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En-Gender 2022 Conference

Activism, Borders and Media

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ABSTRACT

Social media plays a key role in young women's conceptualisations of beauty and their negotiations of femininity and identity. However, previous research on social media and beauty largely centres on White women's experiences. Functioning as a subset of a larger study on the perceptions of beauty of ethnic minority women aged 18-25, this paper presents an intersectional exploration of these women's experiences navigating beauty discourse on Instagram. Using in-depth, focus group discussions among Black, Asian, Arab and mixed-race women from various geographical contexts, the interdisciplinary research demonstrates a strong relationship between Instagram and ethnic minority women's perceptions of beauty, emphasising the influence of Eurocentric ideals. The findings also reveal ethnic minority women's unique criteria for beauty, which are significantly affected by cultural values such as religion, health, and socioeconomic status. The research concludes that more diverse representation of ethnic minority beauty on Instagram is needed and offers further avenues for research on the culture-specific experiences of ethnic minority women.

KEYWORDS

Social Media, Beauty, Ethnicity, Representation, Gender Identity.

BIO

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En-Gender!

Negotiating Representation

Ethnic Minority Women's Experiences of Beauty on Instagram

By Rachel Abreu

Introduction: Beauty and the Media

The oft-narrow representation of women's bodies is subject to continuous discussion in media studies, illustrated by extensive research on the link between mass media images and women's body dissatisfaction.[1] Existing research shows that social media, especially image-based platforms like Instagram, are especially detrimental to women's body image and self-esteem.[2] Although Instagram is most popular among Latinx, Asian and Black users in Western contexts,[3] the social media platform, like other forms of mass media, has a complex history of mis-representing ethnic minority groups.[4] Body image and social media scholars implore the need for more research on racially and ethnically diverse populations, but existing literature on the relationship between Instagram and body image continues to focus on majority Caucasian samples or tends to conflate race and ethnicity,[5] giving little attention to other facets of ethnic identity, like cultural or geographical background.[6]

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[1] Shelly Grabe, L. Monique Ward, and Janet Hyde, "The Role of the Media in Body Image Concerns Among Women: A Meta-Analysis of Experimental and Correlational Studies", *Psychological Bulletin* 134, no. 3 (2008): 460.; Lisa Groesz, Michael Levine, and Sarah Murnen, "The effect of experimental presentation of thin media images on body satisfaction: A meta-analytic review", *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 31, no. 1 (2002): 2.

[2] Grace Holland and Marika Tiggemann, "A systematic review of the impact of the use of social networking sites on body image and disordered eating outcomes", *Body Image* 17 (2016): 108.

[3] "Social media preferences vary by race and ethnicity*"*, Radio + Television Business Report*,* accessed November 7, 2022, https://www.rbr.com/social-media-preferences-vary-by-race-and-ethnicity/,

[4] "Daily Instagram usage in the United States as of August 2018, by ethnicity", Statista*,* accessed November 8, 2022, https://www.statista.com/statistics/945939/daily-frequency-usage-instagram-usa-ethnicity/

[5] For clarity, I conceptualise ethnicity as the shared national, linguistic, and cultural identity traditions or expressions of a group, whereas race refers more to shared physical characteristics and some commonalities in history. Geographical location simply denotes where a person lives and can (but does not necessarily) reflect their nationality. In short, ethnicity or ethnic identity can include racial characteristics, but I take care not to assume that shared racial experiences equate to ethnic similarity.

[6] Grabe, Ward, and Hyde, "The Role of Media in Body Image Concerns Among Women: A Meta-Analysis of Experimental and Correlational Studies", 472.

This paper draws from my master's research project, which aimed to address the gaps in previous research by exploring the perceptions of beauty of ethnic minority women aged 18-25. The use of the term 'ethnic minority' reflects the complexities of the research context and sample. Primarily, the research was designed within a UK lens in mind and subsequently analysed in this context. The term 'ethnic minority' is therefore used in line with the majority White[7] population of the UK and refers to non-White ethnic groups such as Black, Asian, or Arab.[8] However, 'ethnic minority' is also viewed through the additional lens of representation on social media (and Instagram specifically), where Whiteness dominates cultural production and the algorithms that dictate search results uphold the view of Whiteness as the norm.[9] On an online platform where Western ideals and representations dominate, women of colour remain minoritised. Although sampling for the study was conducted on a global scale, the term 'ethnic minority' ultimately reflects the language and experiences of the women involved in the research.

The research is exploratory in nature and is guided by the key research question, '*To what extent does Instagram influence the perceptions of beauty of young women between the ages of 18-25, from ethnic minorities?*'. The exploratory approach functions as a means of highlighting diverse perspectives by giving space to discuss women's perceptions, assumptions, and emotions, which are often given little attention in existing research that favours quantitative, experimental approaches. The exploratory approach allows my research to build on studies that often conflate beauty with body image or body dissatisfaction, to allow ethnic minority women to develop their own, unique criteria for beauty.[10] The research also takes a more holistic view of ethnicity that considers facets of ethnic identity beyond race, to include factors such as cultural background, location, socioeconomic background, and even religion.

To address the aforementioned question, this paper offers an overview of the significant findings from in-depth, focus group discussions among Black, Asian, Arab, and mixed-race women from various geographical contexts. The findings will be presented in three parts: the first part will explore ethnic minority women's perceived standards of beauty both within and outside of the context of Instagram; the second part will explore the extent to which cultural and ethnic identity affects the women's criteria for beauty; and finally, the third part will discuss issues of representation, including factors that may hinder the diverse representation of minority ethnic women on social media.

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[7] Throughout this paper, I intentionally capitalise both 'Black' and 'White' to delineate both as racial and political categories. The choice of the capital W challenges the idea of Whiteness as norm, neutrality, or absence; it also invites examination of the privileges afforded to White identity and persisting ideologies that inform racial categorisation.

[8] "List of Ethnic Groups", GOV.UK, accessed December 6, 2022, https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups.

[9] Safiya Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 24.

[10] Shelly Grabe and Janet Hyde, "Ethnicity and Body Dissatisfaction Among Women in the United States: A Meta-Analysis", *Psychological Bulletin* 132, no. 4 (2006): 622-640.

The findings ultimately provide invaluable insight on the unique, nuanced experiences of ethnic minority women on social media. The conversations about beauty and representation uncover how both are tied to several persisting issues, such as the enduring effects of colonialism, Eurocentric thinking, and White privilege. The discussions about beauty are often tangled with existing perspectives on ideal femininity and gender expectations, which are only further complicated by (often Western) feminist critique. These interconnected concerns about religion, race, culture, and gender are brought to the fore on social media platforms like Instagram, where they can be dissected on a global scale. The findings of this study not only stress the importance of continued intersectional approaches to the study of beauty and representation, but also uncover avenues for further research.

The Interactions of Beauty, Social Media, and Ethnicity

Research on body image and social media is often linked to theories within developmental and social psychology.[11] While these theories and concepts have set the groundwork for the present study, the research is equally guided by existing feminist approaches. One of the persisting preoccupations within feminist discourse is the concept of beauty as capital and a key defining feature of women's value in society.[12] Specifically, there exists the sustained notion of the middle-to-upper class, able-bodied, slim, White woman as representative of ideal feminine beauty, which can have negative implications for oft-marginalised groups of women, including women of colour.[13] The Western ideal of beauty continues to be reflected within the global beauty market, with mass media often held responsible for its prevalence.[14] It is due to these perspectives that the study is concerned with wider definitions of beauty and physical attractiveness, beyond the focus on body image in existing psychological research and the narrow definitions of ideal beauty that continue to be subject to feminist critique.

A key concept that explains how ideals of beauty are internalised is the Tripartite Influence Model (TIM) developed by Thompson et al., which emphasises the role of family, peers, and the media as core influences on body image development.[15] Specifically, Western media propagates an ideal that aligns female success with physical attractiveness, often presented as both thinness and

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[11] Rachel Rodgers, Susan Paxton, and Eleanor Wertheim, "#Take idealized bodies out of the picture: A scoping review of social media content aiming to protect and promote positive body image" *Body Image* 38 (2021): 10.

[12] Patricia Collins, *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[13] Ann Cheney, "'Most Girls Want to be Skinny': Body (Dis)Satisfaction Among Ethnically Diverse Women", *Qualitative Health Research* 21, no. 10 (2011).

[14] Claudia Liebelt, "Beauty and the Norm: An Introduction," in *Beauty and the Norm,* ed. Claudia Liebelt et al. (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 5.

[15] J. Kevin Thompson et al., *Exacting beauty: Theory, assessment, and treatment of body image disturbance* (Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1999).

Whiteness, that is exacerbated by the effects of social media.[16] While recent studies have added the criteria of fitness and muscularity to this ideal, it is nevertheless commonly viewed as unattainable, leading to increased comparison among women and tendencies to view oneself from an outsider's perspective (self-objectification).[17] It is, however, important to note that these body image ideals are internalised differently by minority ethnic groups. For example, Black and Hispanic groups are less likely to internalise thin ideals; tend to demonstrate greater body satisfaction; and show lower tendencies for self-objectification.[18] The present study thus addresses the need to explore the experiences of ethnic minority groups in more depth, to acknowledge ideals beyond thinness and discover their unique criteria for beauty.

An example of a concept that is especially applicable to the study of beauty within ethnic minority groups is Thomas Cash's construct of appearance investment, which helped move the construct of body image and its associated body disturbances away from the context of disordered eating.[19] Cash not only identified social attractiveness criteria in terms of weight and shape, but also demonstrated how factors such as hair and skin tone are equally critical when studying body image.[20] Cash's work is significant as he highlights factors that are not limited to Eurocentric criteria for beauty, which idealise lighter skin, youthfulness, and European features.[21] Nevertheless, Eurocentric beauty ideals persist in their negative effects, as the pressure to conform to these ideals has caused an increase in body modification practices such as cosmetic surgery and skin lightening among ethnic minority women.[22]

Body dissatisfaction is only one of many effects of the Eurocentric ideal, which has also been found to affect life outcomes of ethnic minority women due to the associations between light skin and social mobility in Western societies.[23] Indeed, Whiteness was found to be associated with education and income privileges among women in the US context.[24] Additionally, while previous research suggests that all women internalise an unattainable beauty ideal, the nuances of this ideal are greatly influenced by ethnic identity and culturally specific criteria.[25] This points to the need to

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[16] John Mingoia et al., "The Relationship between Social Networking Site Use and the Internalization of a Thin Ideal in Females: A Meta-Analytic Review", *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2017).

[17] Mingoia et al., "The Relationship between Social Networking Site Use and the Internalization of a Thin Ideal in Females: A Meta-Analytic Review", 2.

[18] Christine Vaughan, William Sacco and Jason Beckstead, "Racial/ethnic differences in Body Mass Index: The roles of beliefs about thinness and dietary restriction" *Body Image* 5 (2008): 297; Lauren Schaefer et al., "Self-objectification, body shame, and disordered eating: Testing a core mediational model of objectification theory among White, Black, and Hispanic women", *Body Image* 24 (2017): 9.

[19] Thomas Cash, "Developmental teasing about physical appearance: Retrospective descriptions and relationships with body image", *Social Behavior and Personality: an International Journal* 23 (1995).

[20] Cash, "Developmental teasing about physical appearance: Retrospective descriptions and relationships with body image".

[21] Rachel Rodgers, Jenna Campagna, Raihaan Attawala, "Stereotypes of physical attractiveness and social influences: The heritage and vision of Dr. Thomas Cash", *Body Image* 31 (2019).

[22] Liebelt, "Beauty and the Norm: An Introduction", 1.

[23] Liebelt, "Beauty and the Norm: An Introduction", 6.

[24] Margaret Hunter, "'IF YOU'RE LIGHT YOU'RE ALRIGHT' Light Skin Color as Social Capital for Women of Color", *Gender and Society* 16, no. 2 (2002): 177.

[25] Luana Marques et al., "Body dysmorphic symptoms: Phenomenology and ethnicity", *Body Image* 8 (2010): 166.

explore the effects of narrow, often Eurocentric beauty ideals in more depth among ethnic minority groups and to extend this research to contexts outside of the West.

Instagram is widely acknowledged in existing research to have the most significantly negative effect on body image compared to other social media platforms, largely due to its highly visual nature.[26] Instagram has gained a reputation for contributing to processes of thin-ideal internalisation, as the images disseminated on the platform often portray characteristics such as a flat stomach and slender waist as ideal.[27] While the platform creates an environment for comparison and competition to thrive, it can also play a more positive role by providing a space for body positive activism or fostering communities that can help combat low self-esteem and loneliness.[28] Unsurprisingly, much of the literature that aims to challenge Instagram's negative effects draws on studies that are conducted in Western contexts, among majority Caucasian participants.[29] The present study therefore aims to represent the experiences of racially diverse, minority ethnic, young women in more depth within this body of research.

The Present Study

A key part of the research methodology is its use of a feminist, intersectional approach that aims to give voice to the groups often marginalised within research.[30] The feminist framework is especially applicable to the study of ethnic minority women, as it fosters emphasis on their unique, lived experiences and the synchronicity of gender with their racial and cultural backgrounds.[31] The study makes use of exploratory, qualitative methods that align with feminist theory, place women and other marginalised groups at the centre of social inquiry, and empower the experiences of the

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[26] Angela Alberga, Samantha Withnell and Kristin von Ranson, "Fitspiration and thinspiration: a comparison across three social networking sites", *Journal of Eating Disorders* 6, no. 39 (2018): 8.

[27] D.M. Wuri and S.M.G Tambunan, "Positive body image activism in collective (@effyourbeautystandards) and personal (@yourstruelymelly) Instagram accounts: Challenging American idealized beauty construction", in *Cultural Dynamics in a Globalised World,* ed. Melani Budianta et al. (London: Routledge, 2017), 298.

[28] Wuri and Tambunan, ""Positive body image activism in collective (@effyourbeautystandards) and personal (@yourstruelymelly) Instagram accounts: Challenging American idealized beauty construction", 300.

[29] Rodgers, Paxton and Wertheim, "#Take idealized bodies out of the picture: A scoping review of social media content aiming to protect and promote positive body image".

[30] Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, *Breaking out again: feminist ontology and epistemology* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[31] Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color", *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991).; Sharlene Hesse-Biber, *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis* (California: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2012).

'other'.[32] This approach helps to move the research beyond existing knowledge situated within the discipline of psychology, which often makes use of quantitative, experimental approaches.[33]

Specifically, online focus group methods were selected to collect data with the aim of uncovering the underlying assumptions, motivations, and emotions behind women's experiences on Instagram.[34] Focus group methods were chosen due to their resemblance to everyday interactions and to create a pressure-free environment for women to share their lived experiences and approach sensitive topics.[35] The research was also conducted during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic; online methods were originally chosen for health and safety reasons, but ultimately allowed me to broaden the scope of my research to populations all over the world.

The final sample consisted of fourteen women. Prior to participation, the women were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire to confirm their age, gender, ethnic background, and location. Participants were able to choose from a list of Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic (BAME) categories informed by the UK context of the research, however, to avoid homogenising ethnic backgrounds, they were also given the opportunity to specify or self-identify their ethnicity in an open-ended answer. Among these participants, ten (71.4%) identified as Asian, one (7.1%) identified as Arab, one (7.1%) identified as Black, and two (14.3%) identified as Mixed/Multiracial. The mean age of participants was 23.64 years. Participants were split into three groups of between four to five members. The key characteristics of the sample are illustrated below.

Group Number	Participant	Location	Ethnicity	Age
1	Fiona	USA	(South-East) Asian	24
	Anna	USA	(South-East) Asian	23
	Melinda	UK	(South) Asian	24
	Isadora	UK	Black African	25
	Clara	UK	(East) Asian	20
2	Andrea	Philippines	(South-East) Asian	24
	Jenny	Philippines	(South-East) Asian	24
	Debbie	Philippines	(South-East) Asian	23

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[32] Hesse-Biber, *Handbook of Feminist Research.*
[33] Grabe, Ward, and Hyde, "The Role of Media in Body Image Concerns Among Women: A Meta-Analysis of Experimental and Correlational Studies"; Rodgers, Paxton and Wertheim, ""#Take idealized bodies out of the picture: A scoping review of social media content aiming to protect and promote positive body image".
[34] Donald Case and Lisa Given, *Looking for information: A survey of research on information seeking, needs, and behavior* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Group Limited, 2016).
[35] Pranee Liamputtong, *Focus Group Methodology* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011), 108.

	Ysabel	Malaysia	(East) Asian	25
	Samantha	Malaysia	(East) Asian	23
3	Ariana	Dubai	(East) Asian	24
	Kirsten	Israel	Mixed (Asian/Arab)	25
	Tatiana	Israel	Mixed (White/Arab)	23
	Sasha	Egypt	Arab	24

Figure 1: Characteristics of the sample, based on information from the demographic survey. Names are pseudonymised and participants are grouped according to their location at the time of the focus groups.

The focus groups were arranged according to geographical location to maximise participants' homogeneity in background, which facilitated comparison across groups.[36] Maximising homogeneity by background (and not attitude) also gave participants the impression of a shared understanding, which subsequently encouraged the discussion of more difficult topics.[37] One group consisted of women living in North America and Europe, another of women living in Asia, and the final group consisted of women living in the Middle East. Despite the differences in their locations at the time of the focus groups, all women expressed that they had the experience of living in both Western and Asian, Middle Eastern or African contexts. These experiences not only reflected the women's positionality as ethnic minorities, but also facilitated further comparison on the effects of acculturation and whether this influenced their perceptions and conceptualisations of beauty on Instagram.

Data collection was conducted online via Zoom. A total of twenty images were collected from Instagram to supplement the discussion, with five photos each depicting young women of Black, Asian, Other (Arab/Middle Eastern) and Mixed/Multiracial ethnicity. The images were presented to the participants based on these ethnic categories. The images were sourced using hashtags related to ethnicity and beauty, such as #Beauty, #AsianBeauty, #BlackBeauty. Images were filtered through a second criterion of belonging to Instagram users with a following of over 5000 people. This assured that the images chosen belonged to individuals who have a significant influence in their online community, which made the images more likely to be representative of an ideal or standard that would subsequently be internalised by others.[38] Photos that were blurry or contained nudity were excluded from the selection. Discussions were mostly participant led but were

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[36] Rosaline Barbour, *Doing Focus Groups* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2008), 59.
[37] Barbour, *Doing Focus Groups,* 59.
[38] Nick Routley, "The Influence of Instagram", *Visual Capitalist*, November 17, 2017.

prompted by a topic guide related to criteria for ideal beauty and feelings about representation. The topic guide was presented alongside the images via PowerPoint, using Zoom's screen sharing option, and played on a constant loop throughout the duration of the discussion. The participants' names have been changed to protect their confidentiality. The views discussed in the following chapter are presented alongside pseudonyms that were chosen from an online, randomised name generator (behindthename.com).

PART I: The Beauty Standard

The first part of the focus group discussions centred around the question, '*When viewing images on Instagram, what do young women from ethnic minorities perceive to be the criteria for ideal beauty?*'. One of the key themes that emerged was the persistence of Eurocentric ideals in the media. Consistent with prior research, the consensus among the women was that ideal beauty is characterised by typically Western features such as White skin, pointy noses and long, straight hair.[39] However, the connotations of skin colour varied depending on cultural and geographical context. While women from all three geographical contexts believed that fair skin alluded to Western beauty, some participants in the Asian focus group context addressed the possible effect of Korean beauty standards, which also idealise fair skin, on Southeast Asian communities. Although references to Korean beauty standards were posed as a challenge to the perceived influence of Eurocentric beauty ideals, Korean beauty standards are still very much rooted in Western ideals, often attributed to the Westernisation of Korean culture in the 1980s.[40] The views expressed by the participants not only suggest the persistent and insidious nature of Eurocentric beauty ideals, but also invite further exploration into how these ideals have been reinvented into Asian standards of beauty.

The women were also concerned with unpacking the relationship between skin colour and status. For the women in North America, Europe, and the Middle East, both fair and tan skin had connotations of wealth and success, depending on their context. To illustrate this idea, one of the participants living in the Middle East, Ariana,[41] drew on her Chinese upbringing and summarised:

'Having fairer skin meant that you weren't working out in the fields, therefore [it] was an indication that you were rich and that you didn't need to engage in manual labour. [But for my White friends], during

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[39] Marques et al., ""Body dysmorphic symptoms: Phenomenology and ethnicity", 164.

[40] Jaehee Jung and Choon Hwang, "Associations between attitudes toward cosmetic surgery, celebrity worship, and body image among South Korean and US female college students", *Fashion and Textiles,* 3, no. 17 (2017): 2.

[41] Name has been changed.

wintertime if you're tan, it means you can travel to far-flung destinations and engage in all these other things that rich people would do'.

These views suggest that standards of ideal skin colour are relative to their cultural context and are influenced by a perception of success, which, at times, draws on Colonialist mentalities of Whiteness as power.[42] In fact, Ariana's views reflect a diluted version of colonialist discourse, which propagates the idea that the dark skin of indigenous peoples represents slavery and barbarism.[43]

These examples led to the women to suggest that beauty ideals are constantly shifting and very much determined by geography. These shifts were emphasised by the experiences of Asian participants who had experienced living in both Asia and the UK. For example, one participant, Melinda[44], recounts, 'Living in the UK I feel more okay being as brown as I am but being back home [in India] there are more comments about "you're so dark" or "you're so fair"'. Similarly, Clara[45], a participant from Hong Kong, believed that she felt a greater pressure to be skinny in Asia than when she moved to the UK. Notably, the pressure to be skinny was experienced by Asian participants regardless of their location. On one hand, these experiences present a challenge to the influence of the Western thin ideal, as they suggest that the pressure to be thin is pre-existing in some ethnic minority communities, particularly Asian. On the other hand, these pre-existing views may still be the effect of lingering Western influence and a sign that adopted colonialist thinking in the East has yet to catch up to the West's changing ideals of beauty.

Conversely, the women also showed awareness of a culture on Instagram that is beginning to challenge Eurocentric beauty ideals to some extent, noting photos of women embracing their natural hair and unconventional features. These views echo previous literature that cites the rise of countercultural accounts on Instagram, which highlight its role in promoting positive body image and contesting existing beauty ideals.[46] Although the women suggested that Instagram may serve as a platform for ethnic minority groups to recognise and react to the effects of Eurocentrism, they were also quick to caveat this with the acknowledgement of shifting – yet persistently unattainable – body ideals propagated on the platform. The women had contrasting views on the link between thinness and beauty, with some participants attributing thinness to health and others suggesting that in their cultures – in areas often marked by food insecurity – 'chubbiness' meant that you were eating well, and are therefore healthy.

Women from all focus group contexts also cited the rise of the hourglass body ideal and popularity of Kim Kardashian, who has influenced body modification trends and waist-training

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[42] Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
[43] Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 52.
[44] Name has been changed.
[45] Name has been changed.
[46] Wuri and Tambunan, ""Positive body image activism in collective (@effyourbeautystandards) and personal (@yourstruelymelly) Instagram accounts: Challenging American idealized beauty construction", 300.

practices, as a challenge to the thin ideal. Nevertheless, the women echoed previous research in their belief that bodies depicted on Instagram feel unattainable and contribute to subsequent feelings of insecurity.[47] Many of the women attributed the pressures of body ideals to the ubiquity appearance-focused images on Instagram, coupled with their anticipation of comments and judgement from others that they grew to expect from the platform. Speaking from her Indian context, Melinda noted, 'It's just not your body type. Knowing that you will not fit that ideal version of beauty and having to accept that […] is a very big problem [...]'. This idea, echoed by many of the women interviewed, supports the connection between Instagram and poor body image and self-esteem established in previous research.

Notably, the women also established a clear distinction between beauty in everyday life and beauty as portrayed on social media. While they acknowledged that some of the photos presented during the discussion could belong to people they would see in everyday life, many also emphasised that Instagram creates a culture of increased scrutiny. It often seemed that having an awareness of Instagram's culture of 'putting your best face forward' served as a protective factor against the internalisation of unattainable beauty ideals among the women. Indeed, the women were often resigned to the idea that images on Instagram are purposely projecting an image of 'perfection' that they deemed unworthy of attempting to replicate, and this in turn helped minimise feelings of insecurity over not looking a certain way.

Describing the culture of Instagram also led to the persistent questioning of 'why we really use [the platform]'. The women acknowledged the transactional nature of interactions on Instagram, and discussed potential reasons for posting on Instagram, such as self-expression, the need to matter, or the ability to 'feel seen'. Women across all groups also highlighted the effects of editing and using filters on the outcomes of their own posts. Isadora[48], from the UK and USA focus group context, stated, 'I do see the difference between when I post a picture of my face with no makeup […], no filter versus a picture [where] I add a filter. The likes and the reactions are quite different'. This view was not only met with agreement from the women in the UK and USA focus group context, but also echoed across the remaining groups. While these discussions highlight the negative effect that Instagram can have on young women's perceptions of beauty, they also suggest ways in which beauty ideals on Instagram can be unlearned or challenged through managing one's expectations of the culture of Instagram.

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[47] Nicole Baker, Ginette Ferszt and Juliana Breines, "A Qualitative Study Exploring Female College Students' Instagram Use and Body Image", *Rapid Communications* 22, no. 4 (2019): 280.
[48] Name has been changed.

PART II: Culture, Ethnicity, and Conceptualising Beauty

The second guiding question for the discussion was, *'To what extent does cultural or ethnic background moderate these criteria for beauty?'*, which led to the women establishing their own, unique criteria for beauty. Prompted by their varying opinions on the thin ideal, the women raised the criterion of health as a universal standard of beauty. The women argued that health as a standard of beauty explains body image ideals and other desirable characteristics such as smooth, clear skin, which was deemed a sign of health as it indicated the absence of acne. Similarly, the women raised the idea that the discourse around thinness is often equated to fitness, viewing a 'well-proportioned body' as a symbol that a person takes care of their overall health and well-being. While this criterion corresponds to previous research that highlights Instagram's emphasis on fitness,[49] the women also implied that it offers a more positive perspective on why thinness continues to be viewed as a beauty ideal. It is important to note, however, that equating thinness to health is a fallacy, not only contested by medical research,[50] but also by constantly shifting representations of a healthy body in history.[51] Issues of food insecurity and socioeconomic status are also equally valid in this discussion, as thinness may not always be related to health for those living in impoverished contexts. Indeed, the group's definition of health may be harder to attain for some ethnic minority groups, and the universality of this criterion for beauty should not be overstated.

In contrast to these views – and to previous research that is preoccupied with external characteristics of beauty – the women introduced more abstract criteria that they deemed to be 'universal' indicators of beauty, such as giving off the impression of effortlessness and 'seeming put-together', which have not been acknowledged in previous research. Similar to existing research on Chinese women, the women also emphasised qualities of inner beauty such as self-confidence, self-awareness, self-expression, and perceived approachability, characterised by smiling in photographs.[52] This demonstrates unique criteria that ethnic minority women adhere to when judging beauty and suggests that, for these women in particular, beauty ideals are more than just skin deep. The emphasis on inner beauty suggests the influence of concepts upheld in collectivist, Eastern cultures, such as the importance of conducting oneself in an honourable manner to represent the community, often referred to as 'saving face'.[53] The development of 'universal' criteria for beauty also seemed to be a way for the women, especially those in the UK and US focus group context, to challenge the Eurocentric ideal, as they believed that any woman could possess these

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[49] Marika Tiggemann and Mia Zaccardo, "'Exercise to be fit, not skinny': The effect of fitspiration imagery on women's body image", *Body Image* 15 (2018): 1004.

[50] Linda Bacon and Lucy Aphramor, "Weight Science: Evaluating the Evidence for a Paradigm Shift", *Nutritional Journal* 10, no. 9 (2011): 4.

[51] Jacqueline Howard, "The history of the 'ideal' woman and where that has left us", *CNN Health,* March 9, 2018.

[52] Meng Zhang, "A Chinese beauty story: how college women in China negotiate beauty, body image, and mass media", *Chinese Journal of Communication* 5, no. 4 (2012): 447.

[53] Joo Kim and Sang Nam, "The Concept and Dynamics of Face: Implications for Organizational Behavior in Asia", *Organization Science* 9, no. 4 (1998): 522.

characteristics, regardless of ethnicity. While it is valid to propose that qualities of inner beauty such as self-confidence and self-expression are not exclusive to any ethnicity, these characteristics, like the aforementioned criterion of 'health', are not without their limitations in geographical context or socioeconomic status.

When discussing the effects of cultural and ethnic background on their criteria for beauty, many of the women highlighted their religious upbringings as a key influence on what they perceived as beautiful both on and offline. Women across all three groups spoke from their religious backgrounds of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, believing that modesty is highly valued in their religions and subsequently feeds into their own ideas of beauty. Muslim and Jewish participants in particular felt that they wanted to see more women in head coverings represented, as this was a characteristic of beauty that represented their religious values. For example, when speaking about her Jewish faith, Tatiana[54] stated:

'I think beauty is doing what you're comfortable [with]. Right now, I would never ever wear [revealing clothing], simply because it clashes with what I believe in. I'm not saying it's not beautiful, I'm saying it's not beautiful for me'.

While participants claimed that their views surrounding modesty echoed the thinking of older generations, the view of doing what one is comfortable with shifts the gatekeeping of older generations to a view of accepting all forms of expression and beauty. The emphasis on 'what is beautiful for me' also links to third wave feminist discourse, which centres on the specificity of women's experiences and emphasises the language of choice.[55] These discussions suggest that both faith and wider feminist discourse have significant influence on the conceptualisations of beauty of young women from ethnic minorities and highlights the need to further consider the implications of religious values, or rather, negotiations of religion and feminism, in discussions surrounding criteria for beauty.

While religion, to some extent, played a protective role in the women's perceptions of beauty, their criteria for beauty were ultimately influenced by feelings of judgement – and sometimes overt mocking, racism, or othering – that they experienced in their communities. Specifically, the women addressed the negative, lingering effects of colonialism on those who did not adhere to Western beauty ideals. The women believed that upholding Eurocentric ideals contributed to the prevalence of racism within ethnic minority communities, giving examples of people being mocked or belittled within Asian and Arab communities for having dark skin and curly hair. Even in an African context,

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[54] Name has been changed.
[55] Shelley Budgeon, *Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender in Late Modernity* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 130.

one participant, Isadora, believed that dark skin was rejected, noting the prominence of skin bleaching practices on the continent.

Moreover, the women stressed that many xenophobic and conservative views were propagated by their elders but were not views that they themselves held. Although not explicitly stated by the participants, the shift in generational attitudes may be attributed to the growing popularity of third wave feminist discourses and subsequent exposure to these views on social media.[56] Nevertheless, the women's perspectives demonstrated a clear generational difference in perceptions of beauty that subsequently affected the participants' own criteria for beauty. One key difference that emerged was the women's growing appreciation for self-expression as a criterion for beauty, manifested in their positive reactions to photos of women on Instagram with tattoos or piercings. The women believed that such photos challenged conventions and taboos held by their conservative relatives and communities. Indeed, the stigma surrounding tattoos carries more weight and meaning in specific cultures, such as in Judaism, where tattoos are forbidden,[57] or Japan, where tattoos are associated with organised crime.[58] The women's rejection of this stigma suggests a departure from dominant cultural ideals to support the idea of beauty as individual choice and agency over one's body, much like their views on modesty.

PART III: The Need for Representation

Finally, the women addressed the question of whether they believed that ethnic minority groups were positively and/or accurately represented by the images they view on Instagram. Overall, the women took issue with how their race and culture were portrayed on social media and within beauty discourse. Many believed that representations of their ethnicities were often generalised or stereotyped. East Asian women felt particularly subject to greater scrutiny and fetishisation among men on social media. Some of the Asian participants challenged the use of hashtags like #AsianBeauty to accompany photos on Instagram, highlighting the negative connotations of emphasising Asian-ness in the context of beauty. As Samantha[59] described, 'It kind of feels like by emphasising the Asian aspects of my beauty, […] I'm opening myself up to the fetishisation of Asian women […] to white eyes'. Indeed, like Samantha, East Asian women in the group spoke of minimising their Asian-ness for fear of fetishising themselves at the hands of men with "Yellow Fever", a slang term given to White males who exclusively seek out Asian women as their sexual

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[56] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

[57] Oz Almog, "Tattooing the Taboo: The Tattoo Trend in Israel", *Israel Studies Forum* 19, no. 1 (2019): 123.

[58] John Skutlin, "Fashioning Tattooed Bodies: An Exploration of Japan's Tattoo Stigma", *Asia Pacific Perspectives* 16, no. 1 (2019): 4.

[59] Name has been changed.

preference. While the objectification of women through a male gaze is not a novel phenomenon,[60] the experiences of the women interviewed support findings in previous research about the effect of the anticipated male gaze in increasing self-objectification in women.[61] Not only does the influence of the male gaze persist on social media, but it now also exists in new, racialised forms.

In the same vein, the Asian women in the focus groups also raised the idea that representations of race and religion are often conflated. Specifically, they believed that Middle Eastern beauty is often defined in terms of its Muslim-ness and subsequently subject to prejudice, not necessarily due to physical characteristics, but because of radical beliefs about the position of Muslim people within society. In their acknowledgement of Islamophobia, the women also suggested that removing religious connotations in depictions of Middle Eastern women affords them privileged representations within beauty discourse, due to the fact that they share features (i.e., light coloured eyes, pointed noses) with the perceived Western standard of beauty. When speaking about Middle Eastern women, Ysabel[62] posited:

'It's the headscarf that seems to define the Muslim-ness of them, but not really the Middle Eastern-ness of them. […] It just doesn't occur to me that they are considered an oppressed minority in the beauty industry, in terms of physical features and everything'.

The discussion revealed the difficulty in separating depictions of certain minority ethnic groups from debates around veiling. Moreover, the women argued that while East-Asian beauty is hyper-visible in mainstream media, Middle Eastern beauty separate from religious signifiers is almost invisible and requires more consideration when speaking about women from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, such as Arab or South Asian. The discussions ultimately suggest the need to explore religious signifiers (such as the veil) as new criteria for beauty, as well as the need to explore the discourse surrounding religion, beauty, and representation in more depth.

It is also worth highlighting the role that feminism is perceived to play in the portrayal of religious women. The women in the focus groups often raised the idea of the 'forgotten religious woman', stating that White feminism and the movement for sexual liberation led to beauty being equated to showing more skin. Indeed, the idea of showing skin is subject to debate in third wave feminism, where the choice to cover one's body can be interpreted as an inappropriate expression of female agency.[63] Due to this, many of the women felt there was still a need to represent the

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[60] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen* 16 (1975): 6.
[61] Wong et al., "Exploring the Conceptualization of Body Image for Asian American Women", *American Psychological Association 8,* no. 4 (2017): 304.
[62] Name has been changed.
[63] Budgeon, *Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender in Late Modernity,* 133.

religious groups within ethnic minority groups, as more secular representations of race and ethnicity seem to be favoured on social media.

Similarly, although there are movements on Instagram that strive to increase the diversity of women's representation, body-focused diversity movements still engage in highly sexualised portrayals of women. For example, recent content analyses of body-positive imagery on social media demonstrates that many of these images still adhere to themes of sexual objectification, often depicting women in revealing clothing or in sexually suggestive poses.[64] These depictions can alienate groups of women – such as religious women who value modesty – who seek varied representations of beauty but do not wish to engage in these kinds of portrayals online. Returning to the idea of expressions of female agency within feminism, perhaps there is a need to accommodate other feminisms, such as Islamic feminism, within beauty discourse and to reinterpret ideas of agency and freedom of choice to align with more modest representations of women on social media.[65] Overall, the women in the focus groups were resigned to the idea that the types of accounts that garner the most attention on Instagram still conform to narrow, Eurocentric, secular ideals of beauty. As one participant, Ariana, concluded, representations of unconventional beauty on Instagram are 'the exception, not the rule'.

Conclusion

This paper offers an insight to a larger study that aimed to answer the question, '*To what extent does Instagram influence the perceptions of beauty of young women between the ages of 18-25, from ethnic minorities?*'. The focus group discussions confirmed that there is a significant, and often negative, relationship between Instagram and ethnic minority women's perceptions of both their own and others' beauty. Many of the women believed that the culture of Instagram persists in portraying narrow, unattainable, and often Eurocentric ideals of beauty, which echoes ideas in prior research on Whiteness and social media representation.[66] Although Instagram affords ethnic minority women a space to foster communities of diversity and create symbols of representation, countercultural efforts on Instagram are ultimately not enough to negate the oppressive influence of Eurocentric thinking that pervades mainstream media.

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[64] Megan Vendemia, David DeAndrea and Kyla Braithwaite, "Objectifying the body positive movement: The effects of sexualizing and digitally modifying body-positive images on Instagram", *Body Image* 38 (2021): 138.

[65] Joan Scott, "Secularism and Gender Equality", in *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference, ed.* Linnell Cady and Tracy Fessenden (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 35.

[66] Cheney, "'Most Girls Want to be Skinny': Body (Dis)Satisfaction Among Ethnically Diverse Women"; Mingoia et al., "The Relationship between Social Networking Site Use and the Internalization of a Thin Ideal in Females: A Meta-Analytic Review".

The discussions also revealed some of the culture-specific criteria that may guide ethnic minority women's perceptions of beauty. First, the findings indicate that beauty in non-Western cultures is not limited to physical criteria and significantly guided by characteristics of inner beauty. This demonstrates a shift in the understanding of beauty that deserves greater acknowledgement in future research; one that does not conflate beauty with solely body size and shape. Second, the women's views emphasise the need for greater and more accurate representations of ethnic minority women on social media. While the women appeared to be in a negotiating position as to what 'accurate' representations on Instagram would entail, their views on religion, choice, and agency suggest that these representations would need to be intersectional, to account for the significance of both religion and race in expressions of ethnic minority identity and femininity.

Comparing the experiences of minority ethnic women from different geographical contexts highlighted the outside influences, privileges and ideologies that shape how they view their identity and/or beauty. Even in online spaces that are perceived – or even, expected – to foster the sharing of diverse views and experiences, the lasting effects of colonialism are apparent; despite constantly shifting beauty ideals, a view remains of Whiteness and its associated characteristics as superlative. Navigating beauty and femininity is further complicated by conflicting notions of gender, where the role and representation of women in society is subject to critique within both feminist and religious discourse.

Ultimately, the conversations revealed the nuances in representation that should be addressed in future research – and wider discourses on ethnicity, gender, and beauty – by giving more space to ethnic minority women to share their unique experiences. The discussions demonstrate that conceptualisations of beauty cannot be treated as separate from considerations of religious, cultural, and gender identity, especially when viewed within a globalised media context like Instagram. Indeed, the implications of this study are pursued in my doctoral research, which addresses the intersections of race and religion on perceptions of beauty and femininity in more depth, centring once again on the experiences of persistently marginalised and stigmatised populations of women.

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