The Media as Mirror:

How women across generations reflect on beauty standards

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ABSTRACT

Beauty ideals in media continue to shape how women see themselves, yet these ideals are neither fixed nor universally experienced. This thesis investigates how women from different generations experience and interpret beauty standards in media in relation to their self-image. In a media landscape increasingly driven by visual culture and digital connectivity, it is crucial to understand how generational position, life stage, and media context affect the internalization, negotiation, or rejection of dominant beauty norms. The study seeks to answer the central research question: "How do women from different generations experience and interpret beauty standards in media in relation to their self-image?" Using a qualitative, interpretative approach, the research is based on semi-structured interviews with 12 women from three generational groups: Generation Z (18–28), Millennials (29–44), and Baby Boomers (61–79). Six-phase Thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke (2012) was applied to the transcribed interviews, to help with coding, and to identify patterns across and within generational experiences. Two key themes emerged. First, exposure to beauty ideals highlighted generational differences in media use and ideal body types: younger women described algorithmically reinforced 'fit but thin' ideals shaped by platforms like Instagram and TikTok, while older participants referred more to traditional media and a slim, well-groomed ideal. Participants also noted that beauty ideals shift over time and are influenced by cultural representation. The second theme discussed how women negotiate beauty ideals. Across generations, participants reported engaging in comparison, both consciously and unconsciously, which often led to body dissatisfaction and changes in behavior. However, aging also brought greater self-acceptance: while older women expressed increased emotional distance and self-liberation, younger women were still navigating this process. The study also highlights that generational categories are fluid and socially constructed, with overlapping experiences that challenge fixed definitions of 'younger' and 'older' women. The findings show that while media beauty ideals remain influential, their impact varies by generation, shaping not only the standards themselves but how women interpret, negotiate, and challenge them in their everyday lives. Ultimately, this research offers insight into how women navigate the tension between social expectations and personal identity within an evolving media environment.

KEYWORDS: Generations, beauty standards, media, self-image, women

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1. Introduction

Physical appearance has long been a focus of attention, as it is often the first trait people notice and can significantly shape social interactions (Pop, 2016, p. 32). However, the pervasive presence of media has contributed to a societal shift toward an even greater emphasis on appearance. The digitalization of everyday life has intensified this shift by continuously exposing individuals to idealized images of beauty. In a world increasingly shaped by screens, images, and online identities, physical appearance has emerged as a powerful form of social currency. In contemporary society, physical appearance has become a means of establishing one's identity and social position (Pop, 2016, p. 32). Beauty is no longer only a matter of personal taste or cultural tradition, it is a normative ideal that is constantly reinforced, performed, and policed through media. As Pop (2016, p. 32) explains, physical appearance significantly impacts how individuals are treated in everyday interactions, and for many women, this results in a persistent awareness of their bodies in relation to external standards. This awareness is often cultivated through digital environments that encourage comparison and the pursuit of perfection.

Media has long influenced societal notions of beauty, ranging from traditional outlets like magazines and television to fast-paced digital platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, where influencers actively shape visual norms. As these representations evolve alongside technological and cultural changes, media continues to play a central role in shaping perceptions of beauty and self-image. While older generations consumed one-directional media where industries dictated beauty ideals, younger generations engaged with interactive, algorithm-driven content that personalizes and reinforces beauty norms (Fardouly et al., 2015, p. 39). In this evolving media landscape, understanding how women across generations experience and interpret beauty standards, and their impact on self-perception, remains essential.

The aim of this study is to explore how women across different generations experience beauty standards in media and how these experiences relate to their self-image. With semi-structured interviews and Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 79), the study investigates how beauty ideals are exposed and negotiated in everyday life. Recognizing media's influential role in shaping individuals' perceptions of reality, the research draws on Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 173) to examine how

sustained media exposure impacts perceptions of beauty ideals. Additionally, Mannheim's (1970, p. 164) Generational Theory offers a framework for understanding how shared historical and cultural contexts influence generational engagement with media and the construction of identity. Through these theoretical lenses, the study seeks to deepen our understanding of how women across age groups navigate beauty norms within broader sociocultural dynamics.

The social relevance of this study lies in its broader implications, as media-driven beauty standards carry serious consequences for self-esteem, body image, and mental well-being. Lamb et al. (1993, p. 355) explore the underlying reasons why media-reinforced cultural preferences for thinness have contributed to a significant increase in eating disorders since the 1960s, especially among adolescent women. They found that the increase may be tied to changing societal ideals and pressures, especially the cultural emphasis on thinness, that define women's value by their appearance (Lamb et al., 1993, p. 355-356). Exposure to idealized bodies and often digitally altered images of bodies have been associated with increased body dissatisfaction, reduced self-worth, and disordered eating behaviors, especially among adolescent girls and young adult women (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014, p. 617). In severe cases, internalizing such standards has been linked to the development of eating disorders, including anorexia nervosa (Simpson, 2002, p. 65). These effects are not evenly distributed among genders: women have been found to report lower self-esteem in relation to beauty norms than men and are more often the targets of appearance-based judgment and objectification (Lamb et al., 1993, p. 356). Consequently, this study focuses on women specifically, as they are both the primary audience and victims of unrealistic media ideals. Recent changes in media representation, such as the rise of body positivity movements, have introduced alternative narratives that challenge traditional ideals of thinness, whiteness, and youthfulness (Lazuka et al., 2020, p. 86). These shifting standards raise important questions about whether different generations engage with and interpret these beauty standards in distinct ways. Despite decades of feminist critique, the normalization of thin, youthful, Eurocentric beauty ideals persists, now intensified by curated social media content.

This makes it crucial to examine how these norms continue to affect women differently depending on their age, generational identity, and media environment. By exploring how women across different generations perceive and internalize media-driven beauty standards, this research will shed light on whether these ideals maintain the same

psychological impact over time or evolve as women age. Understanding these generational differences can inform more targeted approaches to media literacy education, body image interventions, and mental health support. It may also help identify vulnerable groups and moments in the life course where interventions could be most effective. In doing so, this study supports efforts to reduce the harmful impact of beauty standards, promote healthier body image, and challenge the cultural norms that reinforce appearance-based inequality.

Academically, this research fills a gap in media and body image literature offering an intergenerational perspective. While previous research has explored the impact of media on body dissatisfaction, most studies have focused on a single age group, typically adolescents or young adults, or have examined generational values in non-body-related domains such as work culture or politics. Additionally, by combining Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 173) with Generational Theory (Mannheim, 1970, p. 164) the study offers an interdisciplinary lens for understanding how sustained media exposure interacts with generational identity to shape self-perception. There is a lack of qualitative, in-depth research comparing how different generations of women navigate beauty ideals across evolving media formats. To address this gap, the central research question of this study is: **"**How do women from different generations experience and interpret beauty standards in media in relation to their self-image?". This main question is supported by the following sub-questions:

1). "How do women from different generations perceive and define beauty standards in media?"

2). "How do women from different generations negotiate, internalize, or resist media-driven beauty standards?"

This study examines how women across different generations engage with beauty standards in media, shaping self-image, informing media influence, mental health, and beauty culture discussions. In the following chapter, a theoretically framed study grounded in empirical data will explore media's role in constructing beauty ideals. Additionally, the generational identity and the psychological process of social comparison and self-image will be examined. Furthermore, the research design and chosen methodology are outlined, providing insight into how the data was collected and analyzed. The findings chapter presents results organized around two key themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews: exposure to beauty standards, and the negotiating of those ideals. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the study's contributions, discusses its limitations, and offers suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents an analytical review of the key theories that inform the central research question: “How do women from different generations experience and interpret beauty standards in media in relation to their self-image?” In addressing this question, the chapter also supports the study’s sub-questions and lays the conceptual groundwork for the methodological approach. Drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives, the framework outlines how media, generational positioning, and self-identity intersect to shape women's engagement with beauty norms. First, media influence is examined through Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), which helps explain how long-term exposure to visual and digital media shapes individuals’ perceptions of reality, particularly in relation to beauty ideals. Second, theories of generational identity are explored to understand how shared historical, cultural, and technological experiences influence the values and worldviews of different age cohorts. Finally, the chapter considers how beauty standards affect women’s self-image across the life course, incorporating perspectives on identity construction, social comparison, intersectionality, and individual agency. Together, these theoretical lenses provide a comprehensive foundation for analyzing how mediated beauty norms are internalized, resisted, or reinterpreted by women across generations.

2.1 Media and the Construction of Beauty Standards

2.1.1 Media influence & Cultivation

Studying and understanding the role of media in people’s lives is crucial, as media can have a significant influence on individuals. An established theory, such as the sociocultural Cultivation Theory developed by Gerbner & Gross (1976, p. 194), argues that long-term exposure to media, particularly TV, shapes people’s perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and values. This theory is particularly relevant to understanding how beauty standards, as portrayed in media, influence women’s self-image across different generations. The more people watch TV the more their views of the world reflect the dominant narrative messages

transmitted by television (Shrum, 2017, p. 1). Repeated exposure to idealized images of beauty in television, advertisements, and social media creates a shared cultural narrative of what is considered attractive. Over time, individuals may internalize these ideals, leading to shifts in self-perception and self-worth. While Gerbner & Gross's (1976, p. 173) original study focused on the role of television, modern adaptations of the theory consider additionally the role of modern/new media in cultivating beliefs.

Social media, for instance, holds influence in shaping self-perception. With its emphasis on speed, interactivity, and algorithm-driven content, it plays a significant role in how individuals view themselves. Research by Plachynda et al. (2024, p. 1441) shows that social media platforms allow students to present idealized versions of themselves, often resulting in a distorted perception of reality. Furthermore, the authors note that continuous exposure to curated images and narratives on these platforms can negatively affect students' self-esteem and mental well-being (Plachynda et al., 2024, p. 1441). Understanding the influence of social media on individuals is essential for gaining deeper insight into how different generations perceive and experience beauty standards as portrayed in the media.

Additional research suggests that younger generations, young teenagers who engage with interactive and algorithm-driven content, may experience a more intensified cultivation effect due to the personalized and immersive nature of digital media (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014, p. 606). For these young adults, social media platforms, such as Instagram serve as constant sources of beauty norms, normalizing cosmetic procedures (Hermans, et al., 2022, p. 446). Tiggemann & Slater (2014, p. 616) highlight a broader societal trend in which young girls increasingly engage with media content originally intended for older audiences. Young girls appear to be in a premature rush toward adulthood, exposing them to media messages they may not yet be able to understand nor critically assess (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014, p. 617). Furthermore, this study demonstrates a clear link between internet use, particularly social networking platforms such as Facebook, and the internalization of the thin ideal, heightened body surveillance, reduced body self-esteem, and the emergence of dieting behaviors among preadolescent girls (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014, p. 617). These findings may help understand how the younger generations internalize beauty ideals. Both previously discussed studies focus on younger generations, emphasizing this focus due to the significance of adolescence and young adulthood as formative periods in which individuals form their identities and navigate their role in society (Plachynda et al., 2024, p. 1442).

However, older generations, who consumed more static representations of beauty in magazines or TV commercials, may have had different (perhaps less interactive) experiences with media-driven beauty norms. Moreover, different cultivation may explain why certain beauty standards evolve across generations. For instance, the rise of body positivity and diversity movements in media has introduced alternative beauty ideals, but their impact may vary by age group depending on media exposure and generational attitudes toward body image. These generational distinctions in media exposure and interpretation suggest that age cohorts may internalize beauty ideals in diverse ways, a topic explored further in the next section.

2.1.2 Visual Culture and Idealized femininity

According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997, p. 176), visual media plays a central role in reinforcing sexual objectification, and exposure to sexualized portrayals of women's bodies may lead women to internalize this objectification by viewing themselves as objects. Media representations are central to the construction and dispersion of dominant beauty ideals. These ideals are not merely aesthetic preferences, but cultural codes that shape how individuals are perceived and evaluated in various social contexts. Frederick et al. (2015, p. 3) further argue that beauty standards are deeply embedded in global and historical structures and are consistently reinforced through visual media. The authors emphasize the 'beautiful is good' stereotype, where individuals who conform to conventional attractiveness are ascribed more positive traits and greater social value (Frederick et al., 2015, p. 2). This phenomenon not only reinforces narrow and exclusionary ideals but also contributes to unequal social treatment in areas such as employment, education, and interpersonal relationships. When women are consistently exposed to idealized representations that equate thinness, youth, and Eurocentric features with success and desirability, they may internalize these ideals, which in turn influences their self-worth and identity formation. These findings align with Cultivation Theory's assertion that repeated exposure to mediated images shapes audiences' perceptions of social norms and desirability (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 173). As such, media does not simply reflect societal beauty ideals, it plays an active role in producing and perpetuating them.

This dynamic is especially visible in digital environments. Alkahazraji (2025, p. 1) conducted a cross-sectional study involving 750 secondary school students in Iraq, revealing

that exposure to idealized images on platforms like Instagram and Facebook correlates with increased body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors among adolescents. The study emphasizes that digitally altered images on social media reinforce unrealistic beauty standards, leading to psychological pressure and negative self-perception (Alkahazraji, 2025, p. 2). These findings align once again with the principles of Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 173). Incorporating this study into the theoretical framework underscores the significant role media plays in influencing beauty standards and the importance of addressing these influences in research on body image and self-perception

Expanding on these psychological effects, Wolf's (1990, p. 10–11) 'The Beauty Myth' offers a feminist critique of how beauty standards function as a form of social control. Wolf (1990, p. 10) argues that as women have gained access to political and professional power, the cultural emphasis on female appearance has intensified as a mechanism of regulation. She describes beauty as not a neutral aesthetic value but a socially constructed ideal that serves to uphold patriarchal hierarchies by anchoring women's worth in physical appearance rather than competence or character (Wolf, 1990, p. 12). Media play a central role in this process by consistently presenting idealized femininity as youthful, thin, white, and sexually appealing. Wolf's (1990) framework complements the empirical work of Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) and supports the psychological mechanisms outlined by Cultivation Theory, illustrating how beauty ideals become internalized and used to police women's bodies and behaviors across generations (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 173).

Taking this even further, Liebelt (2018, p. 4–5) argues that beauty standards are not simply ideological tools, but also part of broader systems of normalization that determine which bodies are deemed acceptable, valuable, and visible. Drawing on the sociological history of the 'norm' as a regulatory concept, she illustrates how beauty ideals are institutionally maintained and bound to hierarchies of gender, race, class, and ability (Liebelt, 2018, p. 3–5). In contemporary media, these ideals are not just celebrated, they are treated as default. As such, thin, white, youthful, and able-bodied femininity is portrayed as universally desirable, while bodies that fall outside these parameters are rendered deviant or invisible (Liebelt, 2018, p. 5). This perspective deepens the analysis by framing beauty standards as part of a normative apparatus that not only reflects social hierarchies but actively disciplines women's bodies and self-presentation practices. In this light, media are not only transmitters of beauty ideals, but they are also vehicles of social control that operate through visual culture.

2.2 Understanding Generations

2.2.1 Defining Generations and Values

To understand how beauty standards are experienced across age groups, it is essential to first define what is meant by a 'generation'. Mannheim (1970, p. 193) conceptualizes generations in sociocultural context, emphasizing that they are shaped by shared historical, social, and cultural experiences. He mentions that a generation cannot solely be defined from the biological rhythm, such as the same year of birth (Mannheim, 1970, p.168). Instead, he argues that generations are based on this biological fact, not defined by it (Mannheim, 1970, p. 168). Individuals develop a distinct generational consciousness, influencing their values and worldviews. Building on Mannheim's (1970) work, Campbell et al. (2015, p. 324) mention that generations are not only shaped by cultures but also shape cultures themselves, there's a dynamic relationship between both. This is important because it gives us an understanding of how different generations create meaning and reflect.

To understand how generations play a part in sensemaking it is crucial to understand each generation's values. Values are abstract principles that guide a person's life. As defined by Schwartz (1992, p.4), values are beliefs or concepts that relate to preferred outcomes or behaviors, extend beyond specific situations, serve as standards for evaluating actions and events, and are organized by their relative importance. Adding on to this concept of values, Strauss and Howe (1991, p. 64–67) propose a generational cycle theory, suggesting that generations follow predictable patterns of value shifts, reflecting on how collective memory, upbringing, and cultural climate shape the values, behaviors, and priorities of each cohort. The theory highlights how value change is not random or linear, but part of a rhythmic intergenerational dynamic that continually redefines social norms and cultural expectations (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 64–66). Stern (2002, p. 187) further argues that shared social, economic, cultural, and political experiences are the most significant factors shaping generational values, transcending differences in race, ethnicity, and gender.

These frameworks are crucial in explaining why different age groups engage with beauty standards in distinct ways. Recent longitudinal empirical research further deepens our understanding of generational value differences. In a 12-year panel study of Dutch adults,

Leijen et al. (2022, p. 1) followed individuals from four generations (Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials) and examined how human values shifted both within and across these cohorts over time. The findings of this study revealed that, while certain core values such as conformity and achievement remained relatively stable, meaningful generational patterns emerged (Leijen et al., 2022, p. 2). Millennials, for instance, were found to place higher importance on hedonism and stimulation compared to older generations, aligning with a broader emphasis on self-expression, novelty, and digital engagement (Leijen et al., 2022, p. 7). However, they also showed the most fluctuation in their value profiles, including increases in self-direction and security over time, suggesting that younger cohorts experience more dynamic value development (Leijen et al., 2022, p. 7). In contrast, Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation displayed higher value-profile stability, especially regarding self-direction and universalism (Leijen et al., 2022, p. 6–7). This study provides empirical support to the idea that generational cohorts are not only shaped by their formative sociocultural environments and biological facts but also maintain distinct and evolving value systems over time. These intergenerational differences in core values are relevant when examining how different age groups internalize, resist, or reinterpret media-driven beauty standards in relation to their sense of self.

Additional existing research examines generational difference in various contexts, such as the workplace (Stern, 2002, p. 187). According to Stern (2002, p. 187), each generation has core values shaped by cultural, economic, and technological shared experiences. Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964) were the first generation to grow up within a mass media environment shaped by Hollywood, fashion magazines, and especially television (Stern, 2002, p. 189). Television played a defining role for this generation, not only as a source of entertainment and information, but also as a powerful cultural messenger and mobilizer (Stern, 2002, p. 189). While it expanded their view of the world, it also came with drawbacks, such as reducing time spent in face-to-face interactions with family and friends, a pattern that would continue and intensify with the advent of the computer for subsequent generations (Stern, 2002, p. 189). Millennials (born 1981–1996), were the first generation to grow up with digital media, exposed to both traditional and emerging beauty standards. Television, which defined the Baby Boomer generation, holds less appeal for Millennials, who are shaped more by digital technology than by traditional media (Stern, 2002, p. 190). While television introduced earlier generations to the idea of a global village, the Internet has vastly expanded this concept, making Millennials more tech-savvy and globally connected

than ever before (Stern, 2002, p. 190). The early 2000s saw hyper-thin ideals (size zero culture, but later movements like body positivity started challenging dominant norms (Lazuka et al., 2020, p. 86). Generation Z (born 1997-2012) grew up in a digitally connected world and is highly familiar with its verbal and visual language (Törőcsik et al., 2014, p. 30). This generation is accustomed to processing brief, real-time information accompanied by images, and engages in a highly interactive algorithmic media environment, where social media platforms amplify 'unrealistic' beauty trends while also fostering counter-narratives that challenge conventional standards (Törőcsik et al., 2014, p. 30; Alkahazraji, 2025, p. 2).

2.2.2 Gendered Generations

These different theoretical frameworks enable us to identify different generational cohorts and offer insights into how their perspectives may differ. However, they also raise the question of how generational value differences manifest specifically among women. Barclay et al. (2011, p.180) focuses specifically on generations among women, offering a historically grounded perspective that emphasizes how generational experiences are shaped by the specific points in the life cycle at which individuals encounter broader societal changes. They argue that generations are not merely defined by age cohorts, but by the interaction between aging and historical context. For instance, individuals who encounter major events like war, economic crises, or social revolutions during formative life stages (adolescence or early adulthood) are more likely to develop unique generational worldviews (Barclay et al., 2011, p. 180). This concept reinforces the idea that generational differences in response to media-driven beauty standards are not solely due to age, but to the way historical and cultural events intersect with identity development. Generational identity thus becomes a critical lens for analyzing the differences in how women across age groups perceive, internalize, and resist dominant beauty norms.

As discussed, we can say that generations each have different values, and this might explain their view on certain things. Especially their view on beauty standards in media and their self-perception. Existing research found that 'age' does alter women's perspectives on their self-esteem (Webster & Tiggemann, 2003, p. 241). Research by Webster and Tiggemann (2003, p. 241) suggests that body dissatisfaction is strongly related to women's self-concept and self-esteem, but that this relationship changes over time. In their study of women aged 20 to 65, they found that while body dissatisfaction was present across all age

groups, its impact on self-concept and self-esteem weakened with age (Webster & Tiggemann, 2003, p. 249). Older women were more likely to report a sense of cognitive control over their bodies, which appeared to buffer the negative effects of body dissatisfaction. This is particularly relevant, as it indicates that generational and age-related experiences both contribute to how beauty standards are interpreted and internalized.

2.3 Self-Image and Beauty Standards

To understand how beauty standards affect women's self-perception, it is necessary to examine how individuals form their self-image in relation to external cultural influences. The following section explores the relationship between media representations of beauty and the internalization of appearance-based norms.

2.3.1 Self-Image and the Internalization of Beauty Norms

Beyond generational influences, individuals' self-perception plays a crucial role in how beauty standards impact women's view of themselves. As mentioned before, media representations often promote idealized and narrow conceptions of beauty, emphasizing youthfulness, thinness, and specific bodily features, which can have profound implications for how women perceive themselves and their bodies (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014, p. 615). These standards not only reflect cultural norms but also contribute to the internalization of appearance-based values, particularly in contexts where visual media is highly influential. Giddens (1991, p. 75) argues that identity is a reflexive process, meaning that individuals continuously construct and reconstruct their sense of self based on external factors, including media. This concept is particularly relevant in understanding how women across generations engage with and respond to beauty ideals. Given that beauty standards are strongly related to one's appearance, the concept of self-image serves as a relevant framework for analysis. Bailey (2003, p. 385) describes the concept of self-image as "encompassing tangible and measurable aspects of an individual's identity, including their actions (professional or athletic accomplishments), physical appearance (body proportions), and material possessions". The concept of self-image is central to understanding how women engage with beauty standards and construct their identities.

In media-saturated societies, self-image is not formed in isolation but is shaped through continuous exposure to dominant ideals of femininity and attractiveness. Building on Giddens' (1991, p. 75) study on identity, empirical research by Gordon and Hall (1974, p. 241) show that women's self-image is deeply influenced by internalized stereotypes of femininity. Their study found that women who believed men held traditional views about what it means to be feminine were more likely to experience conflict between societal expectations and personal identity, which in turn affected their emotional well-being and coping strategies (Gordon & Hall, 1974, p. 242). This suggests that self-image acts as a mediator between external beauty ideals and internal self-evaluation. It reflects not only how women see themselves but also how they believe they are seen by others, particularly in relation to gendered appearance norms. Thus, examining self-image provides crucial insight into how media representations and cultural messages about beauty are internalized and negotiated across women's life courses.

2.3.2 Social Comparison and Media Visibility

Additionally, an aspect of self-image would be social comparison. Festinger's (1954, p. 138) Social Comparison Theory explains that individuals evaluate themselves in relation to others, especially in the absence of objective standards. In the context of media, women may compare themselves to idealized images, leading to lowered body satisfaction and self-worth. However, the extent to which women engage in such comparisons may vary with age, media literacy, and social context. For example, Runfola et al. (2012, p. 1) offer further insights on how beauty standards impact women across the lifespan. The authors conducted one of the most extensive U.S.-based studies on body image among adult women aged 25 to 89 (Runfola et al., 2012, p. 2). Their findings confirmed that body dissatisfaction is widespread across all age groups, with over 90% of participants expressing a preference for a smaller body size than their current figure (Runfola et al., 2012, p. 7). However, they also observed nuanced age-related trends. Middle-aged women, particularly those aged 35 to 44, reported the highest levels of body dissatisfaction, while older women demonstrated a shift in ideal body size and less discrepancy between perceived and preferred silhouettes (Runfola et al., 2012, p. 7-8). These results suggest that although body dissatisfaction persists with age, its emotional impact and form of expression may shift, possibly reflecting increasing body acceptance, value change, or evolving social expectations. This supports the notion that self-

identity in relation to appearance is a fluid and lifelong negotiation, influenced not only by media but by bodily change, sociocultural norms, and internalized values.

Building on Festinger's (1954) original theory, Vogel et al. (2014, p. 206) examined how social comparison processes function within social media environments, such as Facebook. Their research demonstrated that frequent social media users tend to engage in upward social comparisons, comparing themselves to others who appear more attractive, successful, or socially connected, which in turn is associated with lower self-esteem (Vogel et al., 2014, p. 210). Importantly, the study found that the negative effects on self-esteem were mediated by the extent of upward comparison, rather than mere exposure to social media alone (Vogel et al., 2014, p. 215). This is particularly relevant to younger generations, who are more likely to engage with algorithm-driven, image-centric platforms like Instagram or TikTok, where idealized self-presentations are amplified. These findings help contextualize how internalized beauty standards in social media can erode self-worth, especially among young women. Moreover, the study suggests that digital environments intensify the emotional consequences of appearance-based comparisons, which may reinforce narrow beauty norms and hinder the development of a positive self-concept, further underscoring the relevance of this research (Vogel et al., 2014, p. 218).

2.3.3 Intersectional and Life-Course Perspectives on Identity

As previously discussed, one's identity and self-image are constructed through various external social factors such as surroundings and media environments. However, Barclay et al. (2011, p. 181) highlight the importance of individual agency in shaping women's experiences of identity across the life course. Their analysis reveals that while the life cycle has historically been perceived as a rigid, stage-based structure (virgin, wife, widow), women's actual experiences often deviate from this model (Barclay et al., 2011, p. 181-182). Through case studies, they illustrate how women construct their own life narratives that may resist or reinterpret societal expectations, thus disrupting dominant life-cycle patterns (Barclay et al., 2011, pp. 176–182). This perspective complements Giddens' (1991, p. 75) theory by emphasizing that identity is not only socially shaped but also individually negotiated. Beauty practices, in this context, are acts of meaning-making that reflect both external pressures and personal strategies of self-definition, particularly as women age and move through different stages of life.

Georg Simmel's (1903/1950) early sociological work adds a compelling dimension to this understanding of identity in the context of modernity. In the adapted version of "The Metropolis and Mental Life", Simmel (1903/1950, p. 3) describes how the overwhelming stimuli and anonymity of urban life compel individuals to develop a protective detachment and heightened self-awareness in order to assert individuality within mass society. He argues that the 'blasé attitude' emerges as a psychological defense against the constant bombardment of external impressions, allowing individuals to preserve autonomy (Simmel, 1903/1950, p. 4). In today's media-saturated digital culture, this dynamic continues to resonate. Social media platforms, much like the metropolis, demand constant visibility and self-curation, especially for women, whose bodies are often subject to public control and aesthetic norms. Visual self-presentation becomes both a form of personal expression and a socially conditioned performance, echoing Simmel's (1903/1950, p. 2) observation that individuality in modern environments often emerges as a reaction to external pressure.

Crenshaw's (1989, p. 141–143) Intersectionality Theory adds an important layer by arguing that discrimination cannot be understood solely through only race or gender but must be treated as a complex interaction between multiple systems of power, including class. Crenshaw's (1989, p. 141–143) theory lays a foundational structure for examining how beauty standards are not universally experienced but are influenced by race, class, and cultural background. This means that a woman's engagement with beauty standards may be shaped not only by her age and generational cohort but also by socioeconomic factors, ethnicity, and personal experiences. For example, media representations of beauty may privilege whiteness or upper-class aesthetics, thereby marginalizing women from racialized or lower-income backgrounds. Intersectionality provides a lens to understand how these layered identities influence women's navigation of beauty norms. Contemporary beauty standards are not experienced uniformly but are shaped by intersecting systems of power such as race, gender, and media representation. Mohamed (2021, p. 2) argues that societal beauty ideals are historically rooted in Eurocentric and patriarchal norms, which continue to marginalize those who do not conform to white, thin, cisgender, and able-bodied aesthetics. These standards, perpetuated across traditional and digital media, especially impact adolescent girls and gender-nonconforming individuals, contributing to body dissatisfaction and distorted self-image (Mohamed, 2021, p. 3–5). Furthermore, Mohamed (2021, p. 6) notes that social media often reinforces these exclusionary ideals through curated content and algorithmic visibility, making it difficult for marginalized groups to see themselves reflected

in beauty discourse. This intersects with Crenshaw's (1989, p. 140–143) theory of intersectionality by showing how race and gender interlock to shape individuals' access to cultural belonging through appearance. Integrating this perspective emphasizes that beauty norms are not only generational or gendered but also deeply racialized, and that the psychological consequences of exclusion are unevenly distributed across social groups

This theoretical framework has explored how beauty standards, as shaped by media representations, are internalized and interpreted by women across generational lines. Drawing on different theories, the framework highlights the powerful role of visual culture in shaping self-perception and reinforcing narrow ideals of femininity. Generational theories reveal that age cohorts engage with media through distinct historical and technological lenses, shaping the values through which beauty norms are negotiated. Further, by incorporating perspectives on self-image, intersectionality, and life-course identity development, the framework underscores that women's experiences of beauty standards are neither uniform nor passive. Rather, they are shaped by age, media context, racialized expectations, and individual agency. Taken together, these insights provide a multidimensional lens through which to examine how women make sense of and respond to mediated beauty ideals, forming the conceptual basis for the study's qualitative inquiry.

3. Research Design

This chapter presents the methodological approach and research design of the study. Firstly, the use of qualitative research will be rationalised. In addition, an outline of the research design and the operationalisation of the relevant concepts are discussed. This will be followed by an explanation of the sampling procedure, data collection, and ethical considerations. Finally, the chosen method for analysis, Thematic Analysis by Braun & Clarke (2006), is outlined. This study aims to explore how women across different generations experience beauty standards in the media and how these experiences relate to their self-image. With a focus on women's personal experience and self-image, this study analyzes how women construct meaning from their experiences and how this relates to their self-image.

A qualitative research approach is particularly well-suited for inquiries focused on understanding participants' lived experiences, their processes of sensemaking, and the meanings they attribute to those experiences. Qualitative research seeks to offer deep insights and a comprehensive understanding of complex, real-world issues (Moser & Korstjens, 2017, p. 271). Unlike quantitative research, it does not involve applying interventions, manipulating variables, or relying on numerical measurements (Moser & Korstjens, 2017, p. 271). In contrast, qualitative research is inherently exploratory and seeks to capture the complexity of human behavior without reducing it to numerical representations (Richards & Morse, 2013, p. 46). This research approach offers the flexibility and adaptability necessary to investigate subjective experiences (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013, p.4). Additionally, Creswell (2007, p. 40) underscores the value of qualitative inquiry in investigating social realities that demand nuanced, in-depth engagement with participants' perspectives. As Flick (2007, p. 50) notes, a well-constructed research design should be sensitive, flexible, and adaptable to the conditions encountered in the field, remaining open to new insights that may emerge during the initial stages or throughout the research process. This perspective aligns closely with the objectives of the present study, which seeks to explore the formation of women's self-image in relation to beauty standards portrayed in the media which can be a sensitive topic for women to talk about. Fundamentally, qualitative research aims to generate novel insights and conceptual understandings grounded in rich, contextualized data (Richards & Morse, 2013, p. 28).

Qualitative research includes a range of methodological approaches, and conducting interviews is a suitable method for data collection (Moser & Korstjens, 2017, p. 271). Interviews were selected for this qualitative study due to their effectiveness in capturing rich, in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences and personal perspectives (Richards & Morse, 2013, p. 28). Given the subjective and context-specific nature of individual experiences, particularly in areas influenced by societal norms and perception of self-image, interviews provide a nuanced approach to understanding complex social phenomena. As Tracy (2013, p. 133) highlights, qualitative interviews foster a process of mutual exploration and reflection, creating space for dynamic, adaptive, and often insightful exchanges between the researcher and participants.

This study employed semi-structured interviews, a method particularly effective for balancing structured thematic guidance with the flexibility to explore unanticipated but relevant insights (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013, p. 4). In this format, interviews typically begin with open-ended questions related to the research topic, allowing participants to speak freely and reflectively (Moser & Korstjens, 2017b, p.14). These questions are intended to elicit detailed personal experiences, emotions, and reflections, often centered around specific events or situations. Although the conversation is guided by pre-established topics, the semi-structured approach enables the interviewer to use follow-up questions, probing techniques, prompts, or brief silences to encourage further elaboration (Moser & Korstjens, 2017b, p.14). The flexibility inherent in this method fosters a participant-centered dialogue, allowing individuals to articulate their views in their own words while providing the researcher with opportunities to delve into emerging themes (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013, 58). Furthermore, data collection and analysis are iterative processes that happen simultaneously as the research progresses, allowing early insights to inform subsequent interviews and enabling a deeper exploration of recurring patterns (Moser & Korstjens, 2017, p. 272).

3.1 Operationalisation

In qualitative research, operationalisation involves translating abstract theoretical concepts into guiding questions, sensitizing concepts, and interpretive codes that inform data collection and analysis, rather than following a rigid, metric-based model. In this study, key concepts from the theoretical framework, such as media influence, generational identity, and self-image, have guided the construction of the interview topic list and the development of a

codebook for thematic analysis. The topics included, demographics, media use, beauty standards, self-image, and media & beauty standards.

Drawing on the Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 173), which suggests that long-term media exposure shapes people's perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and values, participants were asked about their media use and exposure to beauty standards. The topic included different types of media, such as television, magazines, and social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. This is especially relevant for examining how media-driven beauty standards shape women's self-image across different generations. Furthermore, insights from Mannheim (1970, p. 193), and Barclay et al (2011), shaped questions that prompted participants to reflect on dominant beauty ideals encountered throughout the years. Theories on self-image, particularly those of Gordon and Hall (1974, p. 241), guided the inclusion of questions encouraging participants to reflect on their self-image, especially on appearance and self-esteem. Finally, the last topic brought together the earlier themes, offering an overarching perspective on the key concepts. Each of these topics were translated into open-ended prompts that allowed participants to describe their lived experiences in their own words. For example, to examine how their sense of self has changed, participants were asked: "How would you describe the ways your self-image has changed throughout your life?"

The analytic process in this study combined both deductive and inductive coding. Initial codes were generated based on the topics from the interview guide. To maintain transparency in how theoretical ideas were translated into analytic categories, specific interpretive criteria were applied throughout the coding process. Perceptions of beauty standards were identified when participants described experiences involving pressure, aspiration, comparison, or exclusion related to physical appearance norms, for instance, recalling feelings of inadequacy prompted by idealized bodies in media representations. Generational influence was recognized when participants explicitly linked their experiences to their age group, or to growing older. Aging is approached here not only as a biological process, but also as a developmental journey associated with increased self-awareness and psychological maturity, a cognitive control (Webster & Tiggemann, 2003, p. 242). Expressions of self-image and attractiveness were traced through reflections on body satisfaction or dissatisfaction, self-esteem, and shifts in personal identity over time. Additionally, intersectional experiences were marked when participants described how their appearance-related experiences were shaped by overlapping social categories like race, class,

or sexuality, for example, when participants noted the absence of people who resembled them in beauty standards.

Rather than relying solely on frequency, what counted as meaningful evidence in the analysis was also determined by the richness, clarity, and contextual relevance of a participant's narrative. A higher degree of perceived beauty-related pressure, for example, was assessed not by repetition alone, but by the emotional intensity and behavioral consequences expressed in a participant's account. Throughout the process, highlights were used to document interpretive decisions and theoretical reflections, ensuring a coherent and transparent link between the empirical material and the theoretical lens. This approach allowed the analysis to remain grounded in established concepts while remaining open to the complexity and nuance of lived experience as expressed by participants.

3.2 Sampling

In this research, participants were selected through a purposive sampling and a snowball sampling (Sarstedt et al., 2018, p. 654). The participants were selected based on sample criteria including elements deemed appropriate for analysing the effect under study (Sarstedt et al., 2018, p. 654). The units of analysis are the three different generations of women: Generation Z (ages 18–28), Millennials (ages 29–44), and Baby Boomers (ages 61–79). With the sampling it is important to consider the construct of generations which is not solely defined by birth cohorts. Since the study focuses on women's personal perception, the participants had to fit the criteria of identifying as a woman. Specifically, women were selected as the focus of this study due to the disproportionate impact of media-driven standards on their self-perception. Compared to men, women are more frequently objectified, sexualized, and held to narrow ideals of physical attractiveness in media representations (Santoniccolo et al., 2023, p. 2). Empirical evidence shows that women experience these negative effects more frequently and more intensely than men, particularly through the internalization of unrealistic appearance ideals and increased body surveillance (Santoniccolo et al., 2023, pp. 5–6). While both genders are affected, studies suggest women may be especially vulnerable to emotionally damaging upward comparisons, given the sociocultural emphasis on appearance in defining female worth (Vogel et al., 2014, pp. 208–211). These gender-specific effects justify the need for focused research on women, particularly in

understanding the process from media exposure to self-evaluative outcomes (Santoniccolo et al., 2023, pp. 8–9).

Additionally, participants were required to belong to a specific generational cohort, aligning with the research focus on generational perspectives. The selected generations included Baby Boomers (ages 61–79), Millennials (ages 29–44), and Generation Z (ages 18–28). Although Generation Z is typically defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, the decision was made to include only those aged 18 and older. This age restriction was applied for ethical reasons, as it ensured that all participants were legally adults capable of providing informed consent. By focusing on adult members of Generation Z, the study was able to maintain ethical research standards while still capturing the generational experiences relevant to media exposure and beauty norms. Particularly, these three different generations are selected because they share different historical experiences, and each generation has their own core values and thus makes meaning differently (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 66). Baby Boomers grew up in a world without digital media, Millennials experienced the rise of digital media, and Gen Z has been immersed in a fully digital environment. These generational differences make them relevant for this research, as they may offer distinct perspectives on beauty standards in relation to self-image.

As Mannheim (1970, p. 164) argues, generations are not solely defined by chronological birth years, but also by shared socio-historical and cultural experiences. A common cultural context, such as that of Western culture, is therefore essential in defining generational identity. Based on this understanding, eleven out of twelve interviews in this study were conducted in Dutch and subsequently translated into English for further analysis. The final interview was conducted directly in English. While the criterion to interview primarily participants from a Western cultural background was applied for convenience, it also helped to ensure a relatively consistent cultural framework across the sample. However, the increasingly globalized nature of contemporary societies challenges some of the assumptions underlying Mannheim's (1970) theory. This became evident in the composition of the sample: five participants were found to have Dutch-Indies heritage. Although this may suggest cultural variance at first glance, four of these participants were born in the Netherlands and all five of them were raised there. As a result, they each grew up within a Western Dutch cultural environment. Their inclusion thus remains appropriate, as their generational experiences were shaped by the same dominant cultural influences as the rest of the sample. This example underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of cultural

context when applying theoretical frameworks such as Mannheim's (1970) in recent studies.

Another criterion for participation was that individuals needed to express an interest in beauty standards or, more broadly, in the themes central to this research, such as self-image, and media-influence. This helped ensure that participants were meaningfully engaged with the subject matter and capable of offering reflective and insightful responses. To meet these requirements, a total of twelve women were selected, four from each generation, using a snowball sampling method. The snowball sampling method entails that participants are selected through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141). This sample strategy facilitated access to individuals with relevant perspectives, and helped to create a more comfortable interview environment, as many participants were referred by acquaintances they trusted. This strategy is particularly suitable for research involving sensitive topics, such as women's self-image and personal experiences related to beauty standards, as it often increases the likelihood of recruiting individuals who feel more comfortable and willing to share their thoughts (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141). However, care was taken to ensure that none of the participants were close friends or family members of the researcher, in order to maintain objectivity and reduce potential bias. Although this method does not guarantee full comfort or participation, it does reduce the risk of participant withdrawal during the study.

As a result of the sampling method, one interview pair consisted of a mother and daughter who were directly related. While this familial relationship can be viewed as a limitation, potentially influencing the openness or neutrality of their responses, it also introduced a valuable dynamic to the data collection process. The participants frequently referred to each other's experiences, shared intergenerational reflections, and discussed how they perceived one another or how they were raised. These relational insights not only enriched the depth of the interviews but also offered organically cross-referenced perspectives. Such volunteered information can function as an additional layer of verification, supporting the credibility of related findings through internal triangulation (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 151).

3.3 Data Collection

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format, which allowed for both consistency and flexibility (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013, p. 4). This approach ensured that essential research topics were covered across all participants while also providing the space to follow the natural flow of each conversation. Instead of strictly following a predetermined list of questions, the interviews were guided by a topic framework that allowed the interviewer to probe deeper into emerging insights, depending on the participant's responses. This format encouraged participants to speak more freely, offering rich, nuanced reflections grounded in their personal experiences. Each interview began with general demographic and background questions to provide contextual information. These opening questions were instrumental in making participants feel at ease and setting a conversational tone. The next segment of the interview focused on media usage, an important factor in how individuals engage with and internalize beauty standards. Participants were asked about the frequency, type, and platforms of media they consume, which offered insight into generational differences in media exposure and habits. The third topic addressed perceptions of beauty standards in contemporary media. For example, participants were asked to describe the beauty ideals they currently observe in the media they consume. These responses helped to uncover how each generation interprets and responds to prevailing cultural standards of appearance. The fourth section explored women's self-image. This segment was particularly sensitive, as it required participants to reflect on how they see themselves, both in terms of personality and physical appearance. It was noted that some participants found this part of the interview challenging, as it touched on areas of vulnerability or insecurity. The final section brought together the topics of media, beauty standards, and self-image. Here, participants were asked to reflect on the relationship between these elements in their own lives, for instance, whether they felt that media representations influenced how they view themselves or others. These concluding questions provide a deeper understanding of how women from different generations navigate self-perception in the context of mediated beauty ideals.

The majority of the interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, allowing them to feel at ease in a familiar environment. This arrangement was suggested by the participants themselves. The remaining interviews were held online via video calls, offering flexibility and convenience. No technical issues related to sound quality or internet connection were encountered. All interviews took place in distraction-free settings, which

helped the participants' focus and may have encouraged openness and honesty. To help participants feel comfortable and behave naturally, only audio recordings were made, and video recordings were not used. When interviewing Baby Boomer participants, specific attention was given to the interpersonal dynamics of interviewing older adults. As Robertson and Hale (2011, p. 4–6) emphasize, effective communication with older individuals requires patience, active listening, and an awareness of potential generational differences in language use and social norms. These considerations were incorporated into the semi-structured interview process to foster a respectful and comfortable environment, allowing participants to share openly about their experiences with beauty standards and self-image. Additionally, care was taken to ensure that the pace and tone of the interviews were appropriate, supporting clarity and mutual understanding throughout the conversations

3.4 Ethical considerations

As previously mentioned, this study involved semi-structured interviews with women across three generational cohorts, with participants ranging in age from 18 to 78. In-depth interviews are inherently personal, and this intimacy raises unique ethical considerations (Allmark et al., 2009, p. 48). Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained, concerning privacy, informed consent, confidentiality, and emotional harm. Given the exploratory nature of semi-structured interviews, they may lead discussions into unanticipated personal territory (Allmark et al., 2009, p. 49). To address this privacy issue, interviews were conducted one-on-one in private settings chosen by the participants, always ensuring the participants they could decline to answer any question or withdraw at any point without consequence. Recognizing that consent in qualitative research is not a one-time event, a process-consent model was employed: participants were reminded throughout the interview that they could pause or stop the conversation at any time (Allmark et al., 2009, p. 49–50).

Prior to conducting the interviews, informed consent was obtained. Participants received a consent form with detailed information about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their engagement, and the measures taken to protect their confidentiality. To maintain confidentiality any identifying information was removed and transcripts were anonymized. However, as Wiles et al. (2008, p. 421–422) highlight, there can be tension

between ethical regulation and participants' autonomy, some individuals may wish to be identified and recognized in the research, while others prefer strict anonymity. To navigate this, participants were given the option to choose either a pseudonym or to be referred to by their first name. A participant-centered approach to confidentiality was adopted, ensuring that individual preferences were considered and respected as part of the consent process.

Additionally, emotional harm was taken into consideration as ethical concern. In-depth interviews can evoke distress, particularly when discussing sensitive topics like self-image. It was made sure that all the participants had the capacity to give consent, for instance, no minors were studied for this research. Participants' emotional states were prioritized, giving them the opportunity to discontinue or debrief at any time. Given the close and empathic nature of the researcher-participant interaction, awareness was maintained regarding the possible dual role of the researcher and the risk of inadvertently assuming a therapeutic stance (Allmark et al., 2009, p. 50). Finally, recognizing power dynamics inherent in qualitative interviews, a particular effort was made to foster an atmosphere of mutual respect and equality. Participants were acknowledged as experts in their own experiences, and the study aimed to amplify their voices rather than impose interpretations. This approach echoes Allmark et al.'s (2009, p. 50) concerns about the interviewer's control over the process and potential for misrepresentation.

3.5 Data analysis

After conducting the interviews, all the recorded interviews were manually transcribed verbatim into documents, forming the first step of the Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 60). Thematic analysis was selected for its flexibility and systematic approach to identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 58). This approach is particularly suited to exploring shared experiences and recurring ways participants discuss or frame particular topics, rather than focusing on meanings that are unique to individual participants or isolated data points (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). Each interview transcript has been analyzed using the Six-phase Thematic Analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p, 60). Initially, the researcher immersed herself in the data by transcribing the interviews, re-reading the transcripts multiple times, taking initial notes, and translating interviews from Dutch to English. This deep engagement facilitated a nuanced understanding of the content and context of participants' accounts. In

the second phase of analysis, initial codes were generated by manually highlighting salient data segments across the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 61). These codes, which reflected recurring features relevant to the research questions, were then grouped into broader themes through iterative comparison and synthesis. A codebook was developed to support this process (see Appendices B). The codebook contains 28 codes, grouped under the following categories: demographics, media-use, beauty standards, self-image, and media & beauty standards. Themes were subsequently reviewed in relation to both the coded data and the overall dataset to ensure coherence and relevance. Once refined, each theme was clearly defined and named to reflect its conceptual scope, and the final themes are presented in the findings chapter, supported by illustrative quotes.

The analysis followed an inductive approach, with themes emerging from the data rather than being shaped by pre-existing theory (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 58). Efforts were made throughout to maintain consistency and transparency. To enhance the credibility of the findings, within-method triangulation was employed during the interview process (Flick, 2007, p. 81). This form of triangulation can involve asking similar questions in different formats, such as combining open-ended narrative prompts with follow-up direct questions, to examine the consistency of participants' responses. This technique supported a more nuanced and validated interpretation of the data and provided additional depth to the thematic analysis.

4. Findings

This chapter presents and analyzes the key findings of the qualitative study exploring how women across different generations experience beauty standards in relation to their self-image. The aim of this study is to ultimately answer the following research question: "How do women from different generations experience and interpret beauty standards in media in relation to their self-image?" To break this down the findings will first focus on answering the sub-questions: "How do women from different generations perceive and define beauty standards in media?", and: "How do women from different generations negotiate, internalize, or resist media-driven beauty standards?" Drawing on semi-structured interviews with Generation Z, Millennials, and Baby Boomers, the analysis reveals both shared experiences and generational differences. Participants reflected on how media shaped their ideas about beauty, how they compared themselves to idealized images, and how their self-perception evolved over time. Importantly, the data suggest that women do not engage passively with media; they interpret, negotiate, and sometimes resist its influence, though not always successfully. The chapter is structured around two central themes, illustrated with direct quotes from participants to highlight the depth and diversity of their experiences. Additionally, each theme has multiple subsections. The themes are as follows:

1. Exposure to Beauty Ideals: Media as Mirror, Defining the Ideal, and Representation and Exclusion
2. Negotiating the Ideal: Comparison as Daily Practice, Emotional Consequences, Performing Beauty, and Self-acceptance Through Aging, Redefining Generations

Together, these findings provide a nuanced understanding of how generational position, life stage, and media engagement are related to women's self-image.

4.1 Exposure to Beauty Ideals

The first central theme focuses around the first sub-question: "How do women from different generations perceive and define beauty standards in media?" To get a better understanding of how women across different generations experience beauty standards it is crucial to know what they are exposed to and what they see. Media environments are the primary source through which participants encounter and understand beauty standards.

Across generations, participants describe being immersed in visual content that idealized specific body types, grooming practices, and facial aesthetics. This theme analyzes how women perceive the mediated construction of beauty, how they navigate algorithmic exposure, and how such content shapes their self-image.

4.1.1 Media as Mirror

Participants across all age groups report daily media use, yet their engagement patterns and responses differ sharply. Women from Generation Z and the Millennial group, describe that their media consumption mainly lies on Social Media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, exposing them to idealized and curated representations of beauty. Sara (Gen Z), for example, mentions these platforms as her most used social media: “Yes, I use Instagram. I think I'm on Instagram the most out of all the social media. I also use TikTok. I'm a little less on there, but I still think also an hour a day or so” (transcript C, p. 46), suggesting habitual media use. These platforms, driven by visual aesthetics and algorithmic content delivery, consistently reinforce a particular image of how a woman ‘should’ look.

In contrast, Baby Boomers mainly talk about more traditional media consumption, such as television, the paper, and magazines. However, they also engage with these types of media on a daily basis. This indicates that participants are exposed to a substantial amount of media for several hours a day, which aligns with the Cultivation Theory where long-term media exposure can shape people’s perception (Gerbner, & Gross, 1976, p.173). These environments are experienced not only as spaces of inspiration, but also as sites of repetitive idealization, where certain bodies, skin types, and aesthetics are prioritized over others. Many participants, especially younger women, describe the non-stop nature of this exposure. Social media is portrayed as an immersive space where images are not merely seen but absorbed, often passively and continuously. Millie (Gen Z) notes how digital platforms promote repetitive beauty content through algorithmic curation: “You click on it once and then it keeps coming back. At some point, you’re stuck in that algorithm.” (transcript A, p. 7). This sensation of being ‘stuck’ speaks not only to media saturation but to technological reinforcement. Once users interact with a specific image or aesthetic, social media platforms amplify that content, reinforcing its visibility and, by extension, its normativity. This reflects

what Simmel (1903/1950, p. 1–2) describes in “The Metropolis and Mental Life” as the overstimulation of urban modernity: individuals are exposed to a rapid succession of stimuli that require emotional filtering. In today’s digital culture, this overload is visual and aesthetic, dominated by images of perfected, often unattainable beauty. Additionally, Simmel (1903/1950, p. 6) talks about impersonal stimuli requiring the individual to cultivate emotional distancing to avoid mental overstimulation. In contrast to Simmel’s (1903/1950, p. 6) view, Joyce (Baby Boomer), echoes a different view: “So if I need a bra or whatever, then I start seeing bra ads every day.” (transcript J, p. 177). This indicates personalized, emotionally resonant stimuli, that is algorithmically targeted to their behaviors or interests. This highlights an important shift: from impersonal mass exposure to intimate, data-driven saturation. This transformation contributes to a more individualistic society, where people engage in personalized digital environments, making it more difficult to navigate this social life collectively.

4.1.2 Defining the Ideal

While all participants acknowledge the dominance of certain beauty standards in media, the form of those ideals varies across generations. The majority of the younger women, particularly from Generation Z and the Millennial cohort, consistently refer to a version of the ‘thin ideal’ that has evolved into a more toned and athletic standard, emphasizing fitness, curves, and a highly groomed but natural-looking appearance. The paradoxes built into this ideal, requiring both discipline and casualness, makes it particularly difficult to attain or critique. Millie, for example, describes the contradictions embedded in what she sees online:

> I think nowadays that ideal image is very sporty. And with that comes a very athletic body. So yes, not an ounce of fat, but very big buttocks. And a small handsome face is part of it. Very thin things in the face… You wear make-up, but preferably you don't want to see people wearing make-up. So it's natural. But actually what you see is not natural. (transcript A, p. 8).

This critique illustrates a high level of media literacy, but also reveals how aesthetic contradictions, such as being ‘natural’ but highly made-up, are internalized through visual repetition. Maude, a Millennial, echoed a similar perspective when discussing the body ideal

she sees in her feed: “Not super skinny, but curvy. But still very fit, you know? Where you think, oh wow, nice butt and a well-toned body. Also always really well-groomed in terms of appearance, eyebrows, makeup, perfectly smooth skin without any blemishes.” (transcript G, p. 122). Both examples reflect a shift in cultural beauty ideals from the traditional ‘anorexic’ thin ideal toward the ‘fit but thin’ ideal, where women are expected to not only be thin, but also toned, groomed, and effortlessly naturally attractive. This ‘new’ thin ideal aligns with the ‘hourglass’ figure that dominates today’s society (Mohamed, 2021, p. 6). This evolution of the thin standard is arguably more demanding of women’s bodies, rather than the traditional thin ideal. As Wolf (1990, p. 12) argues, beauty ideals adapt alongside women’s social advancement, often becoming more restrictive in new forms. The pressure to be ‘fit but thin’, for example, promotes an image that merges sexual appeal, health, and discipline, reinforcing the idea that female bodies must be constantly managed and optimized (Wolf, 1990, p. 13–15). Participants view this trend as a healthier form of beauty ideal, as it also emphasizes physical activity. Lindsay (Millennial) explains: “I think during the Kim Kardashian era, I definitely started training my body a lot more. That’s a healthy trend.” (transcript E, p. 94). Similarly to Wolf’s (1990) argument, Liebelt (2018, p. 5–7) emphasizes that beauty standards are embedded in broader normative systems that reward conformity and visibility while marginalizing those who fall outside dominant ideals. What may appear as a healthier or more empowering beauty standard still operates as a form of social control, repackaging old pressures in new terms such as ‘wellness’ and ‘self-care’ (Liebelt, 2018, p. 5–7).

In contrast, Baby Boomer participants often speak of an ideal that centers more explicitly on slimness and conventional grooming. Joan (Baby Boomer) observes:

> Yes, you rarely see an overweight female presenter, right? They’re always in good shape, hair perfect, eyebrows perfect, everything just right. Whether you think it’s beautiful or not. So yes, I do think that presents a certain image. And not always an honest one. (transcript I, p. 160)

Joan’s description suggests that for older generations, beauty is less about athleticism and trendiness and more about order, neatness, and subtle perfection, values that still communicate control, but within a more classical frame. Nonetheless, she critiques this norm as inauthentic, emphasizing that what is presented as ‘normal’ is both narrow and unreal. Sandra (Baby Boomer), describes the same ‘thin’ ideal, however she noticed a shift:

> It used to be even worse. Of course, we noticed it less because there was less media. But back then, I think, the image was that everything had to be very slim. Those mannequins. They were like walking skeletons, I always said. And yes, also very perfect. Everything had to be perfect. And now you do sometimes see a fuller woman, and those kinds of things. Yes. It's changing a bit, that's true. (transcript K, p. 7).

Not only do participants describe what current beauty ideals look like, many also reflect on how these standards have shifted over time, shaped by changing media landscapes and cultural norms. Especially older generations, those who had lived through multiple beauty trend eras, mention this shift. This awareness added historical depth to how they understood what is currently 'ideal'. Lindsay (Millennial), for example, describes a shift from extreme thinness toward athletic femininity:

> Then in the past it was mostly just skinny, right? That you just had to be thin. And now it's actually curvy. So now you actually have to have breasts and a butt, but still also a flat stomach. (transcript L, p. 106)

This illustrates how the 'thin ideal' has transformed not only in form but also in meaning. Participants also discuss broader changes in the cultural connotations of beauty. Wilma (Baby Boomer), reflecting on her youth, recalls stricter social norms surrounding appearance:

> Yes. I remember, my father was quite strict. My older sister would sometimes show up at the table with lipstick on. That wasn't accepted. That wasn't done. That wasn't done. Yes, those were my standards back then. It had more of a connotation like, "You look like a whore," something like that. (transcript L, p. 219).

For older generations, beauty ideals often emphasized that women should be attractive and presentable but not overtly sexual or provocative. This reflects a cultural norm that valued modesty and restraint, positioning femininity within socially acceptable boundaries. Joyce (Baby Boomer) states: "We were not supposed to be sexy" (transcript J, p. 175). This normative ideal, which demanded that women be beautiful but not too feminine or sexualized, shaped how many from this generation internalized and later interpreted contemporary beauty standards. It suggests that their understanding of attractiveness is filtered through a lens of moderation and self-control, where thinness is valued but only if it does not cross into excess or sexual overtone. Supporting this, Leijen et al. (2022, pp. 6–7)

found that Baby Boomers exhibit higher value-profile stability, particularly regarding principles such as self-direction and universalism. This stability suggests that their attitudes toward beauty and identity are less likely to shift dramatically over time, reflecting consistent values around individuality and inclusivity that may influence their perception of evolving beauty standards.

4.1.3 Representation and Exclusion

Beyond defining beauty in terms of body size and appearance, several participants point to the exclusion of certain identities from dominant beauty narratives. Due to the rise of technology and globalization, the media has been able to become more diverse. As Joyce recognizes: “As more people from other countries started living in the Netherlands, things became more diverse. And I find that very beautiful.” (transcript J, p. 182). While many acknowledged that diversity has improved in recent years, most argued that it remains superficial or scarce. Isa (Gen Z) mentions: “I do think that things are getting better overall, but I also still believe that people who actually belong to a minority, or feel they do, or actually have a visible disability, still don’t feel represented enough.” (transcript B, p. 31). As Isa observes, those who fall outside Eurocentric, slim-bodied, and Western norms, whether due to ethnicity, religion, or body type, are still less visible. When reflecting on diversity, Joyce (Baby Boomer) says that she does not see enough diversity regarding different body types. She feels that the media, and her surroundings, are only focused on a certain body type, an average, tall and thin. However, she would like to see more differences: “There should be more diversity. Petite, broader, it should all be okay.” (transcript J, p. 183). Additionally, Joan (Baby Boomer) reflects on cultural diversity she sees in mainstream media: “And sometimes I even think, only white people, you know? You do see more people of color now, but I still think there are few people wearing a headscarf, that sort of thing.” (transcript I, p. 160).

Joan’s observation reflects Crenshaw’s (1989, p. 141–143) Intersectionality Theory, which emphasizes that beauty standards are not only shaped by gender but are also shaped by race and class. This shows how beauty standards are structured by overlapping systems of marginalization. As a Dutch woman with Indonesian roots herself, Millie explains that representation does play a role in how she sees herself. “Like, I look a certain way. And I

couldn't always see that reflected in the media. I thought that was a shame. Because of that, I started thinking that maybe it wasn't okay. Or that I was different, or things like that." (transcript A, p. 16). Millie's perspective aligns with Mohamed's (2021, p. 6) research, as she describes how social media often reinforces exclusionary ideals through curated content and algorithmic visibility, making it difficult for marginalized groups to see themselves reflected in beauty discourse. Additionally, when representation is well done, participants feel more empowered. Isa (Gen Z), a ginger female, talks about how she feels represented and empowered when seeing more people like her. She mentions:

> No, but I have noticed, though it never made me insecure, that there are more and more redheads (gingers) appearing. And I really think that's true. It has increased. Or maybe I'm just noticing it now. But it's really more visible in campaigns, in films, even flyers or posters along the street. You see more and more gingers everywhere. Or in commercials. And I think that's positive… I think, 'Ah, that's nice'. (transcript B, p. 41)

This example illustrates how increased representation can contribute to a sense of empowerment among participants, suggesting a meaningful connection between visibility and self-perception. One Baby Boomer highlights a lack of age representation, as a 78-year-old woman she feels that her generation is underrepresented on media platforms. Joyce says:

> But I do think that fashion platforms always present everything using younger models. No older than forty, I think…I actually don't think that's good… If you're talking about fashion for all generations. I think fashion should be for all ages. (transcript J, p. 175).

Representation of a certain body type, race, culture or age has influence in how women experience beauty standards, or even their self-image. As the participants mention, diversity is improving but remains insufficient. "So yeah, change is good, but only if it keeps progressing. It could be more, but at least it's visible." (Isa, Gen Z, transcript B, p. 31). These observations suggest that participants are not only critical media consumers but also evaluators of cultural progress. Isa's comment captures the ambivalence of media inclusion: while visibility has improved, it is far from complete. Representation continues to be uneven, and many participants feel that dominant beauty narratives remain bound to a Eurocentric and slim-bodied framework.

4.1.4 Avoiding the Ideal

As mentioned, all women across generations are deeply aware of the beauty standards that are presented through the media. The participants also mention a shift throughout the years, according to them a healthier shift. However, this ideal is still very much demanding and can still generate negative effects. When talking about media-use and beauty ideals participants mention actively unfollowing or following certain content that presents alternative beauty ideals. Lindsay (Millennial) describes that by following body positivity content she still admits that there is still another ideal, the 'thin' ideal. "When I'm focusing on body positivity, I'm basically implying to myself that there's also body negativity. But I understand, I think it's really good that it exists. And I think it's a really good thing to balance with." (transcript E, p. 94). This aligns with Mohamed's (2021, p. 6) findings, which suggest that while body positivity movements can enhance confidence for some girls, others feel excluded or unrepresented, highlighting that the movement does not always have a universally positive impact. Participants thus deliberately avoid content related to beauty ideals, fully aware of how susceptible they are to its influence.

Similarly, other younger participants recognize the harmful impact of beauty standards and actively choose to unfollow certain influencers in an effort to reduce their exposure. Sara says: "And I think a year or so ago I also unfollowed a few of those people. Because I realised how quick I was to check out their stories." (transcript C, p. 48). In a way, the act of unfollowing or avoiding beauty ideals can be seen as a form of agency, which plays an important role in shaping women's experience of identity (Barclay et al., 2011, p. 181). Despite constant exposure to beauty ideals, participants actively avoid them, believing that avoidance offers a sense of protection or empowerment. Their engagement with body positivity movements reflects not only a desire for self-acceptance but also a commitment to supporting a broader social message. As Sara boldly puts it: "Also because I am very much behind their ideal of fuck that beauty standard" (transcript C, p. 49). This defiance reflects not just rejection, but a conscious effort to reclaim agency over their self-image. It reflects a growing awareness among younger women of the emotional and psychological toll of unrealistic standards, and a deliberate effort to curate digital spaces that support, rather than undermine, their well-being. In this way, avoidance becomes an act of empowerment, one that challenges the internalisation of beauty norms and contributes to the construction of a

more self-determined identity.

This theme answers the sub-question: “How do women from different generations perceive and define beauty standards in media?” Across all age groups participants recognize the media’s powerful role in shaping ideals but define them differently. Younger women describe a curated, athletic ideal driven by social media, while older women refer to more traditional, polished norms. Despite these differences, many across generations reflect critically on exclusion and unrealistic standards, often seeking to resist or redefine them. This leads into the next theme: how women actively navigate and respond to these ideals in daily life.

4.2 Negotiating Beauty Ideals

As shown, women across different generations perceive similar beauty ideals, but they are exposed to them through different channels and respond to them in distinct ways. The second theme focuses on the second sub-question: “How do women from different generations negotiate, internalize, or resist media-driven beauty standards?” This theme explores how beauty standards move from the outside in, how women begin to measure themselves against what they see. This includes comparison, self-doubt, and body dissatisfaction, often described as unconscious or habitual. Furthermore, focusing on the emotional consequences, the behavioral consequences and how aging plays a role in negotiating the ideal. Finally, the concept of generation is critically redefined.

4.2.1 Comparison as a Daily Practice

As participants speak about beauty standards, they quickly begin to share personal reflections on how they measure themselves against these ideals. Across all generations, comparison emerges as a key mechanism through which participants engage with beauty standards and their self-image. While participants are often aware of the unrealistic standards, they nonetheless describe engaging in frequent, often unconscious, and habitual comparison with peers, influencers, and the images they encounter. The finding that comparison is a persistent, almost automatic part of participants’ experiences, particularly among younger generations, resonates with Festinger’s (1954, p. 138) Social Comparison Theory. According

to Festinger (1954, p. 138), the drive for self-evaluation is a fundamental human motivation, and in the absence of objective standards, individuals turn to others to assess their abilities, opinions, or self-worth. This natural process becomes psychologically impactful when comparison is unavoidable or ingrained in daily environments, such as on social media. This, unintentional, comparison appears to be deeply ingrained, particularly for younger women in social media environments. Millie (Gen Z) acknowledges this: “It’s not like I’m scrolling through Instagram thinking, ‘Oh wow, she has a nice nose and I don’t.’ But I think it just happens unconsciously.” (transcript A, p. 14). Several participants from the Millennial group also express how the act of comparing yourself to others is a human habit that will not change. Megan expresses:

> No, no I will do that forever, because I'm human and there's plenty of things like, just because I like myself doesn't mean that I don't still envy people sometimes or I don't look at a woman and I think ‘like her boobs are nice, damn, I wish I had those boobs’ you know, like yeah, just normal. (transcript H, p. 152).

This emphasizes the importance of how comparisons are internalized. Millennials express a relative reflective view on this. Maude (Millennial) describes how she thinks comparison is a human habit but is also something that happens rather unconsciously.

> So, unconsciously you’re kind of comparing like, can I do that too, do I have that… And even when I see someone who I personally wouldn’t find attractive, I still think, oh, I’m actually happy with myself. So you’re always comparing yourself a bit. But I think that’s also something human. You’re always measuring: what group do I belong to, how do I stack up? (transcript G, p. 129).

This unavoidable tendency toward comparison underscores the extent to which beauty ideals are internalized in women’s daily lives. Sara (Gen Z) questions whether it is ever possible to break free from this pattern, stating: “Yes. I wonder if that ever goes away. I think I'm just very susceptible to comparison” (transcript C, p. 58). Her reflection highlights the relevance of this study, demonstrating how women can be self-aware while still continuously evaluating themselves against prevailing beauty standards. Festinger (1954, pp. 137–138) points out that comparison becomes especially strong when it feels unavoidable, such as when someone wants to belong to a group but feels different from others in it. This clearly

reflects Generation Z's insights. Millie and Sara (both Gen Z) describe comparison not as a deliberate choice, but as something habitual and almost inevitable, echoing Festinger's (1954, p. 137) claim that psychological forces drive comparison even when it leads to discomfort. Their experiences show how beauty standards, especially those seen on social media, are often internalized even when people know they are unrealistic. Additionally, comparison becomes more uncomfortable when people focus on things they cannot easily change, such as physical appearance (1954, pp. 137–138). This is visible in the comments from Millennials like Megan and Maude, who reflect on admiring or envying physical features while knowing they cannot really change them. Their comments both reflect awareness and frustration, which fits with what Festinger (1954, p. 138) describes as the pressure people feel when their private self-evaluations clash with what they see around them.

In contrast, the Baby Boomer generation notably expressed comparison as happening more in everyday social life than online. They feel that comparison expresses itself mostly in their social environment. Sandra (Baby Boomer) expresses that she feels a certain pressure from her social environment. When reflecting on online versus offline comparison, she mentions:

> Yeah, that's less so. Because I feel like you can just turn that off. At least, if it's on TV, you can turn it off. You can put your phone away. But people, among each other, that's different, I think. (transcript K, p. 206).

Similarly, Joan (Baby Boomer) notices: "I'd be lying if I said I didn't compare. You hear someone is the same age as you, and you think… do I look like that too?" (transcript I, p. 166). This connects to another point Festinger (1954, p. 138) makes, that comparison is intensified when individuals cannot remove themselves from the social group they are immersed in. Sandra and Joan describe comparisons arising less from media and more from their immediate social environment, friends, family, or age peers, suggesting that offline social belonging can function as its own form of comparison pressure. Joan's remark about wondering whether she looks like someone her age shows that comparison can still be powerful, even outside of media, and often happens in ordinary social settings.

4.2.2 Emotional Consequences

These comparisons with media and surroundings shaped emotional responses such as insecurity and dissatisfaction. The interviews reveal that participants across all generations have either experienced, or are currently experiencing insecurities related to their appearance, body image, and self-image. This affirms what Runfola et al. (2012, p. 7) found in their study, that body dissatisfaction remains common among adult women of all ages, although its form and intensity may vary. Notably, all participants from Generation Z, speak openly about their current ongoing struggles with self-image, highlighting the challenges of developing self-confidence amid evolving and often contradictory beauty ideals. Interestingly, for some, insecurity is not limited to only physical appearance. Isa (Gen Z), for example, describes uncertainty about her identity and future, suggesting a broader negative self-image:

> Yeah, how I see myself. Also career-wise, I honestly have no idea where I'm heading. So that's one big question mark and foggy area for me. And that makes me feel a bit insecure too. Sometimes I'm just like, ugh, I really don't feel like figuring it out, like, where am I going now? (transcript B, p. 31–32).

This highlights that social comparison can go beyond appearance, influencing women's self-image. Other Gen Z participants directly link insecurity to their physical appearance. Sara mentions: "I've had quite some struggles this year with… that I can be quite insecure about myself. Yes, about my appearance too." (transcript C, p. 55). These reflections align with findings by Alkahazraji (2025, p. 7–8), who reported that adolescent exposure to digitally altered social media content is associated with lower body satisfaction and increased psychological stress. For Gen Z women who have grown up in these digital environments, the pressure to meet idealized beauty standards seems especially intense, even when those standards are recognized as unrealistic. Importantly, while Generation Z describes active struggles, women from other generations also express emotional responses linked to beauty ideals, though often with greater self-reflection. Lindsay (Millennial) describes how exposure to beauty ideals can still cause insecurity: "Then there's someone who's drop-dead gorgeous, working out all day and drinking green juices... and you feel that insecurity creeping in." (transcript L, p. 86). Lisa (Millennial), additionally, mentions: "It's still something where… if I'm insecure about anything, it's that. Not necessarily my face or a specific part of my body or whatever. It's purely my weight." (transcript F, p. 108). These comments reinforce Vogel et al.'s (2014, p. 216) conclusion that exposure to idealized yet seemingly 'positive' content,

such as fitness or wellness influencers, can paradoxically lower self-esteem, particularly when users compare their own lives to curated online identities. What may appear aspirational, the ‘fit but thin’ ideal, can still result in self-doubt and emotional strain. Megan clearly embodies this statement through her comment: “So when it's medias and beauty standards that are pushing me to work out that's not really a healthy relationship with working out, which means it won't last forever and that's I think the negative aspect.” (transcript H, p. 150). Additionally, in the Baby Boomer generation body dissatisfaction is also found. Sandra (Baby Boomer) also mentions a current negative self-image, describing a distorted perception of her own size: “I always think I wear a much bigger size. So that’s a negative view of myself.” (transcript K, p. 201).

A particularly interesting insight was how motherhood influenced women’s emotional responses. Mothers and grandmothers in both the Millennial and Boomer generations expressed deep concern about the effect beauty standards, particularly those shaped by media, might have on their daughters. They seek to prevent the media from influencing their child in the same way it negatively affected themselves. Sandra (Baby Boomer) is a mother and expresses her concerns of the influence of media for her child. She highlights how pervasive and normalized commentary on appearance has become: “But as a mother, you are afraid that something could go wrong, right? Yeah, because I think it really affects kids. And nowadays, everyone thinks they can just say whatever they want. Even about other people’s appearance.” (transcript K, p. 205). Moreover, Lisa (Millennial) expresses a similar fear about her young daughter’s future:

> But when I already see how much it influenced me, even though I didn’t grow up with social media. Then I think it will be even more intense for her. I’m not yet sure how I can protect her from it in the right way. Or if that’s even possible, I don’t know. (transcript F, p. 113).

Joan (Baby Boomer), additionally, shared how, during pregnancy, she was already thinking about how her child would be judged by appearance:

> Because the first thing people see is appearance. One way or another. And people will judge your child, or anyone, based on that. I wouldn’t try to make it extra perfect, but I would want them to look well taken care of. (transcript I, p. 168).

These concerns reflect how deeply internalized beauty norms have become, so much so that they extend beyond the self, shaping how women imagine and try to protect the next generation's experiences. This aligns with Liebelt (2018, p. 5), who argues that beauty standards function as a system of normalization, shaping not only individual self-image but also broader social dynamics such as parenting practices, expectations, and interpersonal judgments. As Liebelt (2018, p. 6) notes, beautification is increasingly tied to social positioning and upward mobility, particularly for women, with rising appearance standards producing both affective pressure and perceived opportunity. In this sense, physical beauty becomes not just a personal concern, but a socially regulated ideal that reinforces or challenges existing power hierarchies.

Lastly, a comment from Sara (Gen Z) highlights a different kind of emotional consequence: the feeling of inadequacy when comparing one's life, not just appearance, to others on social media:

> Just to see how life can also be different. And not that I get very jealous, but... Yes, sometimes it feels kind of shitty… that you think, oh, I'm using it now to get seduced by someone else's life which I can never have. (transcript C, p. 48)

This reinforces Vogel et al. 's (2014, p. 216) finding that idealized representations of life online, not just physical beauty, can fuel negative self-evaluation. It illustrates how beauty norms today are deeply interwoven with broader lifestyle ideals, contributing to emotional strain across domains of appearance, success, and self-worth. Together, these findings demonstrate that the emotional impact of beauty standards, particularly insecurity and dissatisfaction, is present across all generations. These patterns confirm that beauty standards are not static ideals, but dynamic forces that shape emotional life across time and social context.

4.2.3 Performing Beauty

Beyond comparison and emotional insecurity, many participants describe how internalized beauty standards shape their daily routines and behaviors. Comparisons lead to tangible behaviors, including adopting new beauty routines or mimicking online trends. For many women, beauty is not only a visual ideal but a task to be performed, an ongoing effort

to meet an internalized sense of what is acceptable, desirable, or simply normal. This involves grooming practices such as shaving, using makeup, and maintaining skin and hair. These behaviors, often presented as personal choices, are frequently linked to broader cultural pressures about how one should look in order to feel confident, accepted, or simply 'normal'.

Younger participants, especially from Generation Z, describe how these internalized standards translate into self-care rituals. Sara (Gen Z) says: "I just find myself unattractive if I don't shave." (transcript C, p. 56). This comment reflects the strength of internalized norms, where even natural bodily features such as body hair are framed as unacceptable. Millie (Gen Z) notably points out that the role of men should not be overlooked. She explains that beauty standards often originate from the male gaze, emphasizing how external judgement becomes internalized in personal perception.

> But I think that men play a big part in it. Because, a thick ass, as a woman you actually get nothing out of it. Maybe it feels softer, but there's no real benefit for you. I think that's where it starts. For example, with large breasts, those are generally things that men find attractive. And women who get surgery or train or do whatever to achieve that, they do it to become more attractive to men, not for themselves. Because what men find attractive, they then also consider attractive. (transcript A, p. 20)

Beauty here is experienced not as an enhancement, but as a baseline requirement. Similarly, Megan (Millennial) illustrates how deeply the beauty ideal of desiring larger breasts has been internalized: "But if I'm very honest with myself, deep, deep, deep down, it's also because I want to fit in something in a certain way. And I think it should look that way because of everything I've seen." (transcript H, p. 143). This suggests that women's desires regarding their appearance are often not purely personal choices, but rather shaped by internalized and socially normalized beauty standards. In line with Liebelt's (2018, p. 5–6) argument, these norms are deeply institutionalized and enforced through everyday cultural practices. She explains that appearance ideals are not just about preference or taste, but about maintaining social acceptability (Liebelt, 2018, p. 5–6).

Although some participants claim to be unaffected by beauty standards, their descriptions of skincare routines and trend-following behaviors suggest a more complex reality. The majority of the participants describe adopting beauty routines or purchasing specific products to align more closely with what they saw online. Younger participants especially mention this. Sara (Gen Z) explains: "So, I then bought that CeraVe because

influencers had them." (transcript C, p. 57). She is directly influenced by the products that are advertised by these influencers. Adding to this she says: "The curly hair routine is now also really a trend on TikTok, since two years, I think. I also really started doing that because of social media. Otherwise it wouldn't be happening now." (transcript C, p. 57). Millennials generally describe their choices as more considered or distanced, however, they too followed digital trends. Maude (Millennial) notes: "The brow lamination trend, I fell for that. I do it myself now with some products." (transcript G, p. 129). These findings correspond with Alkahazraji's (2025, p. 1–2) study, which demonstrates that adolescents internalize and act on media-driven ideals, shaping their behaviors and appearance routines in direct response to what they consume online. Even if individuals are aware that these impulses come from external sources, the influence is powerful. These behaviors reflect what Fredrickson and Roberts (1997, p. 180) termed as 'self-objectification', when women come to view their own bodies through an external lens, maintaining them according to perceived standards of attractiveness. In more extreme cases, comparisons and beauty ideals extended to eating behaviors. Eva (Gen Z) reflects on her teenage experience: "But it did result in me eating less, yeah. Because I thought… Well, those models also eat less and have beautiful bodies, so I should too. That was a phase, yes." (transcript D, p. 76). This illustrates how internalized beauty norms can lead to harmful behavior. Existing research has long shown that exposure to idealized body images is associated with disordered eating and lower body satisfaction, particularly among adolescent girls and young women (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014, p. 607; Alkahazraji, 2025, p. 2). Even when framed as a 'phase', these experiences speak to the real psychological and physical risks of beauty-related pressure.

Multiple participants also describe undergoing cosmetic procedures to meet perceived beauty standards. These decisions are rarely framed as empowering. Instead, they are motivated by social discomfort or fear of judgment. Eva (Gen Z) explains that she changed an aspect of herself due to dissatisfaction with how it looked: "It could've stayed, because it was just a scar. But I just didn't think it looked good. So I wanted it gone." (transcript D, p. 75). Wilma (Baby Boomer) reflects on a cosmetic treatment that had gone wrong:

> Yes. In hindsight I thought, was it worth it? Yeah. I mean, it only got worse. So, no more shorts… no more bikinis either. No, you just don't do that anymore. That's just my mindset, if something no longer looks good, then you just shouldn't show it. You should just show your positive features. (transcript L, p. 224).

This comment reveals how strongly beauty standards can influence personal beliefs, leading individuals to feel they should only display parts of themselves that meet certain ideals. Although the interviewee frames it as a personal mindset, it reflects a wider cultural message that appearance determines value. It is concerning that such thinking may cause women to hide parts of themselves that do not fit these standards, rather than feeling confident in showing their whole, authentic selves. Wilma's statement reflects her questioning of the decision to change something about herself solely for the sake of appearance. Sandra (Baby Boomer) also underwent a procedure as a result of persistent questioning about her appearance and describes feeling humiliated by the experience. She says: "Yeah, I just found it humiliating…People would say, 'What happened to you?' I got that a hundred times a day. I thought, might as well get something done about it." (transcript K, p. 202). She concludes, "In the end, you still get influenced by other people" (transcript K, p. 202), underscoring the external origins of these internalized behaviors. These examples echo Wolf's (1990, p. 10–11) argument that beauty standards act as a form of social control. As women gain social visibility, the pressure to meet increasingly specific and demanding beauty norms intensifies, not as a choice, but as an obligation.

Despite these pressures, some women express a sense of agency. They stated that they would only pursue cosmetic changes for medical reasons or if they personally chose to later in life. This shows that while social norms are powerful, they are not absolute. As Giddens (1991, p. 75) suggests, identity is a reflexive project, one that individuals shape over time through both internal values and external pressures. These findings illustrate how beauty, as a social standard, is enacted on and through the body, shaping not just how women feel, but what they do.

4.2.4 Self-Acceptance Through Aging

When responding to beauty standards participants reflect on how the beauty ideals are internalized. Negative emotional consequences are found in each generation and even behavioral consequences are present. However, a remarkable insight is that older generations expressed a sense of self-acceptance throughout the process of growing older. Aging is approached here not only as a biological process, but also as a developmental journey associated with increased self-awareness and psychological maturity. As women age, they often report experiencing a shift in how they evaluate themselves, particularly in relation to

physical appearance. Research by Webster & Tiggemann (2003, p. 242) suggests that older women tend to develop greater cognitive control, meaning they are more likely to use mental strategies to cope with challenges to their self-image. For instance, these strategies can include lowering personal expectations or cognitively reframing situations in order to reduce the perceived importance of aspects they cannot control, such as their body or physical appearance (Webster & Tiggemann, 2003, p. 242). This existing research aligns with the findings of the current study. There has been found that, especially with the Baby Boomers, aging plays a role in how women in this study respond to the beauty ideals. Notably all Baby Boomer participants describe aging as a liberating force, one that reduced the influence of societal beauty norms and fostered a stronger, more accepting self-image. Joan (Baby Boomer) states: "I think the secret is growing older. You become more content with yourself." (transcript I, p. 163). Additionally, Sandra (Baby Boomer) says: "You become more accepting. Because yeah, it is what it is." (transcript K, p. 202). For these women, confidence stems less from appearance and more from life experience, relationships, and inner peace. Several participants also mention a generational shift from conformity to self-expression and describe the freedom of no longer needing to keep up. Sandra (Baby Boomer) notes: "When you're younger, you want to belong to the group. You want to be seen like that." (transcript K, p. 202). Aging becomes an 'excuse' for not having to try to meet a certain standard anymore. But above all, a kind of liberation of the so internalized and embedded beauty standards of society.

The Millennial group expresses a similar view to the Baby Boomers. Participants from this generation frequently describe a shift from earlier insecurities to a more confident and self-assured stance. While they often express that aging brought clarity with self-acceptance, they also emphasize the active strategies they employ to support this process. These include avoiding exposure to beauty standards, as mentioned previously, unfollowing certain accounts, or seeking professional support through therapy. This suggests that aging is not the only factor that encourages self-acceptance. It is also shaped by deliberate actions aimed at protecting and cultivating a healthier self-image. The Millennials' narratives often reflect a growing critical distance from appearance-focused thinking, suggesting a transitional space between youth and middle age. Lindsay (Millennial) mentions: "Now I'm almost thirty. And then you just are. I'm not really consciously thinking about how I am or how I look." (transcript L, p. 89). Lisa (Millennial) adds to this: "Then I'm now at a point where I can just look at myself in the mirror and think, Yeah, I'm okay with you." (transcript F, p. 108).

Aging, among Millennials and Baby Boomers, is experienced as a process of negotiation, in which older insecurities gradually give way to greater self-knowledge and resilience.

This form of self-acceptance resonates with what Simmel (1903/1950, p. 4) describes as the 'blasé attitude', a state of emotional detachment developed as a means of self-preservation in the face of overwhelming external stimuli. Across generations, participants negotiate beauty standards in varied ways, revealing not only emotional and behavioral consequences but also emerging forms of self-acceptance. However, this blasé detachment appears relatively absent among younger participants. Rather than exhibiting emotional distance, Generation Z describe self-acceptance as an ongoing process. They acknowledge that they have not yet fully achieved it but view themselves as actively working toward it. Sara (Gen Z) says: "I'm still working on accepting that more and more." (transcript C, p. 57). Her comment reflects a strong desire to feel good in her own body, working on acceptance is something that is desired. Eva (Gen Z) expresses a similar view: "That's gotten better over the years, thankfully. Especially in terms of accepting my appearance." (transcript D, p. 74). While Simmel (1903/1950, p. 2) saw intellectuality as a coping strategy for urban overstimulation, the findings suggest that social media saturation may overwhelm that coping mechanism. Unlike Simmel's (1903/1950, p. 4) urban subject, who protects the self through detachment, the participants show ongoing vulnerability and emotional engagement.

4.2.5 Redefining Generations

While this research was organized around generational groups (Generation Z, Millennials, and Baby Boomers) the findings call for a more critical and reflexive engagement with the concept of 'generation'. As previously discussed, drawing on Mannheim's (1970, p. 164) work, generations are not merely age cohorts defined by birth, but socially and culturally situated groups shaped by shared historical events, media environments, and formative experiences. From this perspective, generations are not fixed or universal groups, but they are a constructed and context-dependent lens for interpreting social experience. From the interviews can be deducted that generational identity is neither homogeneous nor always self-defined. While certain media platforms (Instagram and TikTok) and beauty ideals (for example, the 'fit but thin' standard) were more frequently cited by younger participants, these patterns were not absolute. For instance, some Baby

Boomers were highly engaged with digital media and described contemporary beauty ideals using language similar to Millennials. Conversely, some younger participants reflected in ways that challenged their assumed generational identity, drawing comparisons with past ideals or expressing values typically associated with older cohorts. These findings suggest that generational positioning intersects with other factors, including cultural background, media literacy, life stage, and family influence. The lived experience of a 'generation' is thus shaped not only by historical conditions but by individual trajectories and social environments. For this reason, generational categories in this study are best understood not as fixed identities but as heuristic tools, analytical lenses that organize empirical material without claiming absolute boundaries.

This resonates with Doucet and Rovers' (2010, p. 95) argument that generational experience is not solely defined by birth years or historical events, but also by emotionally transmitted patterns within family and cultural systems. Their work on generational trauma highlights how beliefs, insecurities, and affective responses can be unconsciously passed down, creating similarities across generational lines even in the absence of shared media contexts (Doucet & Rovers, 2010, p. 98). In the present study, such dynamics may help explain why emotional responses to beauty standards, such as comparison or conditional self-worth, appeared in both younger and older participants, despite differing cultural references. Critically, the use of generational distinctions in this research does not assume essential or homogeneous group characteristics. Instead, it acknowledges that beauty standards operate both within and across generations, producing shared pressures (such as comparison and grooming norms) while also manifesting in cohort-specific ways. In this sense, the generational framework enhances rather than restricts the analysis, by making it possible to trace how shifts in media and cultural discourse shape women's perceptions of beauty across time, while also remaining attentive to individual difference and sociocultural complexity.

This theme addresses the sub-question: "How do women from different generations negotiate, internalize, or resist media-driven beauty standards?" Across generational lines, women engage in a continuous negotiation of beauty standards, balancing internalized societal pressures with personal choices. Social comparison emerges as a significant mechanism through which these standards are internalized. While beauty ideals are deeply embedded across all generations, they manifest in both emotional consequences and behavioral practices. Notably, among older participants, resistance often takes the form of self-acceptance developed over time. Overall, negotiation reflects a dynamic process in

which women respond to and manage beauty norms differently depending on their generational context and stage in life.

5. Conclusion

This study has investigated how women from different generations experience and interpret beauty standards in media in relation to their self-image. The research aimed to uncover how beauty standards influence women's self-perception, and how these effects differ across generational lines. In doing so, the study sought to bridge feminist media theory, generational sociology, and psychological frameworks of comparison and internalization, contributing to a deeper understanding of the lived effects of mediated beauty norms.

The main question that centers this research is: "How do women from different generations experience and interpret beauty standards in media in relation to their self-image?" Drawing on qualitative interviews, the study finds that although all participants are aware of dominant beauty ideals portrayed in media, their experiences, interpretations, and responses differ notably across generations. Two key themes emerged from the analysis, reflecting a generational process: from exposure to beauty ideals to the negotiation of these standards. While this process appears across all age groups, the way it unfolds varies significantly between generations. In response to the first sub-question, "How do women from different generations perceive and define beauty standards in media?", the findings reveal that while all participants recognize the media's role in shaping ideals, their definitions diverge. Younger generations, particularly Generation Z and the Millennial group, describe a 'fit but thin' ideal that emphasizes athleticism, grooming, and curated 'naturalness'. Older participants, such as Baby Boomers, refer to polished and conventional beauty norms, typically centered on slimness, neatness, and respectability. Shaped by earlier mass media like television and fashion magazines, these ideals continue to leave a lasting emotional imprint. Across generations, there is a shared critical awareness of the exclusionary and often unrealistic nature of these standards, which has led many to reflect on, resist, or reinterpret them. The second sub-question, "How do women from different generations negotiate, internalize, or resist media-driven beauty standards?", highlighted the active ways in which women engage with beauty norms. Social comparison plays a central role in how these ideals are internalized, often resulting in body dissatisfaction, daily performance of beauty-related routines, and conditional self-acceptance. Among older participants, resistance often takes the form of emotional distancing and self-acceptance cultivated over time, whereas younger participants are still in the process of forming such strategies.

This research shows that while beauty standards are widely recognized across generations, how women experience, internalize, and respond to them differs based on their

generational context. All participants move through a shared process of exposure to negotiation, but this process takes different forms at different life stages. Younger women are still navigating self-image under intense media pressure, while older generations often reflect with greater distance and self-acceptance. Ultimately, beauty ideals are not just personal preferences, they are socially constructed, emotionally impactful, and generationally shaped. Understanding this helps reveal how deeply media-driven standards shape not only how women see themselves, but how they choose to resist or reshape those ideals.

This study contributes to existing research by providing a nuanced, generationally situated understanding of how beauty standards in media affect women's self-image. It supports Runfola et al.'s (2012, p. 9) findings that highlight the need for qualitative research to better explore the depth, extent and effects of body dissatisfaction among women. Moreover, it expands existing debates on media effects, body image, and gender by showing that the impact of beauty ideals is never static, but always evolving, contested, and lived in deeply personal ways.

Several limitations shaped this research. The researcher's position as a feminist woman informed the choice to center women's lived experience and critically engage with beauty norms and media structures. The research was thus conducted from a feminist perspective. This standpoint provided sensitivity toward the emotional, embodied, and structural dimensions of beauty ideal internalization. At the same time, it may have introduced certain interpretive biases, such as a critical orientation toward dominant media representations or an emphasis on systemic pressures over individual agency. Recognizing this positionality is crucial within qualitative inquiry, as it underscores that research is always situated and shaped by the values, assumptions, and perspectives of those who conduct it. Rather than compromising validity, this reflexive stance contributes to the transparency and depth of the study.

The study only included cisgender women and thus does not reflect the experiences of non-binary or transgender individuals, who may navigate beauty standards differently and face distinct pressures. While the focus on cisgender women was relevant for exploring generational differences within a traditionally gendered framework, this choice also narrows the scope of the findings. Non-binary and transgender people may face unique forms of aesthetic pressure, marginalization, or invisibility within both mainstream and alternative media, and may negotiate beauty ideals in ways that challenge binary assumptions about gender presentation and self-image. Including these voices in future research would not only

broaden the gender spectrum represented but also deepen our understanding of how beauty norms are constructed, resisted, or redefined across diverse identities. As such, this study can serve as a starting point for more inclusive explorations of how media shapes body image and self-perception beyond the cisgender female experience.

Additionally, as noted earlier, two participants in the study shared a familial relationship. This study focused on individual experiences but did not explore family dynamics or intergenerational influence in depth. This is a potentially rich area for future inquiry, for example, exploring how beauty expectations are passed down or challenged within mother-daughter or grandmother-granddaughter relationships could offer deeper insight. Furthermore, the sample size, while appropriate for a qualitative design, was limited to twelve participants, making the findings non-generalizable. However, this thesis can serve as a foundation for future quantitative or mixed-methods studies, which could test these patterns across broader populations.

Finally, many participants, particularly those from the Baby Boomer generation, reflected on earlier life experiences by speaking from memory. While these retrospective accounts provided valuable insights into how beauty standards have evolved over time, they also present certain interpretive challenges. Memory is inherently selective and can be influenced by later experiences, cultural shifts, or personal reinterpretation, making it difficult to assess the accuracy or consistency of recalled events. As such, reliance on memory introduces a degree of uncertainty regarding the precision of participants' past perceptions. To address this limitation, future research could benefit from longitudinal or diary-based methodologies, which allow for the real-time documentation of media engagement and self-perception. These approaches would offer more temporally grounded data and enable researchers to track changes in internalization and self-image across different stages of life with greater reliability.

Ultimately, this research highlights that while beauty ideals in media continue to shape how women see themselves, the ways they are seen, negotiated, and internalized are as diverse and complex as the women who live with them.

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7. Appendix

Appendix A

Topic Guide: Generational Experiences of Beauty Standards in Media and Self-Identity

General Information	Date: Time: Name respondent:
Introduction	Objective: Establish rapport with the participant and provide context for the interview. - How's it going? - Do you have any questions or comments before we start? - Thank the participant for their time and explain the purpose of the study. Comments: - The conversation will be recorded. - Everything said is confidential. I will only use your first name, or a pseudonym, and do not use personal data. - Consent to recording and taking notes - Verify personal data (name, age, student) Procedure: I'm going to ask you some questions about your experience with beauty standards in media. The purpose of this interview is to ultimately answer this research question: *How do women from different generations experience and interpret beauty standards in media in relation to their self-identity?* The data will then be retrospectively processed through transcription and subsequently incorporated into a research report
Topic 1: Demographics	- What is your age? (What year were you born in?) - What is your nationality? - What is your birthplace?

	- Where did you grow up? - What do you do in daily life? (study/work/other) - How does your daily life look like? - What are your interests/hobby's? - Is there something you're ambitious about?
Topic 2: Media Use	- How would you describe your media use in daily life? Do you use a lot of media? - Can you recall your earliest memories of engaging with media? What kinds of platforms or formats did you use at the time? - Which types of media do you find yourself engaging with most often? (e.g., social media, TV, magazines, movies) - What is the main reason you use these platforms? - How often do you read/watch/use this media? (weekly, daily, etc.) - What kind of content do you watch/consume the most? Can you describe it? - How would you describe your relationship with media?
Topic 3: Beauty Standards in Media	- How do you notice beauty standards being represented in the media you consume? - Can you describe the beauty standards that appear most often in the media you engage with (skinny models, cosmetic procedures, skincare, etc.) - How often do you see content related to beauty, appearance, or body image in the media you consume? (How present is it in the media you consume?) - Do you feel that the media portrays an ideal beauty standard? How would you describe the kind of beauty that is most often idealized in media? - Do you think social media has made beauty standards more inclusive or more restrictive? In what way have you noticed that? - Do you actively follow or engage with media content that promotes alternative beauty ideals (e.g., body positivity, natural beauty, diversity)? - Have you ever questioned or rejected beauty standards set

	by media? Can you share that experience? - Have you noticed any changes in beauty standards over time? How have you seen media beauty standards shift over time? - What changes would you like to see in how beauty is represented in media? - How do you feel media portrayals of beauty are changing, and what impact do you think these changes are having?
Topic 4: Self-image	- How do you see yourself? (as person, also appearance) - How would you describe yourself in terms of personality, and character traits? - How would you describe yourself in terms of appearance? - Would you say you currently have a negative or positive self-image? Why? - Has your self-image ever been different? - Do you think the way you see yourself has an external influence? - In what ways do you feel that external influences (like media, family, or social expectations) have shaped how you see yourself? - Have you ever had anything done to your appearance (changed it permanently)? Why yes/no? - How would you describe the ways your self-image has changed throughout your life?" - Can you tell me about any beauty practices (e.g., makeup, cosmetic surgery, fitness routines) you've engaged in and how, if at all, media has influenced those choices?
Topic 5: Beauty Standards and Self-image	- Do you compare yourself to beauty ideals in the media? If so, in what way do they influence you and how does that make you feel? - What do you think about current beauty standards in the media, and how do they affect you personally? (negative/ positive influence) - Have media portrayals of beauty ever affected the way you see yourself? If so, in what ways? Do you have an example?

	- Do you feel pressure to conform to certain ideals of beauty in the media? Why or why not? - Can you tell me about any beauty practices (e.g., makeup, cosmetic surgery, fitness routines) you've engaged in and how, if at all, media has influenced those choices? - Have you ever felt empowered or inspired by representations of beauty in the media? Can you give an example? - How do you think younger/older generations view beauty differently than your own generation? - How has being a mother influenced the way you think about beauty or media portrayals of appearance? - Do you have any advice for younger generations regarding media and beauty standards?
Closing	Before I start wrapping up this interview, do you have some things you want to talk about? Are there any topics you would like to discuss? - Is there anything we have not covered that you think is important to discuss? Thank you for your cooperation, I will now use this interview for my research. If you ever have any questions you can contact me, also if there are any issues you are unsure about. On this note, I am now going to close the interview and thus no longer record it.

Appendix B

Codebook legend:

Demographics

Media-use

Beauty Standards

Self-image

Media & Self-image

CODEBOOK: OVERVIEW OF CODING			
CODE	**DEFINITION**	**PARTICIPANT AND GENERATION**	**QUOTE EXAMPLES**
Migration background	Participant refers to cultural or ethnic background.	*GENERATION Z*	*"But I wouldn't say my cultural background directly influenced how I see myself. But do you kind of get where I'm coming from? Like, I look a certain way. And I couldn't always see that reflected in the media. I thought that was a shame. Because of that, I started thinking that maybe it wasn't okay. Or that I was different, or things like that."- Millie* *"And maybe—yeah. I once bleached my hair. Now I do it because I like how it looks. But back then, maybe it was more like, Oh, but I have black hair… oh no. So yeah, maybe that cultural aspect also still plays an indirect role in that ideal image."- Millie* *"Well, as a kid I wasn't really happy with the fact that I had a bit of a tan. I went to an all-white school. So I didn't always feel accepted."- Eva*
		MILLENNIALS	X
		BABY BOOMERS	*"Only after 1958, after arriving in the Netherlands, did I adopt a second culture, so to speak. And that is Dutch culture. I feel fairly integrated into Dutch society. But the background always remains."- Joyce*
Family influence on beauty	Family members shape participant's self-image or beauty perception.	*GENERATION Z*	*"I think both my parents are very down-to-earth about these things. So yeah, I was also partly raised with the idea that, yeah, some people are going to have it better than you."- Millie* *"My father also did have strong opinions about looks."- Eva*

CODEBOOK: OVERVIEW OF CODING			
		MILLENNIALS	*"When I talk to my mom, she always used to say to me: "Sweetheart, you're a teenager now. But believe me, one day a switch will flip, and it just won't feel so important anymore."- Lindsay*
		BABY BOOMERS	*"My mother—you know, the influence of parents—always said, "Make sure when you look in the mirror in the morning before you leave the house, that you look well-groomed."- Joyce* *"And I'm also the eldest daughter of four. My parents had four daughters. So you know, with girls or women, there's always that looking at each other and giving comments."- Joyce* *"The environment we came from didn't consider outer beauty that important. No. That wasn't the most important thing. No. That had to come from within."- Wilma*
Media as escape	Participants use media in a way to distract or fill time.	*GENERATION Z*	*"It's really kind of for me, when I have nothing to do, I look on it."- Millie* *"I just scroll because I'm bored."- Eva* *"But it's also really a distraction medium to get a peek into other people's lives"- Sara*
		MILLENNIALS	*"It's also a kind of distraction, or a constant urge. Like, "I'm bored," or "I don't know what to do," so I just grab my phone. I find that an annoying habit I'm trying to unlearn."- Maude* *"Distraction. Just to kill time in quiet moments"- Lisa*
		BABY BOOMERS	X

CODEBOOK: OVERVIEW OF CODING			
Media as inspiration	Media provides fashion, beauty, or lifestyle ideas.	*GENERATION Z*	*"But it can also be for inspiration, for instance. So, for example, imagine, I do that with Pinterest, by the way. But for example, I have something hanging in my closet and I don't know how to style it. Then I just look like, oh, how do other people do that? So, I use that for that."- Millie* *But yeah, I did once follow stores, like Cezanne or something—for inspiration.- Isa*
		MILLENNIALS	*"I take tips from that too. Or outfit inspiration. That kind of stuff, definitely."- Lisa*
		BABY BOOMERS	*"Well, first I was looking for, like, what inspires me. So I was flipping through TV channels a bit."- Joyce*
Media as source of information	Participants use media in a way to gather information from.	*GENERATION Z*	*"Yes, and NOS for example. I do actually watch the news. So for example the NOS app I use a lot"- Millie*
		MILLENNIALS	*"I use it mainly actually for new studies that I have to keep up with, and socially."- Lindsay*
		BABY BOOMERS	*"But on the other hand, it's positive, because it informs you about things. So in that sense, it does give you an opinion at least. Whether you're reading the newspaper or listening to a podcast or watching television. You do form an opinion about things."- Joan* *"I read the newspaper on my iPad. Yes, partly to stay informed, that sort of thing."- Wilma*
Comparison through media	Participant compares self to people seen in media.	*GENERATION Z*	*"I thought, those models are also eating less, so I should too."- Eva* *"That I then really started buying products that, for example, Beautynezz (a Dutch influencer) also had."- Sara*

CODEBOOK: OVERVIEW OF CODING			
			"So I then bought that CeraVe. Because influencers had them."- Sara
		MILLENNIALS	*"But yeah, I guess in that way. But with less emotional weight than I used to have."- Lindsay*
		BABY BOOMERS	*"But I do think that fashion platforms always present everything using younger models. No older than forty, I think."- Joyce*
Positive Media impact	Media encourages self-acceptance or creativity.	*GENERATION Z*	*"On the one hand, I think it's super fun to see things other people are doing. Because the nice thing is, you stay in touch with people. You need it for certain things. And you get out of it what you need."- Millie* *"Yeah, also just to see what other people are posting. From friends or acquaintances. Yes. I don't think I'm very easily influenced by certain videos or things that come up while I'm scrolling. So overall, I just have positive experiences with it."- Isa* *"I feel nice in lingerie, I like to buy that."- Eva* *"Because social media can really be a tool to raise awareness or to learn about something. And if you don't have social media at all, you're not exposed to any of it. You might end up with a kind of tunnel vision or a limited view of how things really are in society. So I think that's actually good."- Isa*
		MILLENNIALS	*"So I do think it's led to more diversity."- Lindsay*
		BABY BOOMERS	*"And that you highlight your strengths instead of trying to meet a certain standard"- Wilma*

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Negative Media impact	Media causes insecurity or harmful behavior.	*GENERATION Z*	*"But I also know that sometimes it can have a bit of a downside. In the sense of, well, on social media a lot of beautiful, perfect pictures are shown anyway. And there I can sometimes, maybe insecure is maybe not the right word."- Millie* *"Social media is so close. And then it can just distract me a lot. That's not a good relationship."- Sara* *"For example, I've skipped LinkedIn at the moment. But yes, I find that a very confrontational app. And that just makes me very insecure."- Sara*
		MILLENNIALS	*"I find it becomes addictive very quickly. So I notice it annoys me that I spend so much time on my phone. That I'm just mindlessly consuming videos." - Maude* *"But with like, with the phone media, Instagram and series and things, I think I have a negative relationship. I think I have an addicting relationship"- Megan*
		BABY BOOMERS	*"And people see that. People feel attacked by that. So yes, I think it definitely affects people"- Sandra*
Beauty ideal image in media	The ideal image of beauty that participants see in media. Refers to slimness, curves, or specific body expectations from media.	*GENERATION Z*	*"So ideal, yes, you do see a lot of perfect pictures. And that is also, of course, if you click on it once. Then it keeps coming back. Because you come back at some point in such an algorithm."- Millie?* *"But I do think I see it more now. It's become more normalized, yeah."- Eva*
		MILLENNIALS	*"Not super skinny, but curvy. But still very fit, you know? Where you think, oh wow—nice butt and a well-toned body. Also always really well-groomed in terms of appearance—eyebrows, makeup, perfectly smooth skin without*

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			any blemishes"- Maude? *"Mainly the skinny look. I'd say, first it was everyone being super thin. Then when I started studying, it was more the Kim Kardashian era. So very voluptuous, lots of working out. Thin but with lots of curves. Everyone was focused on glute training and such. And I feel like maybe because of social media, it's gone in all directions."- Lindsay*
		BABY BOOMERS	*"tattoos everywhere, the well-known size 34, 36. Yes. Super tall"- Joyce* *"That women always have to to be slim. Something I never understood back then."- Sandra*
Shifting beauty ideals	Participant refers to shifting beauty ideals (e.g., thick brows, Botox).	*GENERATION Z*	*"And in recent years there has been more and more attention to the fact that this is going on. That these are really like this. And also that fucked up beauty ideal of being slim and well, wanting to have such a perfect body. There's just a lot of change in that now, too."- Sara*
		MILLENNIALS	*"Yeah, extreme makeup, heavy eyeliner and all that. Now everything is way more natural. Like, it's supposed to look like you didn't do anything, but still part of that "clean girl aesthetic." That was around 2016 or so—those super thick eyebrows were all the rage. And now it's more like lamination brows. Just more natural. Though you can still tell that people are wearing a lot of makeup. But it's made to look like they're not. Like it's, "This is just my natural look," or something." - Maude* *"And especially because they change so much over time. One minute, you have to have this huge figure, and then the next, a look that doesn't even exist."-*

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			Lindsay? *"If I compare it to ten years ago, it's a much more present topic."- Lisa*
		BABY BOOMERS	*"You weren't supposed to be sexy, you know?" - Joyce* *"When I watch older films, I do see more natural makeup, and it was all more subtle. But now when I look at it, I think, it's all so over the top. I think, in my opinion, it doesn't need to be. So yes, it has changed."- Joan* *"Now there are just many more fuller women. And I notice that myself in fashion too. The image used to be size 36, 38, 40. But now women are also in size 42, 44."- Sandra*
Diverse and inclusive beauty standards	How participants feel about diverse or inclusive representations of beauty standards.	*GENERATION Z*	*"So yeah — change is good, but only if it keeps progressing. Then it's good. Yeah, I think we're on the right track. It could be more, but at least it's visible."- Isa*
		MILLENNIALS	*"No, I don't think so. Because I think it's created more extremism. And so you're either one way or the other. So there's not that doesn't, that doesn't generate inclusivity"- Megan*
		BABY BOOMERS	*"There should be more diversity. Petite, broader—it should all be okay."- Joyce* *"And sometimes I even think, "Only white people," you know? You do see more people of color now, but I still think there are few people wearing a headscarf, that sort of thing."- Joan*
Body dissatisfaction	Negative thoughts or feelings about one's body.	*GENERATION Z*	*"I preferred not to look in the mirror."- Eva* *"I have had quite some struggles this year with.... That I can be quite insecure*

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			about myself. Yes, about my appearance too, so." - Sara *"And I also had a bit of a mustache. I used to get teased about that. So yeah, I really didn't like that. It sometimes made me feel like an outsider."- Eva* *"I just find myself unattractive if I don't shave."- Sara*
		MILLENNIALS	*"But it's still in my head… that it's not really how I would prefer to look."- Lisa* *"But it's still something where… if I'm insecure about anything, it's that. Not necessarily my face or a specific part of my body or whatever. It's purely my weight. That's what I focus on. Always."- Lisa*
		BABY BOOMERS	*"I thought I was ugly, etc."- Joan*
Self-acceptance growth	Narrative of becoming more confident or accepting over time.	*GENERATION Z*	*"I'm getting a lot happier with myself lately."- Eva* *"And getting more curves. And just getting a bit fuller. I'm still working on accepting that more and more."- Sara*
		MILLENNIALS	*"then I'm now at a point where I can just look at myself in the mirror and think, "Yeah, I'm okay with you."- Lisa*
		BABY BOOMERS	*"I think the secret is growing older. You become more content with yourself. And with everything really"- Joan* *"Yes. You become more accepting. Because yeah, it is what it is. Right. Because when you're younger, you want to belong to the group. You want to be seen like that."- Sandra??* *"I'm very satisfied with everything we have and how we live together. And I*

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			think—that satisfaction starts to show eventually. And I'm also satisfied with who I am. I don't have many complaints about that. I'm very content with it. And I've become very confident because of that"- Joan
Change in self-perception	Change in how people view themselves over time, based on era, or generation.	*GENERATION Z*	*"That's gotten better over the years, thankfully. Especially in terms of accepting my appearance. I have curly hair. I have different skin. I have a different nationality. Well, that's just how it is."- Eva*
		MILLENNIALS	*"Because when you're in your early twenties, you're very focused on placing yourself within a group. But also on detaching yourself from it and finding your own authenticity. And now I'm almost thirty. And then you just are. So I'm not really consciously thinking about how I am or how I look."- Lindsay* *"And that has grown over the years. I've learned a lot"- Lisa*
		BABY BOOMERS	*"But that also comes with age. Because when I was a teenager, I certainly didn't think I was as self-confident as I am now."- Joan*
External influence on self	Participant feels that the self has been influenced by external factors.	*GENERATION Z*	*"Yes, social media does. More when I talk about my inner self. With my ambitions in the literary world and so on."- Sara* *"You know? Social media can be super influential when you're young, especially at the start of puberty. I sometimes think it's good to show a realistic image on social media. But young people might still get a fixed idea of how things should be."- Eva*
		MILLENNIALS	*"I've also had a few relationships. And then I'm definitely sensitive to their*

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			opinions."- Lindsay *"I definitely think the media has had an influence. Or still does. But at least it has had one. Also because… I see it online a lot. The examples of why the image of my generation is the way it is. Yeah. Then I think, "Well yeah, of course I think like that." When I see those examples — the kind of stuff that was just normal to say back then."- Lisa*
		BABY BOOMERS	*"And I think your environment is really important in how it influences who you are, what you wear, and how you feel about yourself."- Joyce*
Media triggered insecurity	Participant feels worse about self due to media.	*GENERATION Z*	"*But I think that's also tied to that comparison. Because you compare yourself, you also start thinking... okay, but what do I want? What is considered beautiful? What's socially approved of? So yes, I think that definitely influences me. And sometimes, it probably does make me a bit insecure."- Millie*
		MILLENNIALS	*"But I think the positive influence it could have (talking about media) — that comes more from inside myself, or from... not from 'I want to look like her' or something. But more from, 'I don't look like that.' So that brings out more of the negative than the positive."- Lisa* *"Then there's often someone who's just drop-dead gorgeous, working out all day and drinking green juices. And you notice that insecurity creeping in."- Lindsay*
		BABY BOOMERS	X
Trend conformity	Desire or behavior aimed at aligning with popular aesthetics.	*GENERATION Z*	*"Yes. For example, I never did skincare. Because I can't really stand creams and stuff. I don't like it. Then, still, that was*

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			really purely because of social media, that I thought, I have to start doing this. Because everyone is doing this."- Sara *"The curly hair routine is now also really a trend on TikTok, since two years, I think. I also really started doing that because of social media. Otherwise it wouldn't be happening now. Everyone walks around with curls now. I also notice that so much when I see that. And that just really was caused by the media."- Sara*
		MILLENNIALS	*"The… brow lamination trend. I fell for that, but I do it myself now with some products. I never had it done, because I thought it was too expensive. But you see that go by and think, oh okay, I'll try that too. Those… eyelash extensions. I don't know if that was really a trend."- Maude*
		BABY BOOMERS	*"But yes, I used to let fashion lead the way. If it was flared pants—it was flared pants. If it was tight pants—it was tight pants. That kind of thing, sure. You did go along with whatever was in fashion. You wanted to fit in, really."- Joan*
Comparison to beauty standards in media		*GENERATION Z*	*"So, despite all these more diverse images and so on. I still have enough standard women on my social media. Which I can then think... Wow, I want that too."- Sara* *"But I think it's something that happens more on an unconscious level. It's not like I'm scrolling through Instagram and thinking... oh wow, she has a nice nose. I don't. How annoying. That's not really what's going on. But I think it just happens very unconsciously."- Millie*
		MILLENNIALS	*"If we're constantly looking at what we don't have—what we think is beautiful about others and what we think is ugly*

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			about ourselves—we can easily fall into that trap of comparison and seeing it in a negative light."- Lindsay
		BABY BOOMERS	*"I was just thinking—I'd be lying if I said I didn't. You know? If you suddenly hear someone is the same age as you, then you think... do I look like that too? Or really? Whether that's in a positive or a negative sense. So yes, you do compare yourself with others."- Joan*
Generational view on beauty standards in media	View on beauty described as generationally specific.	*GENERATION Z*	*"And now, nowadays, we have the internet, and you can find anything. There's a much wider range of what's considered ideal, you know? Because before, there was just one thing."- Eva*
		MILLENNIALS	*"And also when I talk to friends who are in the same age or life phase… it's something we talk about."- Lisa* *"So I definitely think it's had an influence. Also because I see the same thing reflected in other people from my generation, that there's a kind of common thread between us."- Lisa* *"But health is the most important thing. And I also feel that. I think that's more from the fit girl generation than the super skinny generation. I don't know what you'd call that one. Yeah. No idea."- Lisa*
		BABY BOOMERS	*"Daring to dress how you want and show yourself. And I think many women from my generation still carry the label—especially in the Netherlands. The Netherlands is very Calvinistic"- Joyce*

Appendix C

Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information
Name: Elodie Guillanneuf
Student ID: 746386
Course Name: Master Thesis CM5050
Supervisor Name: Charlotte Bruns
Date: June 26, 2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools
I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☒ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically ChatGPT and DeepL, in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: elodieguillanneuf
Date of Signature: 25-06-2025

Extent of AI Usage
☒ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity
☒ I understand the ethical implications and

academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: elodieguillanneuf
Date of Signature: 25-06-2025

Used prompts:

- “Can you check this part for grammar and spelling mistakes?”
- “Is this sentence written in an academic and formal way?”
- DeepL is used to translate some articles for my own understanding.