

BEAUTY STANDARDS AFFECT TEENAGERS NEGATIVELY

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Abstract: Modern beauty standards, heavily promoted through social media, advertising, and popular culture, have a profound and often damaging effect on teenagers. During adolescence — a critical period of identity formation and psychological development — young people are particularly vulnerable to unrealistic ideals of physical appearance. This article examines the key negative impacts of beauty standards on teenage mental and physical health, including body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression, and suggests ways to promote a healthier relationship with body image among young people.

Key Words: beauty standards, teenagers, body image, self-esteem, eating disorders.

Introduction

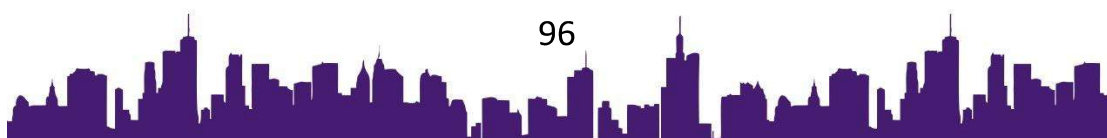
Adolescence is one of the most sensitive stages of human development. During this period, teenagers form their identities, develop self-awareness, and become increasingly influenced by social norms and peer expectations. Among the most powerful of these influences are prevailing beauty standards — culturally defined ideals about how a person's body, face, and appearance should look.

In previous generations, beauty ideals were primarily transmitted through magazines, television, and cinema. Today, however, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube expose teenagers to thousands of filtered, edited, and idealized images every day. Research consistently shows that this constant exposure to unattainable physical ideals is a significant risk factor for psychological harm among adolescents (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

While beauty standards have always existed in some form, their current scale and intensity — amplified by digital technology and global media — make them a particularly urgent concern for educators, parents, and mental health professionals. This article explores the main ways in which modern beauty standards negatively affect teenagers and discusses what can be done to reduce their harmful impact.

Main Part

The most direct psychological consequence of exposure to idealized



beauty standards is body dissatisfaction — a negative evaluation of one's own physical appearance. Studies show that body dissatisfaction is alarmingly widespread among teenagers, particularly girls. Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2004) found that even brief exposure to media images featuring idealized bodies significantly increased body dissatisfaction and negative mood among adolescent girls. This effect is explained by Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory: people naturally compare themselves to those around them, and when the comparison target is an unrealistically perfect image, the result is almost always unfavorable.

Body dissatisfaction is not merely a matter of vanity — it is a serious risk factor for a range of psychological and physical health problems. One of the most concerning is the development of eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder. The National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA, 2022) reports that eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, and that the majority of cases begin during adolescence. Pressure to conform to thin or 'ideal' body types — particularly as promoted through social media — is a leading environmental trigger for these conditions.

Beyond eating disorders, beauty standards contribute significantly to low self-esteem and depression among teenagers. When young people feel that their natural appearance does not meet societal expectations, they often internalize a sense of inadequacy and shame. Ricciardelli and McCabe (2001) found a strong correlation between body image concerns and low self-esteem in both male and female adolescents, with girls reporting higher levels of distress overall. This chronic sense of falling short of an ideal can lead to persistent negative self-talk, social withdrawal, and in severe cases, clinical depression.

The main negative effects of beauty standards on teenagers can be summarized as follows:

Body dissatisfaction: constant comparison with idealized media images leads to negative self-perception and appearance anxiety.

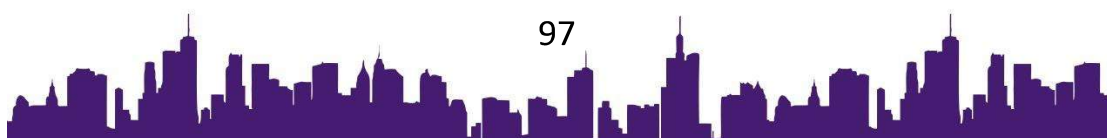
Eating disorders: pressure to achieve an 'ideal' body type increases the risk of dangerous disordered eating behaviors.

Low self-esteem: feelings of inadequacy rooted in appearance reduce overall confidence and self-worth.

Depression and anxiety: chronic body image concerns contribute to emotional distress and increased risk of mental health disorders.

Unhealthy behaviors: teens may engage in extreme dieting, overexercising, or cosmetic procedures in an attempt to meet unrealistic standards.

It is also important to note that beauty standards do not affect girls alone. Increasingly, boys and young men face pressure to achieve muscular, 'perfect' physiques promoted through fitness culture and social media. Research by



Cafri et al. (2005) found that male body image concerns, particularly related to muscularity, are rising steadily and are associated with steroid use, disordered eating, and depression among adolescent boys.

Schools and families play a crucial role in protecting teenagers from these harmful influences. Media literacy education — which teaches young people to critically evaluate and question the images they see — has been shown to reduce the negative impact of idealized media on body image (Levine & Murnen, 2009). Encouraging open conversations about beauty standards, promoting diverse representations of bodies and appearances, and modeling healthy attitudes toward food and exercise are all evidence-based strategies for supporting teenage well-being.

Conclusion

Modern beauty standards, amplified by the pervasive reach of social media and digital advertising, pose a genuine and serious threat to the mental and physical health of teenagers. Body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression are among the well-documented consequences of exposure to unrealistic physical ideals during the vulnerable years of adolescence.

Addressing this issue requires a collective effort from families, schools, media producers, and policymakers. Promoting media literacy, celebrating body diversity, and fostering environments where teenagers feel valued for qualities beyond their appearance are essential steps toward reducing the harm caused by toxic beauty standards. Ultimately, helping young people develop a healthy, compassionate relationship with their own bodies is one of the most important investments society can make in the well-being of the next generation.

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