following these measures, participants completed the Body Shape Questionnaire (a 14-item self-report measure assessing preoccupations with body shape and dissatisfaction) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (a 10 items measure evaluating self-esteem). This pre-assessment step established baseline data on participants' body image and self-esteem prior to their exposure to TikTok content, providing a reference point for assessing any subsequent changes in self-perception.

Video Exposure. Participants were shown the same one-minute TikTok video montage, which featured four different young female influencers deemed attractive by societal standards. The video included influencers lip-syncing to audio rather than speaking, with some showcasing their faces and others highlighting their bodies. This montage was carefully curated to reflect prevalent beauty trends on TikTok. The video was presented in isolation as a downloaded file to ensure that all participants experienced the same content without external influences.

Post-Assessment. Immediately following the video exposure, participants completed the same body image and self-esteem assessments (the Body Shape Questionnaire and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale) that were used in the pre-assessment. This post-assessment was critical in measuring any immediate changes in self-perception due to TikTok exposure.

Qualitative Reflection. Finally, participants were asked to provide reflections on how they believed the TikTok content influenced their self-perception and body image. They rated the attractiveness of the influencers on a scale from 1 to 10 (1 = very unattractive, 10 = very attractive) and evaluated how much watching the videos impacted their responses on the Body Shape Questionnaire and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (post-assessment), on a scale from 1

to 10 (1 = no impact, 10 = high impact). This qualitative data offered deeper insights into the psychological mechanisms at play and the personal relevance of the observed changes.

Results

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using paired sample t-tests to compare pre- and post-assessment scores on the Body Shape Questionnaire and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. These tests were used to determine if there were statistically significant changes in body image and self-esteem following exposure to TikTok content. In addition to t-tests, the correlation coefficient (*r*) was calculated to assess the strength of the relationship between TikTok consumption and changes in body image and self-esteem. A correlation coefficient close to ±0.5 was observed, indicating a strong relationship between TikTok exposure and these psychological outcomes. Qualitative data from participants' reflections were analyzed using thematic analysis, which identified recurring themes and patterns in how participants perceived the influence of TikTok on their body image and self-esteem.

Quantitative data

Table 1

Correlation with Self-Attractiveness Pre and Post Measures

Analysis	Correlation (*r*)	Interpretation
Self-Attractiveness & Pre Body Image	-0.54	Strong Relationship (*r* is close to ±0.5) : The more someone believes they are attractive, the lower their body image concerns are.
Self-Attractiveness & Pre Self-Esteem	0.26	Weak Relationship (*r* is not close to ±0.5) : The more someone believes they are attractive, the higher their self-esteem.
Self-Attractiveness & Post Body Image	-0.59	Strong Relationship: The more someone believes they are attractive, the lower their body image concerns are.
Self-Attractiveness & Post Self-Esteem	0.20	Weak Relationship: The more someone believes they are attractive, the higher their self-esteem.

Table 2

Correlation with Influencers

Analysis	Correlation (*r*)	Interpretation

Self-Attractiveness & Influencer Attractiveness	-0.26	Weak Relationship: The more someone believes they are attractive, the lower they rated the influencers' attractiveness.
Influencer Attractiveness & Post Body Image	0.47	Strong Relationship: The higher they rated the influencers' attractiveness, the higher their body image concerns are.
Influencer Attractiveness & Post Self-Esteem	-0.42	Strong Relationship: The higher they rated the influencers' attractiveness, the lower their self-esteem are.
Influence of Influencer & Post Body Image	0.53	Strong Relationship: The more they were influenced by the influencers, the higher their body image concerns are.
Influence of Influencer & Post Self-Esteem	-0.04	Weak Relationship: The more they were influenced by the influencers, the lower their self-esteem is.

Table 3
Correlation with other Factors

Analysis	Correlation (r)	Interpretation
Pre/Post Body Image	0.96	Strong Relationship: The relationship between pre- and post-measures of body image is positively related.
Pre/Post Self-Esteem	0.93	Strong Relationship: The relationship between pre- and post-measures of self-esteem is positively related.
Pre Body Image & Pre Self-Esteem	-0.34	Weak Relationship: The higher their body image concerns, the lower their self-esteem are.
Post Body Image & Post Self-Esteem	-0.28	Weak Relationship: The higher their body image concerns, the lower their self-esteem are.

Table 4
Paired T-Test (Effects from Watching TikTok Videos)

Analysis	Paired T-Test	Interpretation
Pre and Post Body Image	0.76	The videos did not significantly change how participants rated their body image concerns.
Pre and Post Self-Esteem	0.07	The videos did not significantly change how participants rated their body image concerns. It's close to significance (0.05).

Indications of Quantitative data

Table 1. A strong negative correlation was observed between self-attractiveness and pre-body image concerns (r = -0.54, p < .01), indicating that higher self-perceived attractiveness was associated with fewer body image concerns. This correlation remained significant and even stronger when examining post-body image concerns (r = -0.59, p < .01).

Table 2. A positive correlation was found between the perception of influencer attractiveness and post-body image concerns (r = 0.47, p < .01), suggesting that higher ratings of influencer attractiveness were associated with increased body dissatisfaction. Additionally, a strong negative correlation was noted between influencer attractiveness and post-self-esteem (r = -0.42, p < .01), indicating that higher ratings of influencer attractiveness were associated with lower self-esteem after exposure. Additionally, a positive correlation was found between the perceived influence of the influencers and post-body image concerns (r = 0.53, p < .01), suggesting that participants who felt more influenced by the influencers reported greater body image concerns.

Table 3. An exceptionally strong positive correlation was observed between pre- and post-body image concerns (r = 0.96, p < .01), as well as between pre- and post-self-esteem levels (r = 0.93, p < .01), indicating high consistency in body image and self-esteem before and after exposure.

Table 4. The paired sample t-tests revealed no significant changes in body image ($t(25)$ = 0.76, p = .451) or self-esteem ($t(25)$ = 0.07, p = .947) following exposure to the TikTok videos.
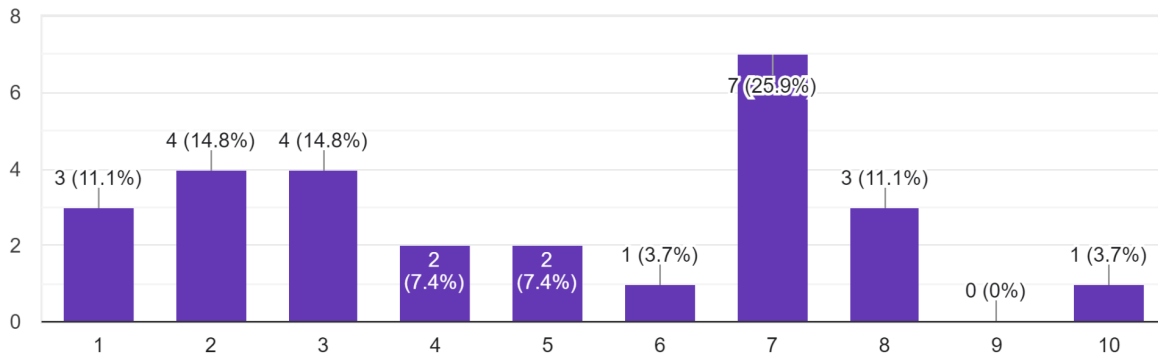
Qualitative data
Figure 1
Participants' opinion on attractiveness of influencers (during Video Exposure) on a scale of 1-10 (from "Very unattractive" (1) to "Very attractive" (10))
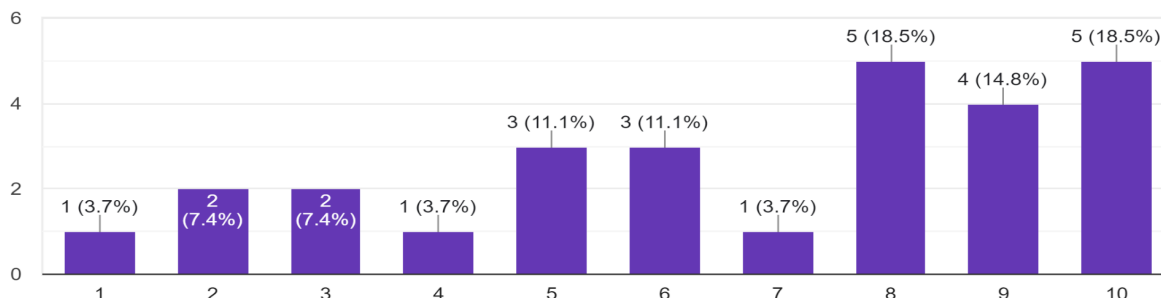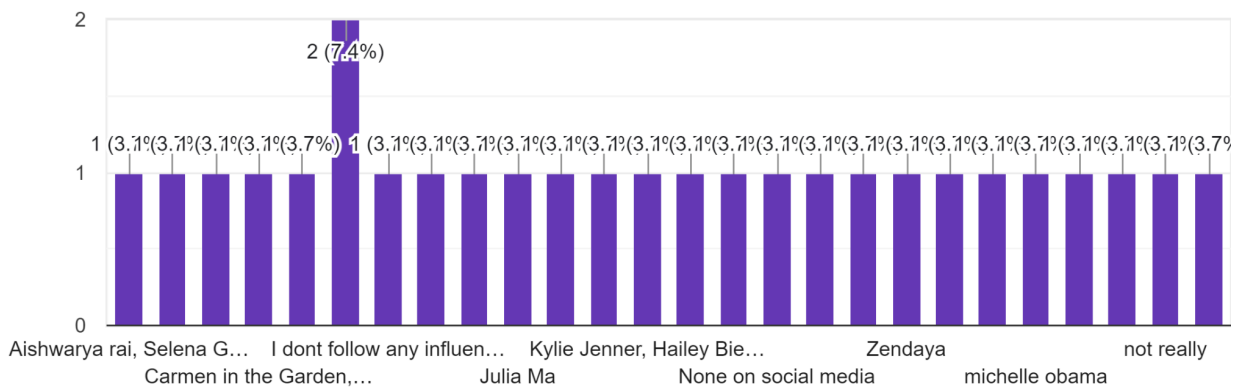
Figure 2

Impact of Video Exposure on participants' responses of the Body Shape Questionnaire and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (post-assessment),on a scale from 1 to 10 (1 = no impact, 10 = high impact).

Figure 3

Admired female figures of participants

Figure 4

Beauty standards highlighted by participants

Fair skin
skinny tall
Pale skin, big eyes
Skinny, Athletic
Slim and has fair skin
Big eyes, long legs, slim, paler skin
Thin body and clear face
Slim and tall
big eyes

Indications of Qualitative data

     Figure 1. Most participants found the influencers to be quite attractive with the ratings of 8 and 10 (on a 1 to 10 scale), with both being selected by five participants (18.5%). Additionally, the rating of 9 was chosen by four participants (14.8%), also indicating a higher attractiveness rating. These ratings highlight that a majority of participants leaned towards the higher end of the attractiveness scale for the influencers during video exposure.

     Figure 2. Majority of participants rated the impact of video exposure on their responses as a 7 on the 1 to 10 scale, with seven participants (25.9%) selecting this rating. This suggests that a significant number of participants perceived a moderate to high impact from the video exposure. Additionally, ratings of 8 were also relatively common, with three participants (11.1%) selecting this option, indicating that some participants felt a slightly higher impact. Ratings of 1, 3, and 4 were each selected by four participants (14.8%), indicating some participants perceived lower impact levels.

     Figure 3. Most participants, who were young and under 25, mentioned celebrities and influencers as their admired figures. Examples of these figures included entertainment celebrities like Kylie Jenner, Jang Wonyoung, Bella Hadid, IU, and Zendaya, as well as social media influencers such as Jenn Im, KarissaEats, and Kerina Wang. Some older participants, above 25, expressed admiration for activists such as Michelle Obama, Oprah Winfrey, and Greta Thunberg.

     Figure 4. A detailed analysis of participants' reflections revealed several specific beauty standards that are considered attractive in participants' cultures. These standards were categorized into skin tone, body type, facial features, hair, and other attributes.

          Skin Tone. The highest number of participants (n=13) emphasized the ideal of having pale or fair skin, indicating its prominence as a beauty standard within the Asian and Asian American demographic.

          Body Type. The preference for a thin body type was frequently mentioned, with 14 participants expressing a desire to be skinny and 10 indicating a preference for a slim or slim-fit physique. Additionally, five participants highlighted the hourglass figure, while fewer participants noted tall stature (n=4) and slim thighs (n=1).

          Facial Features. Among facial features, big or large eyes were the most commonly cited as desirable (n=10), followed by a small face (n=3), small nose (n=2), straight eyebrows (n=1), and double eyelids (n=1).

          Hair. Long, straight hair was identified as the preferred hairstyle by four participants, while one participant mentioned a preference for thick, dark hair.

Discussion

     The findings provide nuanced insights into the complex interplay between social media use, cultural expectations, and body image among Asian and Asian American women. Although paired sample t-tests did not indicate significant immediate changes in body image or self-esteem following TikTok exposure, the correlational analyses and qualitative data suggest that underlying psychological processes may be more subtle and gradual.

Self-Attractiveness and Body Image Concerns

     The strong negative correlation between self-attractiveness and both pre- and post-body image concerns suggests that individuals who perceive themselves as more attractive are less likely to experience body image concerns. This suggests that promoting self-attractiveness

beliefs could serve as a protective factor against body image issues, particularly in the context of social media, where users are frequently exposed to idealized beauty standards. This is also important to resist cultural and societal expectations, which often emphasize specific physical attributes as markers of attractiveness and can influence self-perception. For example, in many Asian cultures, where slimness is equated with beauty and success, individuals may internalize these ideals and only believe they have worth when they align with these standards.

Influencer Attractiveness and Its Impact

The positive correlations between perceived influencer attractiveness, post-body image concerns, and self-esteem shows the significant role social media plays in shaping viewers' self-perception. Participants who rated influencers as highly attractive reported greater body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem, suggesting that exposure to idealized beauty standards can negatively affect body image. This effect is amplified when individuals compare themselves to these influencers, leading to increased body dissatisfaction. The influence of social media is particularly pronounced for Asian and Asian American women who may face conflicting cultural beauty standards. The disparity between Western ideals promoted on platforms like TikTok and traditional beauty norms can exacerbate body image concerns and contribute to a heightened sense of inadequacy. This finding highlights the importance of media literacy and awareness, emphasizing the need for educating social media users, especially younger audiences, about the potential negative impacts of such comparisons.

Body Image and Self-Esteem

The exceptionally strong positive correlations between pre- and post-body image concerns and pre- and post-self-esteem levels indicate a high level of consistency in these measures before and after exposure to TikTok videos. This suggests that participants' body image and self-esteem are relatively stable traits that are not easily swayed by short-term exposure to social media content. Furthermore, self-esteem did not show a direct correlation with body image, implying that self-esteem is influenced by a broader range of factors beyond one's own self-perception of their physical appearance. Cultural expectations and societal pressures play a crucial role in shaping self-esteem, as individuals often evaluate their worth based on societal standards of beauty and success.

Self-Esteem and Influences

Most participants found the influencers during the video exposure attractive, indicating that they are comparing themselves against these idealized standards. The attractiveness of the influencers acts as a benchmark, prompting individuals to compare their own appearance, lifestyle, or achievements to the idealized images they see, which can influence their self-perception and social comparisons. However, it is important to note that finding someone attractive does not always equate to comparing oneself with them. People can perceive influencers as attractive without it necessarily impacting their self-perception and social comparisons. Despite this, the tendency to compare oneself with these idealized images is common and can significantly influence self-esteem. Even individuals with a positive body image may experience fluctuations in their self-esteem due to societal pressures and comparisons with others (McComb & Mills, 2021). This insight highlights the nuanced ways social media can subtly lower self-esteem through these comparisons. The continuous exposure to idealized standards can create a pervasive sense of inadequacy, as individuals compare their

own lives against the often unattainable perfection presented online. This ongoing comparison can erode self-worth over time, as people may feel they fall short of the ideals they see, leading to a gradual but impactful decline in self-esteem. This problem underscores the need for strategies that help individuals recognize this subconscious impact and maintain a consistent and healthy self-esteem despite exposure to idealized beauty standards.

Beauty Standards

The emphasis on "Pale/Fair skin" and the consistent preference for "Skinny" and "Slim/Slim fit" body types underscore a pervasive ideal that aligns with Asian beauty standards often depicted in media. This reflects the internalization of such standards, where individuals, particularly women, may feel pressured to conform to these ideals to be perceived as attractive or socially acceptable. The preference for specific facial features like "Big/Large eyes" and "Small nose," as well as hair preferences such as "Long, straight hair," reflects both Western and Eastern beauty norms. The desire for these attributes can lead to an increased interest in cosmetic procedures and products aimed at achieving or enhancing these features, further perpetuating these beauty standards. Interestingly, the mention of "Hourglass figure" (n=5) and "Tall stature" (n=4) reflects a broader spectrum of body ideals, though still within the confines of slimness. These standards suggest an ongoing tension between the desire for curves and the pressure to maintain a slim physique, a dual expectation that can be particularly challenging for individuals to navigate, especially Asian Americans as they have to navigate both cultures.

Admired Figures

The visual representation of admiration trends among different age groups in this study reveals a significant shift in values and the basis for admiration as individuals age. Younger participants tend to admire figures for their physical appearance and alignment with contemporary beauty standards, influenced heavily by social media and celebrity culture. Celebrities like Kylie Jenner and Zendaya embody these ideals, reinforcing the importance of appearance for younger audiences. The focus on beauty among younger participants aligns with the formative nature of adolescence and early adulthood, a period often marked by heightened awareness of social comparisons and the pressure to conform to societal ideals such as beauty standards. Furthermore, social media platforms like TikTok promote appearance-based content by making them highly rewarded through likes and comments. As a result, younger individuals tend to internalize beauty ideals, to fit into society and gain validation on social media. This is why they also aspire to the lifestyles and looks of celebrities and influencers, who are often largely famous for their beauty (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022). In contrast, older participants, who are in their late twenties and beyond, shift their admiration towards figures known for their accomplishments, leadership, and societal impact. Figures such as Michelle Obama, Oprah Winfrey, and Greta Thunberg are admired not for their appearance but for their significant contributions to society, advocacy, and leadership. This transition in admiration reflects a maturing perspective, where success and meaningful contributions become more valued as individuals navigate their careers and personal lives.

Limitations and Future Directions

The study's findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. The small sample size, and involvement of convenience sampling limit the generalizability of the results. Future research should aim to recruit a larger, more diverse sample to validate these findings.

Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the study precludes conclusions about causality. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the long-term impact of TikTok consumption on body image and self-esteem. Future research should also explore the potential moderating role of individual differences, such as self-compassion and media literacy, in buffering the negative effects of social media on body image. Interventions aimed at enhancing these protective factors may prove effective in promoting resilience among vulnerable populations.

Conclusion

This research explores the connections between social media use, cultural expectations, and body image among Asian and Asian American women, highlighting the significant psychological impacts of contemporary media and cultural norms on self-perception and mental well-being. Although immediate changes in body image or self-esteem may be minimal, subtle and gradual effects are notable. Specifically, beliefs in self-attractiveness can protect against body image issues (Vartanian & Dey, 2013), while comparison to influencers can exacerbate body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem (McComb & Mills, 2021).

Despite some claims that social media's impact is overstated (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016), as well as the limitations of this study, our findings do emphasize the importance of recognizing the subconscious impact of social media on self-esteem. This underscores the need for targeted interventions and media literacy initiatives to mitigate social media's potentially harmful effects.

To address these issues, promoting media literacy and critical evaluation of social media content is essential. Future research should include diverse populations and investigate additional factors affecting body image and self-esteem, with longitudinal studies exploring the long-term effects of social media. By enhancing our understanding and creating a supportive environment, we can better navigate the complexities of social media and body image, fostering improved mental health and self-esteem.

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