Decoding dominant ideals of beauty: Young women's engagements with media representations, social environments, and media literacy

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Abstract

Beauty is an important and complex concept. A variety of sociocultural environments articulates beauty and physical attractiveness to success and popularity. The influence of media deserves particular attention as it is able to create and circulate dominant ideals of beauty. Research suggests that dominant ideals of beauty created by media have a strong impact on women's perceptions of beauty. However, the influence of media is not absolute, and the audiences can decode media messages from a variety of positions: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional. Further, the decoding positions may vary depending on the context and the individual's critical skills required to interrogate media messages.

The main goal of this research was to qualitatively explore the role of beauty in the lives of young women in New Zealand, and to investigate how media influences their perceptions of beauty. Additionally, I aimed to explore whether media literacy skills impacted how young women decode visual texts in media.

Drawing on feminist cultural studies, this qualitative research involved two in-depth individual interviews with sixteen participants. The results are organised into three main themes. The first theme focuses on how young women make meaning about beauty and explains the key physical characteristics they associate with dominant ideals of beauty. I explore the emergence of the 'skinny-curvy' trend and its growing popularity in place of previously dominant ideals of thinness. The second theme focuses of the importance of beauty, beauty practices, pleasures and pressures of beauty, and how young women resist dominant ideals of beauty. The third theme addresses young women's knowledge of media literacy, and their levels of critical awareness of image manipulation used in media.

The implications for this study are associated with the importance of teaching critical media literacy. By examining the influence of beauty ideals on the lives of young women, this research reinforced the feminist cultural studies perspective on the multidirectional flow of power in relation to young women and their engagement with beauty, thus creating a "dialectical play between resistance and incorporation" (Storey, 1997, p. 11).

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No man is an island entire of itself; every man

is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.

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Contents

Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis is the result of my personal and scholarly interest in representations of female beauty in the media and how such representations affect the lives of young women. It is a feminist cultural studies-informed research project, which applies British cultural studies' concepts to explore the circulation of power (Jhally, 2005) in relation to young women's engagements with dominant ideals of beauty that circulate in the media. The study focuses on the voices of the participants and centralises their experiences of beauty.

Since the 19th century, ideals of *perfection* around women's bodies have become highly significant in Western societies (Brumberg, 1997). Even though ideas of female empowerment were present in the 19th century, women were still oppressed by existing practices and found themselves still "pursuing a feminine ideal of dependency, domesticity, and delicacy" (Bordo, 1993, p. 184). The role of media expanded in the 20th century with the popularity of, firstly, newspapers and radio, and then, television (Hendriks, 2002). Research suggests that, since at least the 1940s, women have tended to compare themselves to unrealistic and ideal standards of beauty circulated via mass media (Jung et al., 2001). The comparison has intensified with the growth of social media and technologies such as mobile devices and mobile phones, as modern societies are the most "media-engaged people in history" (Wood, 2011, p. 256). Researchers have argued that the media has a powerful influence on how women view themselves and their bodies (e.g., Bordo, 2003; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Wolf, 1991). Yan and Bissell (2014) note that:

> Women are constantly bombarded by information in mass media which transmits and reinforces values, norms, and ideals of fashion and beauty via images of models, movie stars, and female celebrities in a variety of media formats. (p. 194)

In this research, I use the following definition of social media: "Internet-based tools that allow people to create and publish content of their choice, often collaboratively, to reach a select group of people" (Price et al., 2013, p. 19).

Psychological studies support the idea that exposure to idealised beauty images in the media can lead to increased body dissatisfaction for girls, and, possibly, eating disorders (e.g., Groesz et al., 2002; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004; Stice et al., 2001; Willinge et al., 2006). A significant body of research also suggests that many women are engaged in body altering behaviours (e.g., diets, physical exercise, plastic surgery) in order to try to achieve the beauty ideals presented to them (Bryant & Oliver, 2009; Doodall, 2002; Littell, 1978; Saltzberg & Chrisler, 1995; Schooler et al., 2004), as ideas, values, norms, attitudes, and behaviours transmitted by media influence the lives of individuals (Bryant & Oliver, 2009). Wood (2011) argues that media influences "most people's opinions, identities, choices and lives" (p. 257) and creates ideals related to the physical appearance of both men and women. Focusing on young women, Azzarito (2010) argued that: "Media provides a material site for girls' identity formation and presents conflicting images of femininity, which challenge young women's self-expression and physicality development" (p. 261). Bordo (2003) described the continuous transmission of beauty messages in the media in this way:

> In our Sunday news. With our morning coffee. On the bus, in the airport, at the checkout line … A teen magazine: tips on how to dress, how to wear your hair, how to make him want you. The endless commercials and advertisements that we believe we pay no attention to. Constant, everywhere, no big deal. Like water in a goldfish

> bowl, barely noticed by its inhabitants. Or noticed, but dismissed: "eye candy" – a harmless indulgence. They go down so easily, in and out, digested and forgotten. (p. 1)

The representation of beauty in the media, and how this representation affects the lives of young women, is the central focus of this thesis. The main research question is: *In what ways do dominant beauty ideals intersect with young women's lives and identities?*

The thesis focuses on the complexities associated with participants' surveillance of themselves and others, their attempts to negotiate with dominant ideals of beauty, as well as their ability to decode media messages in various decoding positions. The study also enquires into young women's understandings of image manipulation and their ability to apply media literacy in relation to media messages. There are several key reasons for this study. I outline each of these important foci next, before providing a brief summary of the study design, a reflection on my own subjective interests as a researcher, and finally providing an overview of the thesis.

Justification for the study: The limited palette of dominant ideals of beauty

The importance of physical attractiveness represents a global phenomenon (Yan & Bissell, 2014). Castillo (2013) argued that beauty is not an abstract concept, but rather one that can be measured and that consists of specific characteristics: "although many say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, I do not agree. To me, beauty is clearly defined, objective, and even measurable" (p. 1). Indeed, the existing body of research describes a rather limited number of physical characteristics that determine dominant ideals of female beauty as a thin, blonde, white woman with clear skin, big blue eyes, full lips, and a narrow nose (e.g., Bordo, 2003; Castillo, 2013; Limatius, 2018; Maslow, 2015; Wood & Vialle, 2015). This restricting representation of female beauty circulated by the media (Guy, 2007) influences women's perceptions of beauty

and the perceptions of their own bodies (Saltzberg & Chrisler, 1995; Willinge et al., 2006). A global issue is that young women's perceptions of their bodies can be negatively affected by the circulation of dominant ideals of beauty in media (Berman & White, 2013). According to Bullen (2009), "the constant exposure to sexualisation, objectification and images of gender stereotypes directly contribute to girls' lack of self and body-confidence, as well as depression and eating disorders" (p. 150). Szymanski et al. (2011) explained that the sexual objectification of women happens "when a woman's body or body parts are singled out and separated from her as a person and she is viewed primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire" (p. 8).

The circulation of dominant ideals of beauty in the media was highlighted by Bordo (1997), where she discussed the influence of visual texts on our perceptions of dominant ideals of beauty: "with created images setting the standard, we are becoming habituated to the glossy and gleaming, the smooth and the shining, the ageless and sag-less and wrinkle-less. We are learning to expect 'perfection' and to find any 'defect' repellent, unacceptable" (p. 3). Furthermore, women have been "socialized to rely on their 'natural' resources… beauty, charm, nurturance" (Hesse-Biber, 1991, p. 178) since the early stages of their lives. Girls and young women recognise that physical attractiveness is an important component of their social environments (Piirto, 2019). For instance, it can influence their status among their peers and friends (e.g., Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2020; Francis et al., 2012; Helfert & Warschburger 2013; Tsang, 2017), as "peers represent a highly salient point of reference for self-evaluations during adolescence" (Matera et al., 2013, p. 9). Wood and Vialle (2015) noted that "studies consistently showed that girls were influenced by the images in popular culture and aspired to both look like and behave in the same way as the women portrayed as a way of finding peer acceptance" (p. 14). The existing body of research also confirms that physically attractive people experience more positive reception and are, generally, better off in life (e.g., Margariti

et al., 2021; Weitz, 2001). As summarised by Kwan and Trautner (2009), “attractive people are in fact treated better and experience desirable social outcomes” (p. 51).

An example of the connections between the media and the audience, in this case with young women, can be illustrated by the research on the popularity of the term #thinspiration (e.g., Grabe et al., 2008; Groesz et. al., 2002), a proliferation of thin-ideal images circulated on social media channels such as Pinterest, Instagram, Tumblr, and Twitter. According to the results of previous research in this area, thinspiration has become highly popular in recent years and encourages weight loss by promoting the ideals of thin and slender bodies (e.g., Bahadur, 2013; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Spiegel, 2013). Thinspiration is often connected with advice on how to lose weight and maintain thinness (Lapinski, 2006). Research identifies how thinspiration and its harmful effects are closely associated with the prevalence of thin models promoted by the media (Grabe et al., 2008). Indeed, researchers express strong concerns about the risks related to the use of thinspiration content, which might lead both to an internalization of thinness and subsequent self-discrepancies and disorders in the eating behaviour of the audience (e.g., Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Hargreaves & Tiggeman, 2003; Levine & Murnen, 2009). Despite the possible dangers, slender and thin female bodies, researchers argue, are still considered as a dominant ideal of beauty (e.g., Bordo, 2003; Ging & Garvey, 2018; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Limatius, 2018). Lupton (2017) pointed out the media’s representation of thin female bodies as “beautiful and sexually desirable” (p. 119), calling this thin body ideal limiting and hard to achieve by women who have other body shapes. As described by Seager (2016), “the size of the global weight loss and diet industry is impossible to measure, but revenues certainly reach into the multibillions” (p. 89). McRobbie (2008) explored the dangers of constantly expanding consumerism and its commercial values that affect the “formation of the categories of youthful femininity” (p. 532), thus affecting the purchasing decisions of young women. As explained by Seager (2016), “everywhere in the

world, but especially in rich countries, tens of thousands of women each year have their bodies cut, shaped, stapled and manipulated to conform to prevailing and increasingly globalised standards of beauty" (p. 90). Based on data from 2016, "17.1 million cosmetic procedures were performed, 92% on women" in attempts to improve their physical appearance (Seager, 2016, p. 90). This limited representation of women's physical appearance creates new ways to generate and feed consumerist desire: in the book *Anorexia Nervosa*, Bordo (2008) examined the anorexic's sense of embodiment and other obsessive body practices of contemporary culture, arguing that new practices were logical manifestations of anxieties and fantasies fostered by contemporary culture. In another book, *Unbearable Weight*, Bordo (2004) argued that even though feminism was the first movement that commented on the politics of the human body, it did not cover such areas of life as the representation of the body in medical, religious, and philosophical discourse, artworks, and other cultural texts. Therefore, there is an ongoing need to conduct research dedicated to women and in relation to their lives. The dominant ideals of beauty might cause young women not only to experience anxiety associated with their physical appearance but may also lead to "premature hypersexualization of girls" (Renold & Ringrose, 2017, p. 1066).

Together with commercial values that affect young women, the media holds an important position in young people's identity development (Bruce & Saunders, 2005). In this thesis, I explore how young women engaged with and decoded media messages in relation to beauty and physical appearance. According to Bruce and Saunders (2005), "…understanding how the media works and what 'material' it might be providing is vital" (p. 51). Additionally, with the development of social media, it has become easier for women to let the world know what they think by "weaving a hyperquilt of women's voices throughout most of the planet" (Castells, 2004, p. 195). Zaslow (2009) studied the real-life experiences of young women in relation to women's representation in the media from a feminist point of view, and argued that:

> Exploring the experience of growing up in girl media culture requires a decentering of the media text and focus onto the ways in which teen girls integrate, struggle with, negotiate, and embrace girl power media culture… The large body of research on youth and media does not account for the social processes through which girls incorporate culture into their narratives of self nor does it enable an investigation of the ways in which girls weave media experiences with "real life" experiences to form gendered identities. (p. 10)

Drawing on Zaslow's (2009) ideas, this thesis focuses on the detailed examination of young women's interactions with ideal beauty and its representations in media and their sociocultural environments.

Media literacy and image manipulation

Previously discussed negative aspects associated with dominant ideals of beauty in the media encourage the discussion of media literacy in the lives of young women. It is important to study image manipulation as "unrealistic, photoshopped and stereotyped images used by the media, advertising and fashion industries" (Berman & White, 2013, p. 38) influence young people's perceptions of their bodies (Berman & White, 2013; Choukas-Bradley et al., 2018; Yan & Bissell, 2014). Importantly, young audiences are more affected by media messages and their possible negative effects (Goodall, 2012; Prakoso et al., 2017; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). The importance of media literacy and critical thinking for both young people and adults is a part of a "lifelong process" (boyd, 2014, p. 198). As my research focused on young women, I pay particular concern to their engagement with the media, which will be further discussed in the findings chapters.

The presence of media literacy in the lives of young people is important as it promotes critical awareness and contributes to the development of cultural competencies, thus increasing their ability to be more critically aware in their engagement with media in the "new media landscape" (Jenkins, 2009, p. xiii). In addition, young women can recognise the presence of image manipulation in media representations and debunk the beauty myth of dominant ideals of beauty. As described by Wolf (2002) "…the beauty myth tells a story: the quality called 'beauty' objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it" (p. 12). And as Wolf (2002) argues, this myth has nothing to do with the reality we live in, in which beauty is…

> …determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact. In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves. (p. 12)

In this thesis, I discuss power relations, the importance of feminist cultural studies and Stuart Hall's input in the discipline and in the understanding of contemporary culture (McRobbie, 2008) and how media affects audience's perceptions of the world (Hall, 1980). The use of feminist cultural studies makes it possible to focus on women's critical thinking and understandings of beauty in the media, power relations, media literacy, and young women's engagement with the media (Brooks, 2007; Hall, 1985).

Media literacy has been an important part of my life and will be discussed in another section. It educated me on the presence of image manipulation in media, thus providing me with tools to negotiate my relationship with dominant ideals of beauty represented in media.

Why this research matters

There is an abundant presence of research in relation to media influence on audiences (e.g., Bryant & Oliver, 2009; Groesz et al., 2002; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016), and the influence of dominant ideals of beauty in the lives of women – in particular, the importance of being slender and thin (e.g., Bordo, 2003; Limatius, 2018; Krane et al., 2001; Kwan & Trautner, 2009; Wood & Vialle, 2015). What makes this research unique is the focus on young women's perceptions of beauty and their engagement with media. By basing this study on in-depth interviews with young women aged 19 to 24, I seek to contribute to the most recent research on young women's engagement with media in relation to beauty (e.g., Caldeira, 2021; McComb & Mills, 2021; Ouytsel et al., 2020). I investigate New Zealand concepts of beauty, focusing on the experiences and stories of young women who were either born in New Zealand or moved to New Zealand from other countries. As I examine how participants navigate within and between cultural contexts, this research creates an original contribution to the existing body of research.

Study design

My thesis recognised the importance of my participants' unique experiences, aligning with both feminist research that focuses on "distinct and discernible" (Letherby, 2003, p. 102) presentation of women's voices and girlhood studies that address "research and engagement with girls, for girls, and by girls that aim to draw attention to their literal absence and voicelessness in initiatives that affect their lives" (Mandrona, 2016, p. 3). Additionally, I focused on the clear delivery of the findings, which could be "accessible to everyone" (Stanley & Wise, 1990, p. 24), and not only academics – as the accessibility of research is an important

part of feminist cultural studies. As a result, I took up opportunities to discuss my research and findings in New Zealand mainstream media (e.g., Keogh, 2019; Reid, 2020).

I conducted this research with deep respect for each participant, and I wanted to address the complexity and uniqueness of their experiences. As argued by Luke (1994):

> Women's complex and multiple identities experienced in and through the discourses that define feminine gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity, class, or culture, suggest that an understanding of women and the concept of femininity cannot be articulated in universal principles, but must come from women's individual voices articulated from specific social and cultural locations. (p. 33)

I chose a qualitative research design focused on a small group of participants (Silverman, 2005) in order to gain a detailed description of participants' perceptions, feelings, stories, and thoughts (Mutch, 2013). I conducted 32 in-depth interviews: two each with 16 participants, all of whom were young women aged 19 to 24, residing in Auckland, New Zealand. A qualitative approach is commonly used in feminist research (Del Busso, 2007; Plummer & Simpson, 2014; Yost & Chmielewski, 2012; Worell & Etaugh, 1994) because it focuses on unique experiences of the individuals (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; O'Brien, 2008) and seeks to improve women's lives (Kirsch, 2005).

According to Brizuela et al. (2000), qualitative research not only focuses on a deep exploration of research questions, but also offers opportunities for a more personal relationship between the researcher and the research process:

> Qualitative researchers begin with a question they want to answer, a problem they want to explore, or a situation they want to change. That question, problem, or situation – which is open to modification throughout the research process – reflects the researcher,

her interests, and beliefs. It also drives the whole research process and determines how data is collected. (p. xviii)

Personal reflections on the background to this study

As a young woman, I have always been interested in the role and importance of beauty. Growing up, I acknowledged the importance of physical appearance for a woman and was influenced by the portrayal of young women in media for children. For instance, I would see popular Disney cartoons where young, skinny and smiling Disney princesses in beautiful dresses had almost identical faces and large eyes and who were ideally beautiful in contrast with other women in the stories – the villainesses who were not necessarily skinny or young, and could have short or grey hair, and their dresses were rather extravagant and unusual. The observation of such contrasts as a child influenced my association of beauty with kindness and inspired my belief that a beautiful person is a good person (see also Herbozo et al., 2004; Kirkpatrick & Sanders, 1978; Sawyer, 2003; Tiggemann & Wilson-Barrett, 1998). While I was growing up in Russia, I was exposed to a variety of content generated by Western media. This content portrayed dominant ideologies of ideal beauty and was limited only to particular physical attributes, such as skinny bodies, long hair, whiteness, white teeth and a tan.

Women's magazines especially affected my perceptions of beauty in my teen years. The main focus of the magazines I was exposed to was the importance of physical appearance, with colourful covers and images of perfect celebrities and models. One of the most popular magazines in Russia was *Cosmopolitan*, and its featured covers could be regarded as one of the most standard representations of women's beauty in the media: smiling skinny women with flawless makeup, flawless skin, flawless hair, wearing flattering tight clothes and often showing a lot of skin, flat bellies, and accentuating attention to the women's breasts [Figure 1].

Fig. 1. Examples of Russian Cosmopolitan covers, 2000–2010. Source: Hearst Magazine Media, Inc.

As a teen, I struggled to meet the expectations of beauty I internalised from the media images. When I was 19, I was diagnosed with anorexia. Looking at myself at that age, I believe that my growing interest in media literacy helped me to deal with my unhealthy relationship with food and my struggle to be skinny. As I discovered the presence of Photoshop in the media, I found out that celebrities and models don't really look as perfect in real life as on magazine covers. This myth about ideal beauty (Wolf, 2002) is often created by image manipulation – aimed to promote consumerism and unachievable standards of physical appearance. Further research on image manipulation sparked my interest in the power of media, as well as my concern about the apparent absence of media literacy education among the young women I knew. My interest in the representation of women in mass media influenced my master's degree, which explored how various Russian magazines portray women. The findings suggested that popular women's magazines focused on representation of dominant ideologies of beauty primarily by using

images of beautiful celebrities and models (Vasilyeva, 2015). Because of my own experiences in my late teens, I was interested to know how other young women might be caught up in the dominant ideologies of beauty, their level of media literacy knowledge, and the possible value of introducing more women to the presence of image manipulation in the media.

Overview of the thesis

This study is underpinned by theoretical concepts from feminist cultural studies with a particular emphasis on the circulation of power and how young women decode media messages in relation to beauty. This thesis consists of eight chapters.

Following this Introduction, Chapter Two introduces the theoretical framework of feminist cultural studies. This framework enabled me to pay attention to the perspectives of young women and to analyse how they engaged with dominant ideals of beauty. In this chapter, I focus on three decoding positions evident in participants' answers: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional. I introduce key cultural studies concepts that include representation, discourse, decoding, hegemony, intertextuality, and the role of mass media in the lives of the audiences.

Chapter Three is an overview of key literature in the field, in particular: current dominant ideals of beauty; the role of beauty in the lives of girls and young women; examples of the changing components of beauty throughout history; globalisation and consumerism; how mass media affects women's perceptions of beauty at different stages of their lives; the importance of media literacy and knowledge about image manipulation for younger audiences and social media users.

Chapter Four is focused on methods I used to construct and analyse the research data. This chapter provides a description of why I chose to conduct two in-depth interviews with each of

the 16 participants; the focus of and the ways I conducted my interviews and structured data collection; demographic data on the research participants and the ethics that guided the research process.

Chapter Five provides an exploration of the body, and how dominant ideals of beauty may have changed with the growth of social media. I discuss the importance of being skinny, and the growing role of the trend "skinny-curvy". After that, I examine the role of interpretive communities – such as families, friends, and peers – on young women's perceptions of the body. Finally, I examine which components of physical appearance young women articulated to female beauty.

Chapter Six is dedicated to the analysis of "circulating power relations" (Elias & Gill, 2018, p. 64) associated with participants' discourses of beauty practices, pleasures and pressures of ideal beauty, and the discourses of their resistance to dominant ideals of beauty.

Chapter Seven focuses on young women's knowledge of media literacy and image manipulation in the media. I address participants' analysis of brands that attempt to represent a diversity of women's physical appearances, and participants' knowledge of, and reactions to, celebrities who speak up about image alterations and the use of Photoshop.

Chapter Eight presents the conclusion and analysis of the three findings' chapters, implications of this study, limitations of this research, and suggestions for future research.

Through the in-depth, multiple-interview approach, I was able to hear the voices and stories of young women – about their lives and the lives of their family members and friends – and understand how dominant beauty ideologies can affect their perceptions of beauty and physical attractiveness. All participants' voices are presented in *italics*, as their visibility was a priority

in this research. It is also important to acknowledge that research participants were regarded as unique individuals, who had different countries of origin (more information is presented in the Methodology Chapter), families, and cultural backgrounds.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I introduce my research paradigm and discuss the theory and concepts underpinning my research. The theory applied in this research is feminist cultural studies, and the concepts used will reflect the work of Stuart Hall, a key figure in the theoretical field of cultural studies and media. Additionally, this research is dedicated to women and their lives. Therefore, a combination of two interdisciplinary academic disciplines offered a theoretical framework best suited for this research – feminist engagement with key concepts from cultural studies.

The first section of this chapter provides a definition of culture and discussion of cultural studies. The second section discusses the impact of feminism on cultural studies and the role of feminist cultural studies, as well as its impact on the field of scholarship. In the third section, I expand on cultural studies concepts to address power relations, how audiences navigate structures using their own agency, and the polysemic nature of texts. I will use the framework of dominant, negotiated and oppositional reading positions to understand the complex ways that my participants engage with and decode media messages.

Culture and cultural studies

In this section, I provide an introduction to culture and cultural studies and its key concepts with an emphasis on Stuart Hall's work. I explain why the representation of female beauty is important and how young women negotiate and enact their relationships with it.

It is problematic to provide an exact definition of the word *culture*. Even though cultural studies employs culture as the main focus of its study, various definitions of the term *culture* can be acknowledged. For example, anthropologist Sir E. B. Tylor (1871) presented one of the oldest

definitions, proposing that "culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p. 1); on the other hand, cultural studies scholar Raymond Williams (1976) described culture as "an individual habit of mind; the state of intellectual development of a whole society; the arts; and the whole way of life of a group or people" (p. 76). Here, I adopt the following explanation of what cultural studies suggests as a meaning of this term:

> Culture is a complicated and contested word because the concept does not represent an entity in an independent object world. Rather it is best thought of as a mobile signifier that enables distinct and divergent ways of talking about human activity for a variety of purposes. That is, the concept of culture is a tool that is of more or less usefulness to us as a life form and its usage and meanings continue to change as thinkers have hoped to "do" different things with it. (Barker, 2004, p. 44)

In the transcript of a pubic lecture Hall gave in 1997 (Jhally, 2005), Hall described culture as "a way in which we make sense of or give meaning to things of one sort of another" (p. 9). I use the idea of culture described by Ryan (2010) as a "software of our lives" (p. xi), where rules are dynamic, and in which our bodies are engaged in sophisticated relationships based on how we look and how we act, thus creating a socially influenced phenomenon that is both "cultured and cultural" (p. 161). Ryan (2010) further argued:

> If the way we style our physical selves depends on our thoughts or concerns about how others see us, then one could say that the culture of bodies is in part social, and it depends on mental imagery – the thoughts in our minds regarding how others perceive us – that plays an important role in shaping us physically (p. 161)

Thus, Ryan (2010) suggested our bodies' engagement with the world around us is a part of our cultural experience.

Having established that the body itself carries culture and is 'cultural', I next explain my understanding of cultural studies and its focus on media. Hall (1980) described cultural studies as "a critical perspective that focuses on the political implications of mass culture" (p. 2). Griffin (2005) critically described cultural studies as "a neo-Marxist critique that sets forth the position that mass media manufacture consent for dominant ideologies" (p. 334) where dominant ideologies could be described as circulated by "broadcast and print outlets [that] serve the Bill Gates, Steve Forbeses, and Ted Turners of the world…" and "exploit the poor and powerless" (p. 335). Overall, cultural studies provides a critical contribution to the analysis of "cultural dimensions of power and inequality" (Franklin et al., 1991, p. 5). Additionally, cultural studies provides a theoretical framework to analyse individuals' engagement with popular culture by examining the issues of representation in media (van Zoonen, 1994).

Cultural studies originated from the works of Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and as a discipline it was established at the University of Birmingham, England, in 1963 (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2008). The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, established by Hoggart, became an independent department under the leadership of Stuart Hall, who directed it from 1969 to 1976. Both Hall and the Birmingham School are regarded as the most significant contributors to the development of British cultural studies (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2008). Cultural studies became an international discipline that was significantly developed in the last decades of the 20th century. It presents a cross-disciplinary approach that is a mixture of social sciences: most importantly sociology, humanities, media studies, linguistics, psychology, political science, and literature. It adopts different academic traditions and methodologies (Allan, 2010; Milner & Browitt, 2002; Sardar & van Loon, 2012). Sparks (1996) argued that:

> It is not possible to draw a sharp line and say that on one side of it we can find the proper province of cultural studies. Neither is it possible to point to a unified theory

> or methodology which are characteristic to it or of it. A veritable rag-bag of ideas, methods and concerns from literary criticism, sociology, history, media studies, etc., are lumped together under the convenient label of cultural studies. (p. 14)

The following section examines the growing impact of feminism on cultural studies, as well as the establishment of feminist cultural studies and the role of this theoretical framework in modern scholarship, together with its relevance to my research.

The impact of feminism on cultural studies

Feminism has both impacted and challenged the field of cultural studies, creating a well-established and valuable relationship between feminism and cultural studies (van Zoonen, 1994). Baker (2004) described the influence of feminism on cultural studies in relation to knowledge production that was focused on a variety of social and political issues:

> Feminism has become a major influence within cultural studies and indeed they [feminists] share the view that knowledge production is political and positional along with the wish to engage with, or be a part of, political movements outside of the academy. (p. 69)

Importantly, Hall (2003) provided a description of his changing attitude to feminism and his understanding of its importance and growing influence in the field of cultural studies:

> We were working in cultural studies, but were in conversation with feminism. People inside cultural studies were becoming sensitive to feminist politics. Of course, what is true is that, as classical "new men", when feminism did actually emerge autonomously, we were taken by surprise by the very thing we had tried – patriarchally – to initiate. Those things are just very unpredictable. Feminism then actually erupted into the Centre, on its own terms, in its own explosive way. (p. 428)

Hall (2003) described the first influence of feminism on cultural studies as an uncomfortable and invasive phenomenon that brought changes to the existing field of cultural studies:

> …It's not known generally how and where feminism first broke in. I use the metaphor deliberately: As the thief in the night, it broke in; interrupted, made an unseemly noise, seized the time, crapped on the table of cultural studies. (p. 209)

However, it is important to look at this invasion through the lens of feminist scholars. For instance, women's studies researcher Lennox (2011) explained that "feminists drew attention to the centrality of issues of gender and sexuality to an understanding of power, and they also compelled cultural studies scholars to reconceive their understanding of subjectivity and the subject" (p. 6). According to Barker (2004), cultural studies researchers share many of the underlying tenets of feminism. She explained that:

> Feminism can be understood both as a diverse body of theoretical work and as a social and political movement. In either case, feminism has sought to examine the position of women in society and to further their interests. (p. 68)

The relationship between cultural studies and feminism further evolved in the establishment of feminist cultural studies. As described by van Loon (2011), feminist cultural studies left the "domain of women's studies", meaning that feminist cultural studies did not solely focus on women's right and freedoms, but also "entered all aspects of popular culture" (p. 8) and focused on problematic female representation in the media – the focus that strongly aligns with my research. Van Loon (2011) stated that the starting point of feminist cultural studies is, most importantly, women's lived experiences. Thus, we can regard young women as "participants in a culture who give meaning to people, objects, and events" (Jhally, 2005, p. 3). It should be noted that feminism has shifted its focus from the representation of all women in general to

embracing a more complicated diversity of women, where there is no "singular truth about womanhood" (Fenton, 1999, p. 84).

It was significant for my research to pay attention to the individual experiences of young women by focusing on the inclusion of a diverse representation of women's voices and experiences in relation to the role of beauty in their lives and their perceptions of how it is represented in the media. I adopted a feminist epistemology for this research (Brooks, 2007) in order to place women at the centre of the research process. Over 30 years ago, early feminist cultural studies scholars Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1983) drew on the point made by Daniels, a sociologist who has greatly contributed to the study of women and women's work, who argued that women's voices need to be privileged because men simply do not have a deep understanding of women's worlds, whereas women understand both men's and women's worlds. Furthermore, Stanley and Wise (1983) argued that "including women's 'world' in academic work would lead to the concerted reordering of established beliefs and perspectives, and also to a greater understanding of the many different stratifications which exist within society" (p. 17). They saw a strong need for "filling in the gaps about women's interests and experiences" (Stanley & Wise, 1983, p. 17). Brooks (2007) explained that Western women's rising consciousness of existing contradictions between their "own life experiences and the research studies and theoretical frameworks they were learning about" and the failure of such studies and frameworks to truthfully represent their lives inspired women to "construct new models of knowledge building" (p. 56) in the 20th century. Additionally, Stanley and Wise (1987) pointed out the importance of this research about women being conducted by women, as a fundamental component of feminist research.

In the contemporary context, feminist research has achieved an enriched academic environment with a plethora of female researchers from a diverse range of theoretical perspectives, such as

cultural studies, women's and gender studies, technology and social media, feminist cultural studies, and a focus on women and their lives and experiences (e.g., Albury & Crawford, 2012; boyd, 2014; Bordo, 1993; Campbell, 2002; Coleman & Ringrose, 2013; Hesse-Biber, 2007; McClelland, 2017; Mutch, 2013; Keller & Ringrose, 2014; Rich, 2011; Worell & Etaugh, 1994). Feminist cultural studies researchers share the broader feminist goal of increasing the number of studies about women and creating a realistic representation of women's voices: "the overt ideological goal of feminist research in the human sciences is to correct both the *invisibility* and *distortion* of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal social position" (Lather, 1991, p. 71). However, as argued by Ambjörnsson and Ganetz (2013), feminist cultural studies is still under-theorised, thus pointing out a strong need to engage in research dedicated to this theoretical framework.

The interplay of feminism and cultural studies has contributed to research on girl culture (e.g., Coleman & Ringrose, 2013; McRobbie, 2005, 2009), girlhood studies (e.g., Ringrose, 2013), analysis of media discourses, power relations, and stereotypes (Allen & Bruce, 2017), analysis and decoding of media messages (Heywood et al., 2003), sportswomen and media representation (Bruce, 2016), connections between society and text (Ambjörnsson & Ganetz, 2013), relations of power (Adams et al., 2016), feminist politics and cultural studies in Asia (Niranjana, 2007; Shun-Hing, 2002) and contextual analysis in relation to power and social change (Andrews, 2008). Feminist cultural studies is important across various research fields, and opens "new cultural space for criticism, reflections, and action" (Shun-Hing, 2002, p. 705). As described by Balsamo and Treichler (1990), feminist cultural studies:

> … draws on diverse disciplinary knowledge [and] it also seeks to transform that knowledge by analyzing the social and political conditions of the production of knowledge and women's historical relationship to those conditions, or by recovering subjugated knowledge within different disciplinary domains. (p. 2)

Representation of beauty in the media is an important topic of analysis in my research: for instance, Bordo (1993) pointed out that the "normalizing role of diet and exercise" (p. 186) in daily life was immersed in women's existence, therefore increasing the power of the media to influence its audiences, and increasing expectations to operate within dominant standards of beauty (Griffin, 2005). Media-created myths influence our perceptions of the world in general, and our perceptions of an ideal physical appearance in particular (Bordo, 1993; Hall, 1980).

To identify various factors that might influence women's perceptions of beauty, I use the term *interpretive communities*, described by Hall in his interview with Cruz and Lewis (1994) as communities that "share some decoding frameworks in common… share the tools of reading the text… [or] reading formations" (p. 270). Hall continued by pointing out that "each of us has our own preferred interpretive community, some of which we live in all the time and mistake for the rest of the world" (Cruz & Lewis, 1994, p. 270). Interpretive communities can be associated with such environments as families, schools, universities, or cultural backgrounds. As my research is focused on the interpretive communities of young women, I pay attention to the various environments that surround young women. However, even within a cultural studies focus on youth cultures, especially in the early 1980s, young women's lives were relatively ignored, and stories about women, their lives and experiences were almost invisible and lacked documentation in comparison to men's ones (Nielsen, 1990). For example, McRobbie (1982) studied *youth culture* and the *sociology of youth* – calling them "central strands in the development of cultural studies over the past fifteen years" (p. 26), but ones still oriented towards male youth cultural forms. However, in her research in 1982, McRobbie pointed out that growing numbers of women enrolled in academia in order to obtain postgraduate degrees have gradually generated what she called "a feminist 'intellectual' culture", and that "strongly feminist critique has found its way into the orthodoxies of sociology, history, psychology, politics and so on" (p. 118).

A later study conducted by McRobbie (2009) indicated that "women constitute half of world's population and their subordination and experience of inequality, though changed, remains unequivocal and unsubstantial" (p. 2). Today, however, feminist perspectives are integral to cultural studies. As Ambjörnsson and Ganetz (2013) explain, they are "well established and integrated in this field, and there is a considerable overlap and mutual interaction between cultural studies and gender studies" (p. 127). As described by Ambjörnsson and Ganetz (2013): "feminist cultural studies can be defined broadly as gender studies focusing on culture" (p. 127). My research sits in the "sense of culture as manifested in texts" (Ambjörnsson & Ganetz, 2013, p. 127). Importantly, Ambjörnsson and Ganetz (2013) emphasised feminist cultural studies' attention to the production of meaning: "like cultural studies in general, feminist cultural studies focuses on the production of meaning, both in the practices of everyday life and in texts of different kinds" (p. 127), thus contributing to the understanding of feminist cultural studies as a multidimensional discipline that contributes to the study of women's lives, cultures, and the products of the culture. Indeed, culture, especially as a mediated form, presents one of the key foci of my study.

The following sections introduce key cultural studies concepts used in my research: power, structure and agency, representation and discourse, hegemony, signs, and meaning and intertextuality, and finally, three decoding positions that construct the framework for my analysis.

Key concepts: The role of power and the dynamics of structure and agency

The concept of *power* has been an important part of feminist cultural studies research – for instance, van Zoonen (1994) referred to it as a "key element of feminist thought" (p. 6). The discussion of dominant ideologies, a Marxist interpretation of power structures, critique of

materialism, and the mass media's manufacture of consent are fundamental pillars of cultural studies (Griffin, 2005; Lippmann, 1922). Hall's research was highly influenced by the work of Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1971) who drew on the idea of a unified ideology of the "ruling class" that existed despite any possible "diversity and contradictions" (p. 81). Additionally, Althusser (1971) suggested that individuals' actions are based on the belief system created by dominant ideology, therefore affecting decisions taken by the individual and an individual's behaviours. In short, according to Althusser (1971), an individual enters and lives in the world that is structured on the basis of ideologies that dominate it, thus forcing the individual into belief systems that are constructed according to the dominant ideology. The individual also carries their belief system that "derives… from the ideas of the individual concerned" (Althusser, 1971, p. 82), therefore creating a system, or *schema*, where an individual's actions are based on the belief system adopted by the individual and, therefore, affect the very decisions taken by the individual. Hall (1985) acknowledged the influence of Althusser on his understanding of power relations and "the ensemble of relations which make up a whole society" (p. 91). Unlike Althusser, Hall (1985) offered a less rigid understanding of social formation, pointing out the complexity of society's structures.

The term *structure* is relevant and important (Hall, 1985), but the understanding of the term should be driven by a more complex and multifactorial meaning that pays significant attention to the plurality of discourse: a cultural studies conceptualisation of *structure* will be described further in this section in relation to the concept of *agency*. Hence, if we conceptualise *power* through Hall's argument, a shift from Althusser's (1971) unidirectional understanding of the world and power relations would be identified: power was recognised as a complex and an "indeterminate, open-ended and contingent" (Hall, 1985, p. 95) structure. For Hall (1985), a reliance on Marxist understandings would be limiting because it would "not allow us to think adequately about the shifts of accentuation in language and ideology" (p. 113). However, shifts

of accentuation part of a "constant, unending process" (Hall, 1985, p. 113). Importantly, the exercise of power implicit in the concept of dominant ideology is characterised by a one-way and top-down power distribution (Hardt, 1996). Therefore, Hall argued, it is crucial to recognise the importance of the circulation of power, which "produces new discourses… new kinds of knowledge… shapes new practices…" that can "be found everywhere" (Jhally, 2005, p. 261). The concept of the circulation of power is especially significant as it allows for individuals to develop agency and empowerment.

Every person is caught up in complicated and varied circulations of power (Jhally, 2005). As Hall (Jhally, 2005) argues, "no one… can stand wholly outside its field of operation" (p. 261). McRobbie (2005) agreed with Hall and explained that power is a "complex unity" (p. 5), referring to the concept of *articulation* that could be understood as a "process which consolidates power by means of negotiations, concession, sometimes reaching for consensus by means of tactical retreat" (p. 5).

Hall (1985) had a similar description of articulation, further explaining that articulation could be understood a "connection or link" (p. 113) between different ideas and concepts, whose relation is not necessarily evident, and is subject to further changes and "rearticulations" (p. 114). In my research, I understand articulation as a continuous, ongoing connection between various factors that form ideas and unities. Some articulations – for example, the articulation of beauty and thinness – have been recognised as powerful unities that influence the lives of individuals. Articulation is important in the discussion of media, as media readings consist of complex relations between various elements, such as power relations and personal and cultural circumstances (Zoonen, 1994). As feminist media sociologist van Zoonen (1994) described it:

> … media production is not simply a matter of reflection but entails a complex process of negotiation, processing and reconstruction; media audiences do not simply take in or reject media messages, but use and interpret them according to the logic of their own social, cultural and individual circumstances; media are not only assigned to "reflect" reality, but represent our collective hopes, fears and fantasies and perform a mythical and ritual function as well. (pp. 40-41)

By choosing to apply conceptualisations of power and power relations that emerge from cultural studies, this research explores young women's engagements with media, and the ways in which media influences young women's perceptions of beauty. I engage with the idea that power is not solely attributed to a particular social class or to powerful elites. In contrast to Althusser's (1971) argument that individuals function as "always-already subjects" (pp. 86-87), a cultural studies approach, while acknowledging the power of dominant ideologies to frame an individual's perceptions of the world, acknowledges that each individual also possesses their own agency that allows for resistance against dominant ideologies. Historically changing female beauty standards suggest that there is, indeed, an ideology of beauty, where women are continually intertwined with and affected by current beauty ideals, but its specific components are unstable, as at different times, different elements of physical appearance have been articulated to female beauty (see Chapter Three: Literature Review for more detail). However, I acknowledge media power to circulate dominant ideas, thus resulting in "a process by which certain discourses become increasingly naturalised as truth" (Allen & Bruce, 2017, p. 228). My research analyses dominant representations of beauty in media and how they are perceived by young women; it is particularly important to examine the role of media in this process, as "the mass media plays a vital role in the distribution of stereotypes because it is one of the main channels through which they are transmitted" (Bruce, 2016, p. 370). However, if audiences simply accepted the ideas of how they should look, which are created by powerful

elites or institutions, the individuals would demonstrate either little or no agency in challenging dominant ideals of beauty. Therefore, it would be problematic to identify *why* beauty standards have changed over time and *who* changed them. In contrast, a feminist cultural studies view of power suggests the importance of understanding the concepts of agency and agents, which will be discussed further in this chapter. Before that, it is important to further discuss the cultural studies conceptualisation of the term hegemony in relation to how power operates.

Hegemony

The discussion of hegemony is important because of its relation to power. Allan (2010) drew upon Hall's definition of *hegemony* as a dominant influence and regarded hegemony as a more complex way of speaking about Marx's concept of ideology. Allan (2010) explained hegemony as an active version of ideology:

> Rather than a single, ruling ideology, the idea of hegemony recognizes that there are many possible cultures that vary by time and circumstance. The idea of hegemony allows us to see ideology as active; it opens the door for us to see cultures in conflict, vying for position and influence. (p. 3)

Unlike the ideas in the work of Althusser (1971), the concept of hegemony sees culture and ideas operating in multiple directions, not only top-down. According to Griffin (2005), Hall adopted the term *hegemony* when he "spoke of a cultural role of the media" (p. 336), further stating that "media hegemony is not a conscious plot, it's not overly coercive, and its effects are not total" (p. 336), thus allowing for individuals to express their own agency and demonstrate empowerment despite the presence of hegemonic ideas. Howarth (2011) argued that "in contemporary society, different knowledge systems (relating to science, religion, health, economics, politics and so forth) compete in diverse settings. As a result, there is more

critique, argument and debate and so less stability in knowledge and communication" (p. 7). At the same time, Hall and other cultural studies scholars assume that an average person is "more or less powerless to do anything but operate *within* a corporatized, commodified world" (Griffin, 2005, p. 338). However, it is important to understand that structures (this concept will be examined later in this chapter) have a different influence on individuals or, in other words, it would be "problematic" to assume that "all structures impact [individuals] equally" (Ali et al., 2010, p. 652). Although individuals exist in a "corporatized, commodified world" (Griffin, 2005, p. 338), the influence of hegemonic ideas will vary. In my work, I focus primarily on the idea of media hegemony (Gramsci, 1977), where media hegemony represents a set of dominant ideologies as created by media producers (Artx, 2013).

Agency and agents

Individual agency is a central concept in cultural studies' understandings of power. Agency is a crucial attribute of the existence of every individual, a natural outcome of the process of thinking (Grossberg, 1996a); by neglecting its existence, we thus deny the idea of society's evolution and growth; as well as this, deprivation of an individual's agency rejects the cultural studies understanding of the complex ways in which power circulates. As described by American cultural studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg (1996a), "agency is nothing but the product of the individual's insertion into various and contradictory codes of social practice" (p. 156). However, the presence of institutions of power might make it more problematic for individuals to freely express their agency. Hall pointed out that despite deprivation of some people's voices, it is incorrect to believe "the masses are nothing but a passive reflection of the historical, economic and political forces" (Grossberg, 1996b, p. 140), thus reminding us that individuals carry their own agency. Drawing on Hall's work, Grossberg (1996a) described the

figure of the 'agent' – an individual who is simultaneously carrying their agency and is engaged in the circulation of power:

> This is a fragmented, decentred human agent, an agent who is both "subject-ed" by power and capable of acting against those powers. It is a position of theoretical anti-humanism and political humanism, for without an articulated subject capable of acting, no resistance is possible.… (p. 157)

Importantly, Grossberg (1996a) pointed out that the complicated "systems of power" can be viewed also from a feminist perspective, where "systems of power are organized upon contradictions not only of class and capital, but of gender and race as well… this is yet another site of articulation and power" (p. 157). Finally, Grossberg (1996a) drew on Hall's theory of agency, which included a discussion of the struggles associated with circulations of power, arguing that it offers:

> … a non-essentialist theory of agency: social identities are themselves complex fields of multiple and even contradictory struggles; they are the product of the articulations of particular social positions into chains of equivalences, between experiences, interests, political struggles and cultural forms, and between different social positions. (p. 157)

In cultural studies, the concept of agency involves individuals' abilities to "take actions" (Rigby et al., 2016, p. 296), and agency helps us to understand how girls can "achieve, aspire and perform" (Ringrose, 2013, p. 58).

The concept of structure, and its importance to cultural studies scholars' understandings of agency, will be further introduced in the following section.

Structure

The opposite of agency is *structure*. The comprehensive relationship and balance of these two concepts has been a persistent sociological question (Arab, 2016). In this thesis, I adopt a cultural studies position that the individual is caught in the dynamics between structure and agency (Rigby et al., 2016). Indeed, an individual is often positioned against the "structure in dominance" (Storey, 1997, p. 20) or "authority structure" (Storey, 1997, p. 25), so it is important to recognise the interplay between agency and structure or, as Storey (1997) described it, "the dialectical play between resistance and incorporation" (p. 11).

Different theoretical approaches offer varied definitions of agency and structure. In this research, I adopt the following definition: structure, as explained by Barker (2004), is a set of established rules, customs, and regulations. Similarly, Rigby et al. (2016) refer to structure as "rules and resources, or the ways in which we understand how things should be done, practices organized around those understandings, and capabilities that support those understandings" (p. 4).

In contrast to structure, individuals are able, firstly, to think, and secondly, to demonstrate their agency, thus allowing resistance to be expressed, which, as Hall and Whannel (1964) described, allows for "the changing design of social values in the society as a whole" (p. 20). From a feminist perspective, "knowledge and meaning are conveyed by… social structures" (Nienaber & Moraka, 2016, p. 161), and structures of power are recognised for their ability to create "one group of men (and women) as dominant and ranges everyone else in a complex hierarchy of increasing disadvantage" (Nienaber & Moraka, 2016, p. 150). Nienaber and Moraka (2016) also highlighted the importance of empowerment and resistance for women. Resistance to structures can also take the form of "self care… fun and pleasures" (Motta et al., 2011, p. 8),

or the ability to act as "resistant agents" (Harris & Dobson, 2015, p. 146). Thus, I refer to the cultural studies understandings of the terms *agency* and *structure* and the flow of power associated with these two concepts. I understand *structure*, firstly, as an established set of dominant ideals of beauty created by media hegemony and circulated via the media, and secondly, the ideals about beauty shared by women. Structures are able to influence the audiences. However, the influence varies and allows for the individuals to demonstrate their resistance to the established rules, practices, and regulations (Barker, 2004; Rigby et al., 2016). *Agency* is associated with young women's resistance to dominant ideologies produced by media hegemony, and young women's personal opinions, decisions, and actions – which can include actions that are in opposition to dominant ideals of beauty. Next, I introduce the concept of *representation* and explain why it is important for my research.

Representation

Since this is a cultural studies-informed study, I have to conceptualise how my research participants *make sense of* beauty and the media. The choice of representation as one of the key theoretical concepts was guided by its importance in the study of culture. Hall (Jhally, 2005) described representation as a concept that connects meaning and language to culture. As pointed out by Hall (Jhally, 2005): "cultural studies has paid a tremendous amount of attention in one way or another to the centrality of representations and of the practice of representation" (p. 5). Cultural studies thus offers an understanding of the term *representation* that is different from a commonly used definition. As Barker (2004) explains, representation is simply a symbolic depiction of an object or practice: "The common-sense meaning of the concept of representation is that of a set of processes by which signifying practices appear to stand for or depict another object or practice in the 'real' world" (p. 177). In this view, representation is an act of symbolism that mirrors an independent object world. In contrast, in cultural studies,

representation is a complex and multidimensional reflection of an object that goes beyond simple "correspondence between signs and objects" (Barker, 2004, p. 177). Representation is further defined as "using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people" (Jhally, 2005, p. 15), where language consists not only of words but also signs, which can include visual texts, like photographs, Facebook and Instagram posts, movies, and images. Representation can also be described as a process of meaning production and its exchange between different people. Hall (Jhally, 2005) also described representation as "an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture" (p. 15). As for the terminology of the word *representation*, Hall identified two key meanings: 1. to describe/to depict something; [and] 2. to symbolise or to substitute for something. For the first definition, Hall (Jhally, 2005) referred to the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary:

> To represent something is to describe or depict it, to call it up in the mind by description or portrayal or imagination; to place a likeness of it before us in our mind or in the senses. (p. 16)

As for the second definition, Hall (Jhally, 2005) explained that to represent something is to symbolise, to stand for, to be specimen of, or to substitute for – as in the sentence "…in Christianity, the cross represents suffering and crucifixion of Christ" (p. 16). Further, representation could be described in terms of real life and events happening around us that only exist as we give meanings to them, and as s a result,

> … the process of representation has entered into the event itself. In a way, it doesn't exist meaningfully until it has been represented… representation doesn't occur after the event; representation is constitutive of the event. It enters into the constitution of the object that we are talking about. (Jhally, 2005, p. 8)

Therefore, representation is tightly connected to its subject and should be regarded as *constitutive* of the event. Through a cultural studies perspective, every 'event' exists meaningfully through representation. Hall (1996) presented an example of a woman on a *Cosmopolitan* magazine cover, which he argued neither reflected what women look like nor was a simple reconstruction of a concept of a woman. Hall's argument was that in our technologically advanced society, visual texts are created for a reason and serve a large number of purposes. Referring to the *Cosmopolitan* cover, Hall (1996) argued that the image was carrying a large number meanings valued by the "forces" that controlled this media channel:

> The image was constructed to sell a specific kind of lifestyle that in turn demands the use of detailed products and other commodities, though all of this is presented simply as "a woman". Behind the image on *Cosmopolitan*, then, is an entire world of beliefs, ideas, values, behaviours, and relationships that must be decoded and laid at the doorstep of cultural entrepreneurs and myth-makers. (p. 4)

In relation to the focus of this thesis on young women's engagement with media in relation to beauty, even back in 1964, Hall and Whannel pointed out the growing role of media, like television, radio, newspapers, and magazines in our society; they also argued for the importance of the way mass media engages with young individuals and where "a fairly direct connection can be made between the younger generation and the media" (Hall & Whannel, 1964, p. 20). Indeed, it is important to understand the ways representation of beauty in media affects young people's perceptions. As described by Hall and Whannel (1964):

> The media provide young people with information and ideas about the society into which they are maturing... At the deeper level, the use of the media to provide imaginative experiences through various forms of art and entertainment has a modifying impact upon young people's attitudes and values. (p. 20)

However, media has evolved, and the development of social media has affected both the audience and the "field of representation" (Bruce, 2016): "In the past decade, the rise of Internet-based news and social media has dramatically changed the field of representation, including an explosion in public voice and information sharing on social networking sites" (p. 361). My thesis particularly focuses on the power of visual representation and visual texts in participants' lives, including their understandings of dominant ideals of beauty. This focus on the visual texts is supported by Hall (Jhally, 2005) who argued:

> …it's a kind of cliché to say that in the modern world our culture is saturated by the image in a variety of different forms. The image itself – whether moving or still and whether transmitted by a variety of different media – seems to be, or to have become, the prevalent sign of late-modern culture. (p. 5)

The circulation of images, predominantly produced by the West, has expanded well beyond Western borders. Hall attributes this expansion to "the global explosion in communication systems", which have made the image "the saturating medium, the saturating idiom, of communication worldwide" (Jhally, 2005, p. 5). Hall also identified the existence of two processes that constitute the concept of representation, or, as he called it, two systems of representation (Jhally, 2005). The first is the system of representation, by which "all sorts of objects, people and events are correlated with a set of concepts or mental representations which we carry around in our heads" (Jhally, 2005, p. 17). According to Hall, without the first system of representation in our minds, we would not be able to properly and meaningfully interpret the world: "meaning depends on the system of concepts and images formed in our thoughts, which can stand for or 'represent' the world, enabling us to refer to things both inside and outside our heads" (Jhally, 2005, p. 17). For instance, Hall explained that it is not that hard to conceptualise physical things and people; at the same time, we are also capable of conceptualising non-material, abstract things that we cannot see or touch or even things we will

never be able to see – for example, unicorns or fictional characters (Jhally, 2005). Hall conceptualised the system of representation as consisting "not of individual concepts, but of different ways of organizing, clustering, arranging and classifying concepts, and of establishing complex relations between them" (Jhally, 2005, p. 17). According to Hall, the important part of the establishment of such systems is the use of similarity and difference, which creates or differentiates one concept from another: "the point here is that we are talking about, not just a random collection of concepts, but concepts organized, arranged, and classified into complex relations with one another" (1997, p. 18). As summarised by Hall in one of his Open University lectures, individuals might keep in their minds different conceptual maps, therefore allowing the existence of various and even unique interpretations of things in the world (Jhally, 2005). Therefore, representation:

> … has a kind of double meaning, even in its common-sense understanding. It does mean "to present," "to image," 'to depict" – to offer a depiction of something else. And the word representation or representation does sort of carry with it the notion that something was there already and, through the media, has been represented. (Jhally, 2005, p. 6)

Although Hall acknowledges this "common-sense meaning" (Jhally, 2005, p.6), he then subverts it by explaining how cultural studies also uses the term representation to mean something that represents or "stands in for something else" (Jhally, 2005, p.6), which is the second system of representation (Jhally, 2005):

> We probably don't say that very often these days; you may not think they [political figures] represent us very well, but they're sort of supposed to represent us, and in that sense, they stand in for us. They are our representatives, and where we can't be, they can be. So the notion of something which images and depicts, and that which

> stands in for something else, both of those ideas are kind of brought together in the notion of representation (p. 6).

Members of society must share "broadly the same conceptual maps and thus make sense of or interpret the world in roughly similar ways" in order to "belong to the same culture" (Jhally, 2005, p. 18). My research participants did not all originate from the same national context, as will be further discussed in the Methodology chapter – therefore, it was important to understand the similarities and/or differences in their conceptual maps of ideal beauty, while also acknowledging the power of global circulation of Western beauty standards (Pasha & Golshekoh, 2009). It is important to analyse the answers of young women from different cultures, and based on the polysemic nature of representation, they can interpret representations of beauty in media "in multiple ways" (Bruce, 2016, p. 363), based on their social-cultural backgrounds.

As has been previously discussed, representation is the production of meanings through language (Hall, 1997). Representation, and in particular representation and communication of cultural meaning, takes place through language "because of two sets of standardisations: the customary meaning attached to words and the customary ways of speaking in given social and cultural settings" (Baldwin et al., 2004, p. 60). Language is an essential part of our lives: every society has a language (Baldwin et al., 2004), and it is a crucial tool in understanding each other. The importance of language as a concept of cultural studies was described by Barker (2004):

> Language is important to an understanding of culture for two central and related reasons: first, language is the privileged medium in which cultural meanings are formed and communicated; and second, language is the primary means and medium through which we form knowledge about ourselves and the social world. Language

> forms the network by which we classify the world and make it meaningful, that is, cultural. (pp. 106-107)

Hall argued that language is not an object that can be studied with scientific precision, but rather a constantly changing open-ended system that produces meanings, and in this system, meanings cannot be predicted (Jhally, 2005). Production of meaning can also be dependent on the context, which can then generate can generate a diversity of meanings of visual texts (Bruce, 2016; Heywood et al., 2003). For example, Heywood et al. (2003) described that, depending on the context, visual texts of women can represent "power, self-possession, and beauty" or "sexual access" (p. 80).

Media representation of beauty is one of the key foci my research so it is important to analyse how young women make sense of images of beauty in the media, and understand the negotiations, complexities, and inconsistencies in their interpretations.

In the next section, I explore the concepts of discourse and signs, which need to be examined in relation to how people make meaning.

Discourse, signs, and semiotics

As explained by Hall, language is also used in the process of meaning construction (Jhally, 2005): language allows for the conceptual maps we carry in our minds to be translated into words and images, and, therefore, understood by others. Having discussed language previously, I first address the concept of *discourse*. Hall (1996) referred to discourse as "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – i.e. a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic" (p. 201). This concept is important for my research as it

provides a framework for understanding what young women know and how they talk about ideal beauty.

The concept of *signs* presents a "general term we use for words, sounds or images which carry meaning" (Jhally, 2005, p. 4). Signs are a system that emerges from the unification of two elements, *the signifier* and *the signified*, where "the signifier is a sound, printed word or image, and the signified is a mental concept" (Baldwin & McCracken, 1999, p. 53). Thus, signs are more than just words in a language. As Baldwin and McCracken (1999) further explained, from a *semiotics* perspective, "all cultural products should be seen as texts. A cultural product may not be actually written in words but it still consists of signs… whether visual, aural or even tactile… which can be 'read' or interpreted" (p. 32). For instance, McRobbie (1981) conducted a study dedicated to British girls' magazine, *Jackie*, in which she identified a system of signs that promoted a cultivation of dominant representations of femininity. In McRobbie's (1982) research, *Jackie*'s ideological representation of beauty and fashion had a powerful effect on the lifestyle of its female readers, or as McRobbie described it, the magazine carried "a system of messages, a signifying system and a bearer of a certain ideology, an ideology which deals with the construction of teenage femininity" (p. 67).

In relation to signs, two important ideas need to be pointed out – firstly, a sign is understood by placing it in comparison to other signs. Like language, "there is no single, neutral meaning of any sign. Its value or meaning can only be determined in relation to other signs, which in turn requires searching out oppositions and differences" (Baldwin & McCracken, 1999, p. 32). Secondly, one sign can be understood in many different ways: "in the field of semiotics it is important to remember that there may be many associations for a specific cultural term and they may, when grouped together, appear conflicting and contradictory" (Baldwin & McCracken, 1999, p. 32). In relation to signs, it is also important to understand the context:

"the situational and contextual nature of meaning must be stressed but the notion of contextually dominant meanings does not rule out the presence of other meanings" (Baldwin & McCracken, 1999, p. 32). For instance, in relation to my research, the same visual text (a sign) might be interpreted differently: the image of an ideally beautiful model on a women's magazine cover might carry the preferred meaning or connotation of a desirable standard of beauty for a woman (dominant code, discussed in more detail later), an inspiration for a possible body improvement (negotiable code), or a photoshopped woman with unhealthy body proportions and artificial beauty (oppositional code). Howarth (2011) noted that "communication is always unstable and unpredictable because these meanings are decoded in constantly shifting and oppositional ways" (p. 15). Thus, the meaning attached to the image will depend on the person looking at it or the context and can also change over time depending on the individual. A more detailed discussion of *meaning* is presented next.

Meaning

Allan (2010) described *meaning* as "taken-for-grantedness, achieved as powerful individuals or groups give credibility to the association of sign and meaning and as [that] association is repeated by others over time, as in the media" (p. 5). As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, in the section on power, cultural studies researchers focus on popular culture and mass media. Particularly, in the 21st century and the era of Web 2.0 interactivity and social media, the audience has an increased ability to communicate and express ideas more widely (Keller & Ringrose, 2015; Perloff, 2014). Social media and social media platforms, more than any other types of media channels, provide individuals with the freedom to actively express their opinions and ideas, as well as allowing active communication among individuals all over the world. In the 1990s, Cruz and Lewis (1994) pointed out the changing nature of *meaning* as it

becomes less "predictable and less certain", and where signs no longer reflect one "fixed cultural order":

> Meaning becomes a battleground between and among folk cultures, class subcultures, ethnic cultures, and national cultures; different communications media, the home, and the school; churches and advertising agencies; and different versions of history and political ideologies. (p. 25)

Hall stated that "culture is, simply, about 'shared meanings'" (Jhally, 2005, p. 1); it will be important to investigate the shared meanings in relation to beauty as circulated in media. Therefore, it is important to draw on the concept of intertextuality.

Intertextuality

The concept of *intertextuality* was originally based on the idea that "any text contains 'multiple voices' within it" (Blackshaw & Crawford, 2009, p. 153). Within cultural studies, this idea has been expanded beyond individual texts and, according to Hall, intertextuality can be described as "accumulation of meanings across different texts, where one image refers to another, or has its meaning altered by being 'read' in the context of other images" (Jhally, 2005, p. 232). Here, it is important to identify that marking the difference between the images provides a meaning that we can interpret (Jhally, 2005). As Hall pointed out, visual texts – for example, photographs – "gain meaning when they are read in context, against or in connection with one another" (Jhally, 2005, p. 232):

> This is another way of saying that images do not carry meaning or "signify" on their own. They accumulate meanings, or play off their meaning against one another, across a variety of texts and media. Each image carries its own, specific meaning. But at the broader level of how [beauty] is being represented in a popular culture at

> any one moment, we can see similar representational practices and figures being repeated, with variations, from one text or site of representation to another. (p. 232)

Therefore, not only are young women likely to gain ideas about beauty from multiple places and sources, and various forms of media, and interpret them in relation to one another, but many similar images may be repeated across multiple sites of representation. The upcoming section provides a theoretical discussion of the complicated and ongoing shift in power relations between media producers and audiences' decodings of messages circulated in media.

Decoding media messages

In this research, I analyse the decoding position of participants in relation to discourses of beauty. Hall (1980) argued that the process of decoding media messages could be regarded from three positions: 1. a dominant / hegemonic position; 2. a negotiated position; 3. an oppositional position. This means that even though media producers encoded a message in an intended way, the receiver of the message (the audience) might decode or interpret it differently (Durham & Kellner, 2001; Hall, 1973).

The dominant decoding position occurs when the viewer reads or decodes the "connotated code" (the message encoded by the media) exactly, or "full and straight" (Hall 1973, p. 16) as the message's creator intended it to be decoded. In short, the media produces the message and the individual (see Griffin, 2005) consumes it, decoding it with what is also called the "preferred reading" as intended by the producer. For instance, a woman exposed to an advertisement of a cream that reduces wrinkles may decode the message as it was intended by the advertiser, and makes the purchasing decision to buy the product. She does this, believing that the claimed effect in the advertisement will also have the same impact on her.

Negotiated decoding happens when the reader accepts some messages and resists others, and the decoding contains "a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements", based on an individual's set of logics (personal context and circumstances): "negotiated codes operate through what we might call particular or situated logics: and these logics arise from the different position of those who occupy this position in the spectrum, and from their differential and unequal relation to power" (Hall, 1973, p. 17). In a negotiated decoding position, the reader generally assimilates the dominant ideology but opposes its application in specific cases.

The third position, an oppositional decoding, occurs when the reader fully understands the "literal and connotative inflection given to an event" but chooses not to accept the message and "to decode the message in a globally contrary way" (Hall, 1973, p. 18).

As argued by Hall (2016), most people interpret media messages in a negotiated way. Thus, it is important to understand the possible reading positions young women hold in regard to beauty representation in the media, as well as in their engagement with interpretive communities. Such multiplicity of meaning allows me to analyse how media influences participants' perceptions of beauty in their engagement with various media channels.

Hall's (2016) perspective of decoding positions suggests that agency exists and the audience is not entirely affected by the power of the media, therefore engaging individuals in the relationship with both structure and agency. Usually, oppositional readings occur when people have direct knowledge or experience of the event being represented; whereas the dominant reading is more likely when people have not experienced an event (Durham & Kellner, 2001). Here, we can look at these ideas through the experiences of young women – for example, whether they are familiar with the artificial nature of some images in the media; whether they are active social media users and know that the images can be altered to achieve an ideal

appearance; whether they have knowledge of media literacy and whether they can recognise image manipulation in visual texts in media. Such experiences might affect the ways they see and read mass media's visual texts and how critical young women are about the physical appearance of celebrities, models, and social media influencers.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explained the theoretical framework underpinning this study. A feminist cultural studies approach allows me to explore questions of power relations and the circulation of power. In this thesis, *power* is seen as a multidirectional concept that suggests that, despite the presence of dominant ideologies, the media audience consists of individuals who carry their own agency, thus enabling resistance and an interplay between agency and structure. I discussed the concepts of representation and the importance of visual texts and the variety of meanings that individuals might derive from them. I looked at the decoding of messages and introduced the three decoding positions I explore further in this thesis: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional. I explained that media is able to influence the audience by producing messages, intertextually, to create a dominant ideology of female beauty. In the next chapter I look how these concepts are revealed in the results of existing research, as well as what this research tells us about beauty, young women's engagements with media, negative aspects of media influence, and media literacy.

Chapter Three: Literature Review

This chapter explores a diversity of topics associated with female beauty and physical attractiveness, media, and media literacy. The chapter is divided into two parts.

The first part of the chapter addresses the topic of dominant ideals of beauty and identifies the constantly changing nature of female beauty. It begins with an historic overview of beauty traditions in the past. I then discuss what researchers have identified as the current ideal of beauty, and identify the possible negative influences on women, men, and children. Next, I introduce emerging changes in media representations of beauty since 2000 that have the potential – but have not yet fully disrupted – the existing ideal. Additionally, I address the topics of commercialisation and globalisation of beauty ideals.

In the second section, I focus on the development of technologies and media, media literacy, empowerment and engagement with modern technologies, and the importance of critical thinking. I also address the development of social skills and cultural competencies required in this current era of technology.

Female beauty: Pain and pleasure

The concept of beauty could be described as a cultural myth created by power structures to keep women under control (Wolf, 1991). In the past, young women were forced to follow the existing beauty standards of the time as women's appearance was highly correlated to the chances of getting married and, thereby, achieving social success (Gentile, 2007). Today, even when most women's lives are not limited by such dramatic economic and social consequences, ideal appearance still tends to play a crucial role in the lives of many women. As Gentile (2007) argues:

> Girls and young women are no longer constrained by the marry-or-perish imperative of the nineteenth and early twentieth century but how you look and more importantly, how you depict yourself continue to be defining factor[s] of social success. (p. 1)

The ideas of female beauty have also been affected by "men's institutions and institutional power" (Wolf, 2002, p. 13), wherein men have been associated with *mind* and such concepts as "powerful, ambitious, aggressive, and dominant" and women have been associated with *body* and viewed through the lenses of "her appearance, her attractiveness to men, and her ability to keep the species going" (Hesse-Biber, 1996, p. 17). McRobbie (2015, p. 4) referred to perfect physical appearance as a part of female "common sense", as women desire to be physically attractive and recognised for their beauty (Etcoff et al., 2004). In the classic Perrault tale of Cinderella (Bellas, 2017):

> …elevation of status and economic privilege relies on her capacity to appear desirable… Perrault's tale suggests a perfect recipe for feminine desirability: passive compliance with the patriarchal rule and conformity to impossible standards of beauty. (p. 157)

Beauty has been also associated with a person's class, gender and social status (Peiss, 2000). Wolf (2002) pointed out the complex nature of female beauty by illustrating its contradiction to Darwin's concept of natural selection: "for women to compete with women through 'beauty' is a reversal of the way in which natural selection affects all other mammals" (p. 13).

When it comes to Western society, which is the main focus of my research, it is important to acknowledge that beauty is a significant part of women's lives, thus affecting their behaviours and perceptions of their own appearance. Wolf (1991) argued that even successful and

attractive Western women experience "a secret 'under-life' poisoning our freedom… infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control" (p. 487).

In relation to the dominant ideals of beauty, the existing body of research identifies the following characteristics of female physical attractiveness:

- Thin, slender and fit bodies (Bordo, 2003; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Ging & Garvey, 2018; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Limatius, 2018; Krane et al., 2001; Kwan & Trautner, 2009; Wolf, 1991; Wood & Vialle, 2015).
- Youthfulness (Maslow, 2015).
- White skin (Maslow, 2015; McClearen, 2015).
- Long, preferably blonde hair (Maslow, 2015; Piirto, 2019; Weitz, 2001; Wood & Vialle, 2015).
- Clear skin without blemishes (Wood, 2017).
- Big and blue eyes (Chung & Bissell, 2009; Maslow, 2015; Young, 1990).
- "Stereotyped facial features" (Wood & Vialle, 2015, p. 14), including "narrower face and nose, less fat, full lips, minimal hypertelorism,[1] longer eyelashes, and high cheek bones" (Castillo, 2013, p. 1).

The ability to fit the dominant ideals of beauty can carry both pleasure and pain, thus making women "both bearers of power and objects of risk" (Renold & Ringrose, 2013, p. 247).

[1] Hypertelorism – the abnormal distance between two paired organs, especially the eyes (American Heritage® Dictionary of English Language, 2011).

Researchers point out further potential dangers of the portrayal of beauty in the media, such as high expectations of physical appearance that may not be achievable by women in reality (Cusumano & Thompson, 1997). Indeed, modern standards of beauty can be regarded as "one of the most empirically supported theoretical explanations for the development of body image and eating disturbances among women" (Herbozo et al., 2004, p. 22).

The majority of research in the area of ideal beauty has focused on possible dangers associated with its influence on girls and young women (e.g., Brierley et al., 2016; Dakanalis et al., 2014; Grabe, 2008; Wignall, 2017). Hildebrandt and Latner (2007) pointed out the importance of research on body image and the role of media on its formation, particularly the way "in which individuals adopt unrealistic bodily attractiveness ideals" (p. 209). There are three major concerns associated with the circulation of dominant ideals of beauty in media: 1) the limited range of attributes associated with ideal beauty (e.g., (Fardouly, & Vartanian, 2015; Yan & Bissell, 2014); 2) the influence of these ideals conveyed via mass media (e.g., Mutrie & Choi, 2000; Wignall, 2017); 3) the negative psychological and physical effects on the individual's body perceptions (Bullen, 2009; Choukas-Bradley et al., 2018; Goodall, 2002; Harrison, 2000; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012).

Dominant ideals of beauty still represent a limited palette of physical characteristics, as "girls' representation in popular culture continues to privilege heteronormative, white, physically-appealing ideals of beauty" (Gaerlan-Price et al., 2021, p. 4). Further, dominant ideals of beauty are recognised for their input to "media-ideal internalization, self-objectification, shame and anxiety surrounding the body and appearance, dietary restraint, and binge eating" (Dakanalis et al., 2014, p. 997). Importantly, as further described by Dakanalis et al., (2014),

> The most recent and comprehensive meta-analysis of experimental studies demonstrated that media-idealized images have the most harmful and substantial

> impact on vulnerable individuals… regardless of media characteristics (i.e., frequency and length of exposure, media types) or gender. (p. 998)

However, despite the abundance of research on skinny female bodies (e.g e.g., Bahadur, 2013; Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016), since 2000, a small body of research has begun to identify subtle shifts in this longstanding ideal. For example, the media representation of curvy bodies (Harrison, 2003; Leboeuf, 2019; Markova & Azocar, 2021) – particularly popular in Western countries – has yet to be explored to the same extent in academic literature (Hunter et al., 2020). Other researchers have highlighted the popularity of media representation of female bodies that are skinny and athletic (Malveaux, 2022; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021), pretty and powerful (Bruce, 2016), or strong and sexy (Heywood et al., 2003), or even female bodies that are celebrated more for the women's confidence and self-esteem than their beauty (Gill & Orgad, 2017). The popularity of previously discussed #thinspiration (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016) could be compared to another popular online trend, #fitspiration, which "consists of images designed to motivate people to exercise and pursue a healthier lifestyle" (Langnes & Walseth, 2021, p. 7). #Fitspiration, however, could be regarded as a more body-positive version - or the evolution of - #thinspiration, as #fitspiration comprises healthier lifestyles and exercise, rather than exclusively focusing on weight loss (Toffoletti et al., 2021). Additionally, #fitspiration has been characterised by a healthier and more positive relationship between social media and its users (Toffoletti et al., 2021):

> Social media has become an important vehicle for women in sport and fitness cultures to represent their experiences, promote their achievements and create shared networks and communities of practice, as well as reformulate both gender and sport identities" (p. 21)

And unlike images of curvy or skinny-curvy female bodies that often sexualise female bodies, the images that represent #fitspiration are more focused on exercise routines and a more realistic representation of how women look (Toffoletti et al., 2021):

> In their fitspiration photos, women do not present themselves as glamourous or as highly sexualized (pouting lips, emphasized cleavage and buttocks, styled hair). Users typically post photos of themselves sweating, hair pulled back, without makeup and wearing utilitarian gym lycra. (p. 831)

In contrast to women' ability to share their narratives and represent their exercise experiences on their terms online (e.g., on social media), more traditional media – such as health and fitness magazines – tend to portray a sexualised image such as women with accentuated breasts, skimpy clothing, provocative poses and make-up (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009):

> She is "perky" and inviting with a coy smile, she leans, lilts or languishes, displaying a lean, tight, compact body beneath monochromatic smooth skin, in tight, revealing clothing. Frequently she wears a bikini. Also usually white, she is tight and toned, but lacks visible rips or cuts. Her muscles are long and lean, and certainly not "too big," while her body possesses a subtle dose of curvaceousness. (p. 1)

Other, more traditional media channels such as sports media, have been accused of sexualisation of female bodies, and in particular, female professional athletes: "when women's sport does receive media attention, female athletes are routinely aestheticized, sexualized, and trivialized" (Thorpe, Toffoletti, & Bruce, 2017, p. 361). In contrast, sportswomen's self-presentations on social media demonstrate their agency and desire "to craft and control their own representations in ways that counter stereotypical images of women in sport media" (Thorpe, Toffoletti, & Bruce, 2017, p. 362). Bruce (2016) points out the rise of the pretty and

powerful athlete – a combination of strength and femininity – that emerged online but is also evident in some sports media (see also Heywood et al., 2003).

As this research is primarily focused on the experiences of young women, it is important to specify that social media has become a significant and important part of the lives of young people, thus being "a key resource in young people's lives for the development of identities and relationships, as well as emotional regulation, self-expression, learning and much more" that can affect "young people's health and well-being" (Goodyear, 2020, p. 48). As social media might be a source of useful information and connectedness, it might also be viewed as a factor that might have a complex influence on the well-being of users, potentially leading to body-dissatisfaction, and as argued by Plieger et al. (2021):

> Social networking sites have gained a massive influence on the daily lives of billions of users at different levels. On the active side, they present a good platform for self-presentation from their mainly young users. On the passive side, social networking sites (SNS) are an informal and simple way to witness the allegedly day-to-day life of peers, celebrities, or influencers. Consequently, SNS have received increasing attention with respect to their associations with well-being, self-objectification, and other psychological variables of their users. (p. 1)

For instance, Gentile's (2007) findings from her analyses on the representation of women in media suggested that media's depiction of women's appearance and sexuality could be regarded as one of the main sources of influence on young women's identity formation.

The popularity of social media that overtook traditional media, as well as the development of technologies and mobile devices, has resulted in even more significant and persistent circulation of visual texts that portray dominant ideals of beauty, therefore creating potential

dangers to the individuals who are subject to internalisation of such representations of beauty (Williams & Ricciardelli, 2014). In relation to ideal beauty, one effect of the simultaneous development of social media and accessible image editing technology is the increase in selfie culture. As Derenne and Beresin (2017) explain,

> The constant availability of relatively sophisticated cameras and photo editing software has led to the development of "selfie" culture. Individuals experiment with snapping multiple photos from the most flattering angles and poses, as well as using filters, selfie sticks, cropping, and photo shopping to capture a flawless image for posting. (p. 129)

The rise of selfie culture represents what Derenne and Beresin (2017) called an "obsession with perfection" which they believe has "further increased the focus on ideal body image, including pressure to conform to the young, thin ideal, which continues to be valued in our society" (p. 129). They conclude that this pressure has negative effects: "For those who are vulnerable to comparing their bodies to others, this may trigger body dissatisfaction, increased drive for thinness, and the development of disordered eating" (Derenne & Beresin, 2017, p. 129).

As it was identified in the existing research, body dissatisfaction occurs at the early stage of life, "emerging among children as young as age 7 years… across diverse levels of body size and race" (Grabe et al., 2008, p. 460). Indeed, researchers recognise the presence possible negative media effects, particularly on younger social media users (Goodall, 2012). Williams and Ricciardelli (2014) referred to the expanding influence of social media with its ability to have a stronger influence on audiences than traditional media: "social media, in Western countries such as the U.S., U.K., and Australia, have infiltrated individuals' lives in ways that was not possible with previous mass media", caused by "the easy transmission of images and ideas around the globe… instantaneous and interactive communication with others… [and]

easy access to one's peers" (p. 389). A significant negative consequence of this ubiquitous access to social media is a rise in self-objectification and associated outcomes of problematic behaviour. For instance, sexting, an online activity popular among young people in the era of social media, could be regarded as a practice associated with self-objectification (Speno & Aubrey, 2019), where individuals demonstrate "a tendency to self-objectify… thinking of themselves as objects for others' consumption and evaluation" (pp. 88-89). Self-objectification can be regarded as a problematic behaviour, strongly connected with circulation of dominant ideals of beauty in media and influenced by "the internalization of gender-based media ideals of attractiveness" (Speno & Aubrey, 2019, p. 89). As well as that, the exposure to the circulation of dominant ideals of beauty may influence the perceptions of the audiences, leading to the normalisation of these ideals, with the consequence that "viewers to begin to accept media portrayals as representations of reality" (Grabe et. al, 2008, p. 460). Importantly, Speno and Aubrey (2019) noted that "women and girls, more than boys and men, have a shared experience of living in a culture that sexually objectifies their bodies" (p. 89), thus leading to sexual objectification of female bodies that can lead to self-objectification, further developed into the "negative outcomes, such as body guilt… body shame… body dissatisfaction… sexual dysfunction… decreased cognitive abilities… decreased feelings of comfort and authenticity in interactions with the opposite sex… restrained eating… and depression" (p. 89). Indeed, Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2012) noted that Western media has been criticised for the persistent sexual objectification of female bodies, where the physical appearance of women was focused "on women's appearances in a sexualized way while ignoring women's personalities" (p. 869).

Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) presents another potential danger that can experienced by individuals, and in particular, women (Frost, 2001). Beautiful and attractive people are commonly associated with virtue and intelligence (Clerkin & Teachman, 2009), as well as

social competence and generally positive perceptions by other people (Furnham and Swami, 2007), thus highlighting the importance of physical appearance in the socio-cultural environments. However, "in body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), appearance-relevant concerns become so pronounced that they are associated with intense distress and interference with the quality of everyday life" (Clerkin & Teachman, 2009, p. 589). Frost (2001) identified key behavioural patterns associated with body dysmorphic disorder that include frequently checking, or avoiding, mirrors; comparison to and feeling worse than others, including asking how you look or trying to convince others there is something wrong with your look; spending significant time grooming and choosing or changing clothes; and choosing clothes or adopting body positions to hide body parts. The first and second points are related to the so-called 'mirror gazing', a common symptom of BDD, and as described by Veale and Riley (2001), "Mirror gazing occurs in about 80% of patients with BDD while the remainder tend to avoid mirrors sometimes by covering them or removing them to avoid the distress of seeing their own image and the time wasted mirror gazing" (p. 1382). Potential body dysmorphic disorder is also manifested in muscle dysmorphia (Leit et al., 2001), "a clinical condition that is associated with excessive muscle-oriented exercise, rigid dietary behavior, repeated body checking, frequent body comparisons, and anabolic-androgenic steroid use" (Waldorf et al., 2019, p. 140). Muscle dysmorphia is also compared to anorexia, as these disorders "activate a dysfunctional body schema" (Waldorf et al., 2019, p. 141), and demonstrate a relationship between body image and "media influences" (Leit et al., 2001, p. 334), that might lead to body dissatisfaction, problematic for both men and women.

Dominant ideals of beauty circulated in media, where thinness is articulated to beauty, are recognised for their contribution to the emergence of the thin-ideal trends on social media that can further lead to eating disorders (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2019). Importantly, even women who fit dominant ideals of beauty might experience negative side effects of the exposure to

dominant ideals of beauty; for instance, as suggested by Krane et al. (2001), "we need to address the social bias in favor of females who most closely match the cultural ideal female body... This bias in favor of stereotypic femininity and beauty often leads to obsession with thinness and body shape" (p. 16). Eating disorders, such as anorexia, present a problematic behaviour in relation to the body image, or "a tragic splitting of body from mind" (Chernin, 1981, p. 47). Eating disorders are described as "serious mental illnesses associated with high morbidity and mortality, clinical impairment, and comorbid psychopathology that typically begin in adolescence or young adulthood" (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2019, p. 1681).

Even though media cannot be identified as the main source of body-dissatisfaction and eating disorders, its contribution is confirmed in the existing research: "Although the media do not directly cause eating disorders, recent research has suggested that they are a significant contributor to an overall, cumulative pattern that may initiate an eating disorder in a vulnerable individual" (Kaiser, 2005, p. 283).

Despite the potential dangers associated with physical attractiveness and dominant ideals of beauty, researchers suggest that physically attractive people are generally better-off in life and are more memorable than others (Dion et al., 1972; Margariti et al., 2021; Solomon, Ashmore, & Longo, 1992; Weitz, 2001). However, even though beauty is still associated with success and positive personal traits and is characterised by "positive perceptions of others" (Kwan & Trautner, 2009, p. 50), public perceptions of beautiful people can be biased and connected with negative concepts such as "self-centeredness" (p. 51). Despite these potential negative aspects, "investing in the body provides people with a means of self-expression and a way of potentially feeling good and increasing the control they have over their bodies" (Shilling, 2012, p. 6). Additionally, even consumerism or "hedonic consumption" (Margariti et al., 2021, p. 9) can be associated with rewards and pleasure, as illustrated by popular fictional female characters

in the television series *Gossip Girl*, where "consumption practices and beauty regimes are represented as keys to both pleasure and empowerment" (Bellas, 2017, p. 10).

Social environments affecting perceptions of beauty of girls and young women

Beauty and physical attractiveness are indeed important parts of life and social interactions (Piirto, 2019). As described earlier, the media influences women's perceptions of beauty (Novoselova, 2016). This influence is particularly significant to girls and young women who are continuously surrounded by dominant ideals of beauty transmitted via various media channels (Wood & Vialle, 2015):

> The girls perceived that popular culture suggested that appearance, being thin and possessing traditional beauty should be a priority in their lives, to continually work at and maintain. It suggested that fashion was vital to success and that successful women manipulated those around them to achieve their goals. (p. 2)

Researchers across a range of theoretical traditions, including psychology and sociology, agree that there are various factors that affect beauty perceptions of girls and young women and this influence is not limited only to media, as it incorporates an influence of a variety of social environments, such as girls' relations with peers and friends and their popularity among them (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2020; Francis et al., 2012; Helfert & Warschburger, 2013; Prieler et al., 2021; Tsang, 2017; Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014; Wood & Vialle, 2015). Other influences include their families, and in particular, parents (Francis et al., 2012; Helfert & Warschburger 2013; Wood & Vialle, 2015) and other social environments, for example, school environments (Thompson, 2007; Wood, 2017). Another source of influence is associated with sociocultural activities, for instance, beauty pageants (Thompson, 2007). Popularity among peers and their acceptance has been related to physical attractiveness of girls

(Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2020; Prieler et al., 2021), also suggesting that girls compare themselves with other peers, "as adolescent girls are highly sensitive to peer comparison, and upward comparison with attractive peers" (Prieler et al., 2021, p. 2). Teasing is indeed an important aspect of girls' interactions with their peers, and it is associated with girls' abilities to fit into dominant ideals of beauty, and importantly, the dominant ideals of the thin body (Donovan et al., 2006; Lawler & Nixon, 2011; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011; Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). For example, according to Webb and Zimmer-Gembeck (2014), body dissatisfaction is connected to both teasing and expectations to be slender, followed by social discussions of weight loss and its importance for "social acceptance":

> …pressure to be thin and appearance teasing from friends … [are] most consistently linked with poorer body dissatisfaction. Further, body dissatisfaction tends to be higher when adolescents are exposed to friends' appearance conversations or weight loss strategies, engage in social comparisons, and when messages between friends convey the importance of thinness and influence beliefs in the importance of appearance for social acceptance. (p. 27)

With my focus on the experiences of young women, I refer to the experiences of girls and young women, as "girlhood is more than just a stage of development; it is a cultural site where issues of race, class, power, domination and so on are played out" (Mitchell & Blaeser, 2000, p. 1). As girls mature, they are more actively involved in interactions with a wide range of social environments; and as they recognise the importance of dominant ideals of beauty, girls and young women "believe that appearance is relevant for self-evaluation and for evaluation by others" (Matera, Nerini, & Stefanile, 2013 p. 2). Gaerlan-Price (2020) confirmed the importance of beauty for high school girls by describing female beauty as "a form of a capital" (p. 149), thus associating beauty with "ideal capital to be acquired and utilised in place of or in conjunction with other forms of capital such as educational achievement" (p. 153).

From identifying the current dominant ideals of beauty, the following section will provide some insights to beauty standards that existed in the past, thereby illustrating the importance of dominant ideals of beauty. However, the following section also illustrates the on-going rearticulation of specific elements of ideal beauty, subject to the epoch and contemporary socio-cultural circumstances.

The changing nature of beauty across the ages

The history of female beauty ideals is as old as the documented history of humankind (Ehrenreich & English, 1978). Ehrenreich and English (1978) also pointed out that women of all historical epochs have attempted to change their bodies and appearance to suit and conform to the particular era's dominant beauty ideals. Within cultures and societies, new concepts of beauty and aesthetics have represented dominant ideals of female beauty (Bordo, 2004). In her book *The Beauty Myth* (2002), Wolf argued that women were expected to follow dominant ideals of beauty throughout history. She argued that, despite the expectation that beauty should be associated with "intimacy and sex and life, a celebration of women", it was in fact "composed of emotional distance, politics, finance, and sexual repression", therefore suggesting that female beauty has been affected by various factors that contributed to the creation of "the beauty myth" that was not "about women at all" (Wolf, 2002, p. 17). I illustrate that the articulation of beauty "is not 'eternal' but has to be constantly renewed" – rather, the articulation of specific elements to ideal beauty "[leads] to the old linkages being dissolved and new connections – rearticulations – being forged" (Hall, 1985, pp. 113-114)

Researchers argue that women's beauty has been associated with pain and practices damaging to health, thus making it hard – and sometimes dangerous – to fit dominant ideals of beauty (Ismailova & Sorochkina, 2014; Levy, 1966). Indeed, as Russian historian of fashion

Alexander Vasiliev (2009, p. 16) stated, quoting an old French proverb: “In order to be beautiful, you have to be born beautiful; in order to become beautiful, a woman has to suffer” (p. 16). Hesse-Biber (1996) has identified that “cultural rules have controlled women’s bodies throughout history” (p. 19) and caused serious health issues. For instance, the practices of foot binding in China around the 10th century caused harm such as pain in the legs and thighs and problems with walking – all in order to achieve a desirable “lotus” or “lily” foot (Hesse-Biber, 1996, p. 20). Foot binding practices became a “symbol of high status within Chinese society… in time, it filtered down to the masses as well” (Hesse-Biber, 1996, p. 20), thus articulating the influence of a social class to beauty. Another example can be demonstrated by the tradition of corseting that existed in England, Europe and America in the 19th century, which caused problems with breathing and damaged women’s internal organs and lungs (Hesse-Biber, 1996). In Ancient Egypt, women dripped an extract of belladonna juice (notable for its unpredictable effects from toxicity) in their eyes, painted thick long eyebrows with coal, and applied paint made of carbonate of copper (causing damage to the liver and kidneys) on the eyelids (Nagornova, 2004).

However, in the past, female attractiveness was articulated to biology and reproduction, characterized by the prioritization of physical health and strength (Ismailova & Sorochkina, 2014; Vasiliev, 2009). For example, from about 25,000 to 700 BC, the Mediterranean was dominated by matriarchal Goddess religions where women were regarded as the “divine womb” (Wolf, 2002). As a result, female bodies were worshipped for health, ability to give birth, and sexuality; wide hips, large breasts and belly were regarded as symbols of fertility and abundance of food (Wolf, 2002), such as the Venus of Willendorf (Figure 2). The Venus of Willendorf was described by Salisbury (2001) in the following way:

> The large breasts on which she rests her arms hint at an abundance of food, and her heavy belly and thighs celebrate an excess of calories rarely available to hunting-

gathering societies. The figure's prominently displayed genitals may express either sexuality or childbirth, or both. We do not know whether the figure represents a fertility "goddess," a celebration of – or hope for – general abundance, or a magical invocation of fecundity. The red ochre dye may have represented the blood of menstruation or childbirth, which suggests that Stone Age people may have had awe and respect for that aspect of womanhood. (pp. 332-333)

Fig. 2. Venus of Willendorf, ca. 25,000 B.C. Source: Ann Ronan Picture Library

In the following sections, I move through several time periods to illustrate the diversity of dominant ideals of beauty throughout history. I start with Ancient Greece, where beauty was an important component of the culture – however, Eco (2004) argued that there were no particular physical characteristics articulated to beauty at least until the age of Perides (roughly from 461 to 429 BC). During the Golden Age of Greek Art (from around 500 to 300 BC), beauty was much more connected to broader understandings of beauty, prioritizing such values as "moderation", "harmony" and "symmetry" (Eco, 2004, p. 37). In Ancient Greece, beauty presented a complex matter, and according to the definition of *Kalon* (καλὸς κἀγαθός

[*kalos* kaːgatʰŏs], the ideal of physical and moral beauty, "beauty is all that pleases, arouses admiration, or draws the eye" (Eco, 2004, p. 39). Aristotle's biological theories, centered around the concept of heat, claimed that women were lesser men, which meant that women by nature were less developed (Weitz, 1998). An important idea of distinction between physical beauty and the "beauty of the souls" was developed Plato and Socrates who, according to Marwick (2004):

> …did believe deeply in the distinction between the noble beauty of the soul and the wickedly tempting beauty of the body, though there does seem to be more than a touch of wanting to have your crumpet and moralize about it too. (p. 31)

As time passed, new cultures appeared and developed different standards of beauty. For instance, the early centuries of the Middle Ages were characterised as a period when people were suspicious of physical attributes, beauty, and the senses (Eco, 2004). Morality and religion highly influenced the lives of people in society, thus forcing women to follow dominant ideals of beauty (Marwick, 2004). In both Western and Asian countries, religion was one of the influential power structures that influenced dominant ideals of beauty (Ismailova & Sorochkina, 2014). In Europe, the Church had the power to shape and allocate meaning not only to devotional life, but to all community events, "brooking no division between the secular and the religious" (Wolf, 2002, p. 88). In this time, the whole concept of beauty was dominated by the Church, which articulated specific aspects of physical appearance to ideal beauty: hair was to be hidden after marriage; blonde hair should be blackened; jewelry was regarded as inappropriate accessories (Wolf, 2002). However, later in Medieval Europe, a beautiful woman with long hair and pale skin was regarded as an inspiration of men's actions and heroism (Marwick, 2004).

During the Renaissance epoch (15th and 16th century), artists gained more freedom; therefore, standards of beauty became more open and served as a tool to rebel against strict moral rules and religion (Eco, 2002). Feminine beauty, youth, purity, and openness were highly appreciated and articulated in art to represent the ideals of beauty. Renaissance women used cosmetics and paid great attention to their hair; following the trend of blonde hair, women with dark hair often attempted to brighten theirs, thus ending up with so called "strawberry red" hair (Eco, 2002), thus creating a contrast to the Middle Ages, where dark hair was articulated to beauty (Wolf, 2002).

Even though such changes took place, religion still held significant power in society; for instance, the concept of the woman as a mother figure was respected by artists (Eco, 2004). For example, Mary (the mother of Jesus) was regarded as a mother, a virgin, a symbol of purity and the beauty of life. At this time, the representations of ideal beauty reflected the concept of representation as being to "depict another object or practice in the 'real' world" (Barker, 2004, p. 177). As Danto (2002) described it:

> on principles of Renaissance theory, paintings were windows on the world – pure, apparently transparent opening through which one saw the world as from outside. So a picture drew its beauty from the world, ideally having none of its own to contribute to what one saw, it were, through it. (p. 42)

Between the 16th and the 17th centuries, during the period of the Reformation, the image of women and beauty standards was rearticulated yet again: a female body had to be completely covered with clothes, and women were mainly regarded as housewives and governesses (Eco, 2004). Such changes can be identified in the Tudor epoch when the sensual beauty of Anne Boleyn was replaced by the stiffness of Jane Seymour and the concept of the "Practical Beauty" was created (Eco, 2004).

Beauty trends shifted again during the Baroque era (early 17th century to 1740s) where (Eco, 2004):

> the persistence of Baroque Beauty was justified by aristocratic taste for giving oneself over to the sweetness of life, while the austere rigor of Neoclassicism was well suited to the cult of reason, discipline and calculability typical of the rising bourgeoisie. (p. 239)

Hair was still articulated to female beauty, however, the focus shifted to style rather than color – beautiful long hair with flowing curls and pale hands of women were regarded as the most important characteristics of beauty, pictured in the art of the Baroque era (Eco, 2004). Beauty ideals of this era were articulated to femininity, with more visible breasts, and the bands that supported them, aimed to emphasise a woman's waistline (Eco, 2004). Such a concept articulated beauty to imagination (Eco, 2004).

Victorian women were expected to be fragile, pale, and to have a tightly cinched waist (Hesse-Biber, 1996). Crinolines were not only a fashionable trend in England in the 19th century but were also made of a highly flammable material that was dangerous to wear (Roberts, 1977). In the West in the 18th century, the sun, air and water were regarded as enemies of women's beauty (Nagornova, 2004). White lead painted on women's faces to indicate paleness was typically not washed from a woman's face for weeks (Nagornova, 2004). In an earlier time, white lead was also articulated to beauty – for instance, in Japanese Shinto rituals, the colour white was articulated to purity, so women heavily bleached and painted their skin. White lead was used as the basis for this paint, giving the effect of a smooth, almost mask-like face (Ismailova & Sorochkina, 2014).

During Romanticism (the first half of the 18th century), the ideal image of beautiful women was that they had to look sick, pale, with dark circles under their eyes, and thin (Vasiliev, 2009). The 18th century was characterised by "the idea that Beauty is something that appears as such to the perceiver, that it is bound up with the senses, the recognition of pleasure, [and] was dominant in diverse philosophical circles" (Eco, 2004, p. 227). Women were starving themselves to be aristocratically thin, and used cleansing enemas prescribed by personal doctors to add more shine to the eyes before a ball. An image of Violetta Valéry from the *Lady with the Camellias* was regarded as the most desirable one (Nagornova, 2004; Vasiliev, 2009). This articulation can be illustrated by an example from the Belle Époque (1871-1914) when women from the upper classes articulated beauty to a narrow waist, quite often choosing to remove their lower ribs, even taking into consideration the fact that at that time, only local anaesthesia existed (Vasiliev, 2009).

By the end of the 19th century, women still articulated a narrow waist to a beautiful body (Nagornova, 2004). Corsets were used even by pregnant women, who were trying to achieve a desirable waist circumference equal to 55 cm – the ideal standard of that period – with potentially deadly effects: in 1859, a 23-year-old woman died during a ball, and an autopsy revealed that an overly tightened corset forced three ribs to pierce her liver (Nagornova, 2004).

The first decade of the 1900s were characterized by fast shifts in dominant ideals of beauty, like the "beauty of costume and dresses" and dandyism in the 19th century, the vague "dream of beauty" of impressionists, desire of exotic and tragic beauty in Western society, glorification of Evil as Beauty, Decadent sensibility, "Aesthetic Mysticism" and a concept of "only that was artificial could be beautiful" (Eco, 2004, p. 340). The concept of *androgyny* was also highly popular among women during the Art Nouveau period (1890-1910); style and beauty were replaced by functional beauty, geometric forms and dramatic hairstyles (Eco, 2004). The 1920s

were characterised by a mixture of some old customs and new trends. Curves were rearticulated as out of fashion, whereas thinness and boyish bodies and haircuts were articulated to female beauty; such concepts of beauty aimed to emphasise the desire of equality between the sexes (Eco, 2004). The 20th century could be characterised as the era of rapid change in beauty standards – every decade was associated with a particular set of beauty standards and fashion choices (Eco, 2004), yet again demonstrating a diversity of physical attributes articulated to ideal beauty throughout time.

Though I aim to illustrate the examples associated with the rearticulation of dominant ideals of beauty, I do not attempt to provide a description of all beauty ideals throughout documented history[2]. Instead, I highlight particular eras to demonstrate how beauty transformed over the centuries.

In the following section, I provide a discussion of media literacy, young people's engagement with modern technologies, and the importance of critical thinking. I begin with a brief introduction of media literacy. After that, I focus on empowerment as a media literacy concept. The final part of this section is related to development of social skills and cultural competences required in the era of technological development.

Mass media, globalisation and the commercialisation of beauty

Dominant ideals of beauty are actively circulated in media (Klein, 2014). The online environment influences people all over the world, thereby expanding media messages globally,

[2] Specific literature dedicated to the topic that provides a detailed illustration of beauty characteristics in different cultures and different epochs (e.g., Danto, 2002; Eco, 2004).

with one of the most striking examples related to the influence of dominant ideals of beauty was illustrated by Bordo (2003) who described the case of Fiji, where in 1995, when television was launched in the nation, there were no reported cases of eating disorders. After only three years, by 1998, the circulation of images representing dominant ideals of beauty in American and British programmes created an environment that held enough power to cause eating disorders among 62% of young girls (Bordo, 2003). Bordo (2003) stated that the Western influence was powerful enough to change cultural and social standards of physical appearance in a country where women and girls with voluptuous bodies were traditionally considered as beautiful, thus showing the power of Western dominant ideals of beauty on non-Western countries. With its global expansion, the media has the power to alter existing social traditions and beauty ideals (Sarikakis & Shade, 2008).

In addition, female beauty and female sexuality have been described as both a commodity (Gentile, 2007) and a "currency" (Calogero et al., 2017, p. 66). As argued by Lefebvre (1984), "Everyday life weights heaviest on women… they are both buyers and consumers of commodities and symbols for commodities" (p. 73). Media circulates dominant ideals of beauty using both traditional and new media, or as described by Gentile (2007), "both established and emerging media including Facebook, Myspace, magazines, billboards, newspaper, television, movies, and music videos" (p. 2). This circulation contributes to the unachievable and continuous rearticulation of dominant ideals of beauty (Calogero et al., 2017): "feminine beauty ideology sets beauty work as a primary pursuit for women… because of the unrealistic, elusive, and changing nature of these ideals" (p. 67). Indeed, media and globalisation are important factors that influence the formation of dominant ideals of beauty – corporations and the visual content produced by them are also active parties in this ideological creation (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2020; Klein, 2014; Dang et al., 2013). Apart from the influence of media on women's self-identity and perceptions of beauty, mass media also affects

women's decision-making and choice of beauty products. Women represent an important niche market by consuming products related to the beauty industry, such as accessories, clothes, makeup, and shoes (Cook & Kaiser, 2004). Importantly, teen girls in particular represent a key to profit margins (Gentile, 2007). By 2011, the beauty industry had global sales in excess of $US 330 billion (Jones, 2011), exceeded by US$ 430 billion revenue from global advertising of beauty products (Jones, 2011; Friedman & Jones, 2011).

There are concerns associated with life in Western societies where capitalism, consumerism, and globalisation influence the lives of women (McRobbie, 2009). McRobbie (2009) pointed out the questionable benefits of capitalism for women, further asking "What need might there be for feminist politics at all, if women could simply subvert the meaning of the goods and values of the dominant cultural world around them?" (p. 3). Globalisation and media power strongly influence the audience (Bordo, 2003). Globalisation and the following internalisation of certain images of ideal beauty could be regarded as the strongest reason behind body dissatisfaction among girls (Pasha & Golshekoh, 2009). Sarikakis and Shade (2008) reported that "mass media corporations have grown bigger and stronger in their reach of international audiences and their ability to organize production and distribution processes globally" (p. 65). With this global expansion, mass media has the power to alter existing patterns of social traditions and norms and to shape their uses in society, as Bordo reported in regard to the Fiji case study (Sarikakis & Shade, 2008). Furthermore, Goodall (2012) stated that both adults and children are experiencing the "pervasiveness of media exposure on society... it is hard not to become swayed by what is perceived as social norms" (p. 160). This mixture of globalisation and pervasive media messages causes concerns about their effects on the well-being of young people (Gentile, 2007; Thompson et al., 1999; Willinge et al., 2006).

With “the globalisation of the beauty industry” (Jones, 2011, p. 886), the advertisements of beauty products influence audiences and their perceptions of attractiveness (Jones, 2011). Further, in the modern digital environments associated with consumerism and globalisation, there are expectations of girls and young women “to be a child, to be a consumer and to be feminine” (Tyler, 2002, p. 621). In the following section, I will further discuss media influence by focusing on children and their perceptions.

Children and their perceptions of beauty

In this section, I explore the argument that beauty ideals are absorbed from early stages of life, thus affecting children’s perceptions of physical attractiveness, constructing their judgments based on body depictions in the media (Kirkpatrick & Sanders, 1978; Norton et al., 1996; Tiggemann & Wilson-Barrett, 1998). For instance, children tend to positively evaluate thin people, rather than obese figures (Herbozo et al., 2004). There are correlations held by children between attractiveness and positive characteristics (Herbozo et al., 2004; Grogan, 1999; Kirkpatrick & Sanders, 1978). Psychology researchers criticise the power of the media, which influences and shifts children’s perceptions of bodies – previous research of the effects of media on children underscored that children experience a desire to have thin bodies and a fear of obesity (Gilbert, 1998; Maloney et al., 1989).

Child-oriented media, examined in relation to its influence on young viewers’ perceptions of beauty (Herbozo et al., 2004), has been found to create unattainable standards of physical appearance for girls and young women (Herbozo et al., 2004; Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996). For instance, Gentile’s research (2007) suggested that 14–24-year-old girls and young women in the USA tend to describe dominant images of women in the media as “flawless, perfection, slenderness, sexiness” (p. 2). The content created for children and teenagers by global media

companies, such as Disney, including gender identity and gender roles in Disney cartoons and movies, has been criticised by feminists since the very first animated movie, *Snow White*, in 1937 (O'Brien, 1996; Sawyer, 2003; Towbyn et al., 2003). Portrayals of women in Disney cartoons were initially formulated according to the personal opinion of Walt Disney and, specifically, the patriarchal beliefs existing in the society of the 1940s (O'Brien, 1996). Sawyer (2003) argued that the characters of Disney princesses, observed by young girls, created certain physical appearance expectations, such as the importance of being "beautiful, acquiescent, skinny"; additionally, certain behaviour patterns and expectations were observed, such as "to perform duties of a housewife... do not hold jobs of their own... to find their prince" (p. 3). One of the main themes in every Disney movie was related to physical appearance, and beauty, in particular, rather than the personal qualities and intelligence of female characters (Towbin et al., 2003).

Content created by media producers affects decoding positions of the audience, and as mass media's influence is "so pervasive in our society… [it plays] a role in shaping people's perspectives" (Goodall, 2012, p. 163). As well as that, media has a particularly strong influence on children as media constructs their perceptions and interpretations of the world around (Corsaro, 1997). In addition, media serves as a teacher of social relationships and norms for children and young adults (Wynn & Rosenfield, 2003).

After the discussion of the media influence on the audiences, I further focus on the importance of media literacy and why the audiences need to implement it in the modern digital landscape.

Media literacy

Media literacy, critical analysis and critical thinking are important concepts that should be studied by young people (Jones-Jang et al., 2021; Lim & Nekmat, 2008; Potter, 2004, 2010),

as “acquired media literacy skills can successfully reduce harmful outcomes and produce favorable results, such as expanding audiences’ knowledge of the structures, realism, and impact of media content” (Stamps, 2021, p. 5).

Since last century, mass media has been a source of dominant ideals of beauty, and visual texts “have been a central concern of feminist media” (Thornham, 2007, p. 23). Technologies have become an indivisible part of our lives (Rainie & Wellman, 2019), thus creating a “technologically mediated world” (boyd, 2014, p. 180) where “media is larger than life” (Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012, p. 18). Rainie and Wellman (2019) referred to the influence of modern technologies on societies, individuals, habits, lifestyles, and information exchange, and explained that “the spread of digital technology has reshaped the flow of daily life, vastly expanded the personal and information boundaries of users, and transformed the way people take care of their health, learn new things, and act as citizens” (p. 27). This rapid development has been particularly visible since the year 2000 (Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012), as more traditional media was “absorbed” by the Internet (Kellner & Share, 2007):

> The current technological revolution, however, brings to the fore, more than ever, the role of media like television, popular music, film, and advertising, as the Internet rapidly absorbs these cultural forms and creates ever-evolving cyberspaces and emergent forms of culture and pedagogy. It is highly irresponsible in the face of saturation by the Internet and media culture to ignore these forms of socialization and education. (p. 4)

The existing body of research accentuates the revolutionary and fast development of the Internet, digital landscape, and modern technologies, globalisation, and digital connectedness (Burnett & Merchant, 2011; Prakoso et al., 2017; Rainie & Wellman, 2019). As this digital environment is rapidly expanding and relatively unregulated, it can be associated with such

dangers as fabricated, misleading information and messages (e.g., Clayton et al., 2019; Jones-Jang et al., 2021).

Before I provide a definition of *media literacy*, I first establish the meaning of *literacy*. Critical theorist Douglas Kellner and critical media literacy scholar Jess Share (2005) offered a definition of literacy that focuses on education and skills development: "literacy involves gaining the skills and knowledge to read, interpret, and produce certain types of texts and artifacts and to gain the intellectual tools and capacities to fully participate in one's culture and society" (p. 369). They also suggested that literacies evolve following sociocultural changes and the interests of those in power (Kellner & Share, 2005).

According to media scholar Henry Jenkins (2009), *media literacy* emerged as a result of the increasing role of mass media and modern technologies in our lives. Indeed, "the recent and rapid dissemination of new forms of digital technology has had a noticeable impact on the social and cultural lives of large sectors of the global population" (Burnett & Merchant, 2011, p. 41). For instance, the popular social media platform, Instagram (Anderson & Jiang, 2018), significantly affects young people's perceptions of beauty, with "its strong focus on fitness, make-up, fashion, and dietary topics" (Stein et al., 2019, p. 4).

However, media literacy is characterised by its complex nature, or what Potter (2010) called a "a large complex patchwork of ideas" (p. 676). Media scholars Hoechsmann and Poyntz (2012) described media literacy as a comprehensive system that we need in order to understand and read media messages. They suggested that media literacy is:

> a set of competencies that enable us to interpret media texts and institutions, to make media of our own, and to recognize and engage with the social and political influence of media in everyday life. … Media literacy suggests a capacity or

> competence to do something with media, whether to make sense of it, to produce it, or to understand its role in our societies. (p. 1)

The growing importance of media literacy was also discussed by Kellner and Share (2005) who pointed out the role of both cultural studies and critical pedagogy in the research on mass media, media representation, and social injustices that provided a path for critical studies to address such injustices:

> … There is expanding recognition that media representations help construct our images and understanding of the world and that education must meet the dual challenges of teaching media literacy in a multicultural society and sensitising students and the public to the inequities and injustices of a society based on gender, race, and class inequalities and discrimination. (p. 370)

Media literacy also focuses on the audience's ability to make meaning of media content, produce content, and understand the role of media (Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012), therefore enabling the audience to "interpret the meaning of the mediated messages so that it can provide clues about how to treat the media" (Jones-Jang et al., 2021, p. 195).

As previously discussed, there are certain dangers associated with young people's presence in digital landscapes – for instance, a misleading assumption that young people are *digital natives* and adults are *digital immigrants* (boyd, 2014, p. 176). Even though the younger generation is more active as media users, young people do not *inherit* skills and knowledge to critically evaluate the mass media's messages. As boyd argues (2014):

> Being exposed to information or imagery through the internet and engaging with social media do not make someone a savvy interpreter of the meaning behind these artifacts. Technology is constantly reworking social and information systems, but

> teens will not become critical contributors to this ecosystem simply because they were born in an age when these technologies were pervasive. (p. 177)

According to Potter's (2010) discussion of media literacy, "the purpose of becoming more media literate is to gain greater control over influences in one's life, particularly the constant influence from the mass media" (p. 681). However, media literacy needs more implementation in educational systems (Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012); in addition, the implementation of media literacy should address the importance of *critical media literacy* (boyd, 2014). As boyd (2014) argues, critical media literacy was implemented in the educational systems and communities before the development of the Internet:

> Even though media literacy programs have been discussed and haphazardly implemented for decades, most people have little training in being critical of the content that they consume. Long before the internet, critical media literacy has never been considered essential in schools or communities. Instead, schools have relied on trustworthy publishers, information curators, and other reputable sources. (p. 180)

One of the most important issues that needs to be addressed is young people's "variation in knowledge and experience" about the media and technologies (boyd, 2014, p. 180) – despite their engagement with social media, there is still a need for them to be educated in media literacy and develop critical thinking skills and knowledge building (Potter, 2004). As Potter (2010) explains, media literacy can be regarded as a set of skills that should be developed:

> No one is born media literate. Media literacy must be developed, and this development requires effort from each individual as well as guidance from experts. The development also is a long term process that never ends, that is, no one ever reaches a point of total, complete media literacy. Skills can always be more highly

> developed; if they are not continually improved they will atrophy. Also, the process of knowledge acquisition is never finished, because the media and the form of their messages are constantly changing. (p. 681)

Critical media literacy is important for a variety of reasons. First of all, it empowers the audience and provides an opportunity to *use* the media to overcome traditional power relations. Kellner and Share (2007) argue that "critical media literacy gives individuals power over their culture and thus enables people to create their own meanings and identities to shape and transform the material and social conditions of their culture and society" (p. 18). Secondly, it teaches individuals critical thinking skills and acknowledges the importance of an individual's agency and self-expression. As Kellner and Share (2005) explain, critical media literacy teaches "students to be critical of media representations and discourses while also stressing the importance of learning to use the media as modes of self-expression and social activism" (p. 371). And thirdly, critical media literacy enables the audience to "resist media manipulation, and to use media materials in constructive ways" (Kellner & Share, 2005, p. 372). Boyd (2014, p. 180) drew on the importance of being capable of using technologies in important "everyday activities: obtaining a well-paying job, managing medical care, engaging with government". With technological developments and the presence of technologies in everyday life, people "adopted cyberskins", thus referring to individuals as *cyborgs* – like a human and a machine joined together (Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012, p. ix). The rapid growth of technologies made the use of devices easier and more accessible for everyone, however the content itself needs to be consumed critically, as the audiences might have a limited comprehension of the content in which they are immersed. As Hoechsmann and Poyntz (2012) propose:

> Our communications technologies have become smaller, more convergent, and more comprehensive. We use them to receive, gather, develop, and transmit

> information… we are swimming in a sea of data, the only constraint upon which is our limited capacity to take it all in. (p. ix)

To be able to navigate in this sea of data, young people can use media literacy to develop their critical thinking and critical awareness, and build up their knowledge about image manipulation, especially considering the growing role of media in lives of children and young people (Burnett & Merchant, 2011). However, as the power of media is not absolute, and audiences "are neither powerless nor omnipotent" (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 14), the study of media literacy will contribute to the audiences' empowerment and ability to read media messages from negotiated or oppositional positions, therefore enabling "people to create their own meanings and identities to shape and transform the material and social conditions of their culture and society" (p. 18). Therefore, despite the need for critical media literacy, young people should not be regarded as "blindly willing consumers of media" (Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012, p. 110), "passive recipients" or even "victims" (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 13), therefore highlighting the presence of empowerment in the lives of the young audiences.

Empowerment

As previously discussed in this section, the rapid growth of modern technologies and media make the world we live in "media saturated, technologically dependent, and globally connected" (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 3). These changes demonstrate the need for critical media literacy in order to help the audience "to adequately read media messages and produce media themselves" (Kellner and Share, 2007, p. 7). Empowerment has been acknowledged as an important part of this process (Ang, 2002; Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012; Kellner & Share, 2005, 2007). Interestingly, the concept of empowerment – "the notion that young people can be empowered through and about media as a means for reshaping public spheres" – has been

recognised as an effective strategy of media literacy only in the past 20 years (Hoechsmann & Poyntz; 2012, p. 5). Empowerment is an important concept associated with the theoretical framework of my research that recognises an individual's agency and ability to decode in different ways (Kellner & Share, 2005): "The notion that audiences are neither powerless nor omnipotent when it comes to reading media contributes greatly to the potential for media literacy to empower audiences in the process of negotiating meanings" (p. 372). Importantly, individual empowerment can be achieved through *critical thinking inquiry* and is crucial to enable young people "to challenge the power of media to create preferred readings" (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 8), and develop decoding positions that are not necessarily in line with dominant ideology. Kellner and Share (2007) explained why empowerment has to be implemented in media literacy: "audience theory views the moment of reception as a contested terrain of cultural struggle where critical thinking skills offer potential for the audience to negotiate different readings and openly struggle with dominant discourses" (p. 8), as only with the development of critical thinking will audience members be able to question preferred readings of the media and dominant ideologies.

As evidence of the ability to question dominant discourses, women have been highly critical of standards of beauty observed in the media, especially accentuating the negative tendency to portray women as "sex objects", calling it "offensive and far from reality" (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008, p. 72). Similarly, other research concluded that the representation of femininity in the media was described by research participants as "too narrow, as inauthentic and as insufficient" (Etcoff et al., 2004, p. 5). The portrayal of women as objects in the media may lead to "self-objectification" by women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). However, practising empowerment might lead to reducing, and potentially overcoming, self-objectification (Peterson et al., 2008). Empowerment is important as dominant ideals of beauty can be harmful and cause negative experiences for women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). As

argued by Peterson et al. (2008), "women's self-worth should not be determined by their physical appearance" (p. 640). Self-identity of a woman should be separated from her appearance and whether she does, or does not, fulfil standards of beauty that exist in the society and the media.

Pop culture demonstrated its contribution to female empowerment as well: for instance, the term 'girl power' gained popularity with success of the *Spice Girls*, a popular British pop group; the five singers represented different types of identities, and all together, celebrated the notion of girl power, embracing femininity and feminism at the same time (Zaslow, 2009). Since the 2000s, girls and young women in the USA have been surrounded by examples of such slogans as 'Strong, smart, and bold' by Girls, Inc.; 'You can be whatever you want'; and 'Just do it' by Nike, which aimed to be a source of empowerment for women (Baumgardner & Richards, 2004). However, McRobbie (2008) pointed out the commercial interests behind such slogans directed at young women with a disposable income, especially considering that by the end of 1990s, female teenagers were regarded as an ideal target market (Zaslow, 2009).

Another way to practice empowerment is associated with expression of body positivity in online communities (Sastre, 2014). In relation to the influence of dominant ideals of beauty on young women and girls, it is especially important to make them aware of image manipulation. Manifestation of empowerment can also be related to young women's ability to analyse media messages and apply either negotiated or oppositional decoding; for instance, in questioning the "role models" observed in the media. As it was found in Wood's (2017) research on girls' complex engagements with media, young viewers recognised the popularised representation of role models portrayed in media:

> They saw that successful women in popular culture manipulated others to achieve their goals and described them as aggressive and competitive, with strong drives for

> power that were about winning, rather than the personal power illustrated by the concept of girl power in earlier popular culture. (p. 322)

Knowledge about image manipulation could be an important source of empowerment. Image manipulation was discussed by a number of scholars (e.g., Farid & Bravo, 2010; Willinge et al., 2006) who argued that audiences struggle to make an accurate assessment of images portraying dominant ideals of beauty, which are often created with the use of image manipulation. However, the more audiences understand the processes of media production, the less harmful stereotypical conclusions of the dominant ideals of beauty they will adopt (Bullen, 2009, p. 150). The development of this knowledge is important, despite some scholars (e.g., Berman & White, 2013) stating that "young people are already cognizant of image manipulation techniques used by the media" (p. 5). Media studies and media literacy aim to help young people deal with existing stereotypes of dominant ideals of beauty. Zimmerman and Dahlberg (2008) also pointed out the importance of women showing their agency, "raising their voices" (p. 71), and criticising the representation of women as *sex object*s in the media. Younger media users' agency is also becoming more visible in digital landscapes, thus making them "cultural contributors" (Keller, 2012, p. 431) in the content creation. The researchers indicate the importance of hearing young people's opinions and voices related to their techno-social-cultural practices, as well as recognising the ethics of young people's actions in media environments (Albury & Crawford, 2012; boyd, 2014; Coleman & Ringrose, 2013).

Conclusion

Analysis of media texts and research dedicated to women's lives are particularly important. As argued by Gentile (2007), the existing media representation of women's appearance and sexuality could be regarded as one of the main sources for young women to explore their

identity formation. Additionally, the media plays an active and significant role in people's lives (Thornham, 2007), thus influencing women's perceptions of beauty and self-perception of their own bodies (Saltzberg & Chrisler, 1995; Willinge et al., 2006). Indeed, dominant beauty ideologies influence the portrayal of femininity, beauty, success, and body shape (Cusumano & Thompson, 1997). Representation of female beauty in the media is understood by researchers as problematic is caused by the fact that female beauty standards have been developed by male creators with their "male-defined notions of the truth of femininity" (Felski, 2000, p. 182).

Today, social media has become the most popular medium for young people (Perloff, 2014) and has "totally changed the landscape of traditional media" (Boizot, 2019, p. 6), allowing girls and young women to produce media content and share their experiences on social media (Keller & Ringrose, 2014). Current dominant representations of beauty provide audiences with a limited representation of female beauty; this limited representation might negatively influence individuals' lives. The negative influence may vary from social anxieties (Albury & Crawford, 2012) and body dissatisfaction (Levine & Murnen, 2009; Willinge et al., 2006). The effects of media consumption also create unrealistic beauty expectations; as stated by Yamamiya et al. (2004), "women are significantly more body dissatisfied after viewing thin-and-beautiful media images versus average-size [women]" (p. 75) – for example, creating environments where the U.S. "size zero" – a skinny body – becomes a *status symbol* (Bordo, 2003, p. 3).

As young people have built strong engagement with social media (boyd, 2014), it is particularly important to focus on media literacy. McRobbie (2007) pointed out that "media has become the key site for defining codes... it casts judgments and establishes the rules" (p. 258). Gibson (2014) drew on her personal engagement with visual images in the media that pressured her to change her appearance in order to fit dominant ideals of beauty, explaining that "as a woman

socialized in Western culture, I can attest to the pressure placed upon women to fit within a narrow ideal of what it means to be beautiful" (p. 288).

In her book *The aftermath of feminism. Gender, Culture, and Social Change*, Angela McRobbie (2009) discussed the concepts of *empowerment* and *choice*. McRobbie (2009) stated that empowerment and choice present important concepts "in media and popular culture" (p. 1). Additionally, the importance of recognising individuals' freedom and agency is central to feminism (Brunsdon et al., 1997). Empowerment might lead to reduction of self-objectification (Peterson et al., 2008). Empowerment, being one of the central concepts of feminist theory, is certainly required, as we exist in media environments with dominant ideals of beauty transmitted across various media channels. Empowerment benefits the lives of women, and as argued by Wolf (2002):

> …a woman wins by giving herself and other women permission – to eat; to be sexual; to age; … to do whatever we choose in following – or ignoring – our own aesthetic. A woman wins when she feels that what each woman does with her body – unforced, uncoerced – is her own business. …. Institutions, some men, and some women will continue to try to use women's appearance against us. But we won't bite. (p. 290)

In the following chapter, I discuss the methodology and methods underpinning my work, and how I conducted in-depth interviews with my research participants grounded in a feminist perspective to the interview process. I also explain how I organised and interpreted my data by using cultural studies concepts discussed in Chapter Two: Theory.

Chapter Four: Methodology

Following on from the discussion of research ontology in Chapter Two – Theory, I now turn my focus to the research methodology and methods. This chapter has four aims. First, I outline the epistemology that underpins this research, and explain why it is important to conduct in-depth interviews with young women and why their stories matter from a feminist point of view. Second, I discuss key principles of the interview process: a caring atmosphere, power relations, listening, emotions, and ethics. Third, I describe the selection requirements for participants, and the processes for data generation and analyses. I address my own preparation for the interviews, the participant recruitment process, and information about research participants. Fourth, I introduce the data analysis process and the tools used to organise my data. Finally, I discuss the challenges associated with this methodology.

Epistemology

It is important to establish a consistent and clear understanding of the ontology and epistemology of this research. Ontology, previously discussed in Chapter Two – Theory, aims to answer such questions as *What is real? What is reality?* and epistemology answers such questions as *What is truth? How do we know something? How do we obtain knowledge? How do we interpret reality?* Together, ontology and epistemology comprise the research paradigm. Kuhn (1962) defined a research paradigm as "the common set of beliefs and agreements shared between scientists about how a problem should be understood and addressed" (p. 45). Leavy (2017) described a research paradigm as a framework "through which knowledge is filtered" (p. 11) and the foundation of the research process. Accordingly, a research paradigm can be characterised by its concepts and the relations between them (Guba, 1990). The analysis of

how ideas/ideologies circulate, how power works and its effects represent the key foci of this discussion.

Epistemology is "the science of knowing; systems of knowledge" (Babbie, 2013, p. 4), which determines our "assumptions about the social world – who can be a knower and what can be known" (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 5). Epistemology affects the choices of methodology and methods used by researchers (Babbie, 2013; Hesse-Biber, 2014). Methodology is "the science of finding out" (Babbie, 2003, p. 4) that affects the process of the research (Harding, 1987b) as it addresses "the selection of research focus, problem, and approach" (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015, p. 76). Methods are the techniques, or tools, used in the research (Hesse-Biber, 2014). The choice of methodology and methods for this research was based on my research goals and my interest in the experiences of young women (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015).

I adopted a feminist research approach in my methodology, starting with a careful wording of interview questions and finishing with the way I analysed and presented my data. According to Hesse-Biber (2014): "feminist research encompasses the full range of knowledge building that includes epistemology, methodology, and method" (p. 5). My goal as a researcher was to examine the experiences of young women and to understand their engagement with visual texts in mass media by analysing their decoding positions, understanding their meaning making, addressing negotiations and complexities revealed in their answers, and examining the interplay of structure and agency. As I have previously discussed in Chapter Two – Theory, I chose feminist cultural studies as my theoretical framework as it allowed me to focus on the unique experiences of individuals in the context of ideologies of beauty (O'Brien, 2008), and in particular, women's experiences (Worell & Etaugh, 1994).

I explored the lives of young women as they engaged with dominant beauty ideals and made sense of beauty in media. I focused on their experiences because "feminist research should be not just on women, but *for* women" (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008, p. 328) and involves a "careful attention to women's experiences" (Devault, 1990, p. 96). According to Campbell and Wasco (2000, p. 785), through the communication between women, a comprehensive and nuanced description of women's experiences may be achieved. I examined their experiences shared with me in relation to their perceptions of beauty, together with discussions of media literacy and image manipulation.

For a feminist researcher, it is important to focus not only on research questions, but also on the relationship with research participants and the atmosphere during the interviews. Furthermore, scholars have stated that personal communication with people regarding personal experiences and opinions is one of the most important parts of research (Burgess, 1982; Legard et al., 2003). Consequently, I focused on the construction of a caring relationship with the participants during the interviews (Hogan, 1988). In the following section, I describe the methods I used to generate my research data, explaining how they reflected a feminist epistemology and enabled a deeper exploration of the key concepts underpinning this research.

Interviews

I chose to use in-depth interviews to generate the data. Interviews are a common method used in feminist research, as they enable a deep understanding of individuals' experiences (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). As my study design was qualitative, a small number of participants, each of whom was interviewed twice, allowed me to obtain a deeper understanding of their stories and realise another goal of my research – to understand the "meanings" young women "attribute to their given experiences, not necessarily to make generalizations" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 119).

As explained by Castillo-Montoya (2016), "interviews provide researchers with rich and detailed qualitative data for understanding participants' experiences, how they describe those experiences, and the meaning they make of those experiences" (p. 811). Folkestad (2008) claimed that, with the help of interviews, researchers are provided with new insights into various social phenomenon – in my case, young women's experiences with ideal beauty. At the same time, Folkestad (2008) noted that it is hard to obtain data and an interview guide should be carefully developed. For this research, I aimed to focus on young women's experiences and personal stories, as a "story is a portal through which their experience of the world enters the world and … [gets] interpreted" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477).

I apply Hesse-Biber's (2007) explanation of in-depth interviews that focuses on individual experiences and is used by researchers to generate specific information on the topic:

> The in-depth interview seeks to understand the "lived experiences" of the individual. In-depth interviews are issue-oriented. In other words, a researcher might use this method to explore a particular topic and gain focused information on the issue from the respondents. (p. 118, see also Pickering, 2008)

Additionally, as I further discuss in this chapter, in-depth interviews are characterised by the focus on such skills as listening and follow-up questions (Hesse-Biber, 2007):

> …the in-depth interview is a very particular kind of interaction, a particular kind of conversation. The in-depth interview dialogue is one where the researcher asks a question or seeks some clarification or amplification on what the respondent is saying. The role of the researcher is to listen to the respondent's story. (p. 126)

In-depth interviews are widely used in qualitative research (Legard et al., 2003). Plummer and Simpson (2014, p. 2) even called in-depth interviews a core technique of qualitative research

design. My research questions prioritised my concern with participants and their experiences, their attitudes towards the beauty images they observed in the media, and the influences of their wider social environments on their understandings of beauty. I also used multiple questions to elicit these beliefs or attitudes (Robson, 1993). I paid attention to Hesse-Biber's experiences (2007) where she described her interview process as "go with the flow" (p. 112). By this, I understand the value of asking more follow-up questions – even though they were not prepared beforehand – in order to gain a deeper understanding of the topic being discussed. This approach allowed me to be flexible with the order of the questions, and for young women's answers to give me unexpected perspectives on the research questions, taking me to the areas they found essential to cover during our interviews.

At the same time, a researcher should be aware of the potential danger of the poorly conducted in-depth interview (Plummer & Simpson, 2014, p. 2). It was important to identify, in advance, the possibility of the interviews developing not as planned and to be able to accept possible changes throughout the interview process (Roulston, 2011). For instance, participants may not want to candidly speak about certain aspects of their lives or discuss sensitive topics. Indeed, as was explained by Letherby (2003), "research from a feminist methodological standpoint involves the researcher taking women's experience seriously and being openly subjective and reflexive of herself and the research process, which includes planning, doing fieldwork and interpreting and presenting research findings" (p. 69).

As this research was oriented to the personal experiences of young women, their opinions and perceptions could be obtained through detailed and personalised discussions, as in-depth interviews can be conducted in the form of a conversation (Legard et al., 2003). Based on the work of Legard et al. (2003) on features of a successful interview, I applied two ideas that guided my process. The first was a willingness to combine an issue-oriented structure with

flexibility. I designed key themes, or topics, for conversation with my research participants. These topics led to specific research questions and were mainly oriented to the young women's perceptions of beauty, media influences, and their ideas about the role of beauty in their lives. However, the structure of the conversations was also flexible. If the young women wanted to discuss topics not directly related to the questions, then I was open to that during the interviews. The second was interactivity. I tried to encourage participants to speak by asking open-ended questions, giving them as much power and ability to speak as they wanted. These two ideas will be discussed in the following sections of this chapter, giving a detailed explanation of the preparation, conduct, and framework of the interview process.

Key principles that guided the interview process

I have identified five key principles that guided the interviews. These principles include: a caring atmosphere, the importance of addressing power relations, listening skills of the researcher, the role of emotions, and ethics.

Caring atmosphere

During the interviews, a caring environment and a feeling of connectedness (Hogan, 1988) were the focus, rather than positioning myself as an "all-knowing expert" (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p. 785). Mutch (2013) highlighted the importance of establishing relationships with participants. She emphasised the importance of building empathetic rapport and having brief discussions and small conversations before conducting interviews. Even though I was attentive to the interview schedule, I embraced the idea that each interview might take its own course. Additionally, I allowed myself to take additional time in order to clearly describe the outline of the research, research goals, research design, and shared all interview questions with my participants at the beginning of each interview. Mutch (2013) further explained the importance

of conducting the interviews in a quiet and comfortable environment, secure from any interruptions. Similarly, Legard et al. (2003) pointed out that interviews should be face-to-face, detailed, comfortable for participants, flexible, interactive and encouraging for new ideas and free expression of opinions and attitudes.

Finally, I understood the concept of a caring atmosphere as an interview process characterised by feelings of connectedness, establishing relationships between the researcher and the participant, and building rapport. To achieve this, I applied the following principles to the interview process: short conversations before the interviews started, explanation of research approach to the participants, minding the interview schedule but letting the interview take its own course, finding a comfortable place for the interviews, and encouragement of the new ideas expressed by the participants. By maintaining these principles, I attempted to reduce the power imbalance between me and the participants. For example, in the interview with Molly, I noticed that my naturally quiet and soft voice was beneficial when Molly shared her experiences related to the question as to whether beautiful people are better off in life. I was speaking softly, I did not rush her answers or interrupt her, and I believe that she felt comfortable and relaxed, therefore resulting in her sharing of some important personal stories associated with this topic.

Addressing power relations

As a feminist researcher, it was important that my participants felt relaxed and, as much as possible, equal to me. As discussed by Hesse-Biber (2007), the feminist practice of interviewing incorporates an interest in "getting at the subjugated knowledge of the diversity of women's realities that often lie hidden and unarticulated" (p. 111). At the same time, feminist research aims to follow non-hierarchical power relations and requires the researcher to

contribute to the study by building more personal relations with the participants (Oakley, 198) by developing empathetic rapport during the interviews. Oakley (1981) pointed out that the power relations between the interviewer and interviewee affect the interview process:

> The goal of finding out about people through interviewing was best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship. (p. 41)

Indeed, feminist research acknowledges the importance of seeking collaboration with the participants (Burgess-Proctor, 2015; Hogan, 1988; Mutch, 2013); this collaboration offers a range of benefits, such as better interactions between the researcher and the participants, a deeper exchange of information and openness in communication (Kirsch, 2005). Letherby (2013) explained that even though the researcher might hold more academic knowledge of the subject, research participants can also demonstrate significant experience related to the particular field of study:

> … it is easy to see how respondents may think that the researcher, accompanied by the material and authoritative resources (e.g., the time and opportunity to study the issue, the academic backing and status) that they hold, is an expert in the area they are studying. This of course is often not the case and respondents often hold more knowledge about an experience that for the researcher at this stage is 'just' an interest: an area that they hope to explore and understand further, a methodological stance that problematizes the notion of 'expertise'. (p. 124)

One thing that helped establish rapport and a less hierarchal relationship was our similarity in age. During the data generation process, I was 26 years old, and my participants were 19 to 24 years old. I believe that this helped us to have a better understanding of each other. Participants

saw me not only as a researcher but also as a student working on her project. We would discuss the struggles of being a student, certain difficulties associated with balancing study and work, and even my attempts to get my driving licence required for an easier commute between different university campuses. The participants seemed genuinely interested in my life, and often asked me questions about my life or, after answering the interview questions, they would be curious to find out how I would answer if I was a research participant. I was surprised that the participants were genuinely interested in my own experiences, such as my teenage years in Russia, my life in Thailand before I started my PhD in New Zealand, and my opinion on celebrities' physical appearances. In such situations, I would speak openly and share my own life experiences and stories. As I saw the interview sessions as conversations rather than a rigid structure of questions and answers, I believe that the nature of our interviews could be described as being held in an atmosphere of equality and connectedness. For example, in the interview with Bella, she demonstrated her vivid interest when I mentioned my recent wedding day, so when she asked me about my own experiences, I told her about the beautiful location where it took place, and that my parents travelled from Russia to New Zealand to share this special day with me and my husband.

Emotions and listening

The researcher should be aware of the emotional state of the participants during the data generation process. If the topic might cause discomfort for participants, it is crucial to understand the ways to avoid it – for example, by using alternative phrasing of questions, building rapport with interviewees, or keeping the most sensitive questions until later in the interview sequence (Roulston et al., 2003). As Campbell (2002) described it, "the emotions of researching emotionally difficult topics are often overlooked in academic discourse. Yet, the emotionally engaged researcher bears witness to the pain, suffering, humiliation, and indignity

of others over and over again" (p. 150). From a feminist perspective, these issues can be addressed by creating a comfortable atmosphere, when an interview doesn't have a strict structure, but rather an environment of friendliness or one that reflects the dynamics of friendship (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Kirsch, 2005). Kirsch brought up an example of her previous study with academic women (Kirsch, 1993), in which "she learned how quickly seemingly abstract, impersonal questions could lead interviewees to reveal deeply personal, emotionally charged information—as if to a friend" (p. 2164). Therefore, I chose to conduct two interviews with each participant. The first interview intended to build rapport and trust. In relation to the second interview, I intended to address topics that were potentially more emotionally sensitive or difficult. Reflecting the feminist belief that research should also be for women (Devault, 1990; Doucet & Mauthner, 2008), I structured the second interview to focus on their knowledge of media literacy and ability to use it to decode media messages. The value of this skill for the participants was revealed when some admitted that when looking at images of celebrities and models who meet dominants ideals of beauty, they felt uncomfortable and as if they were expected to meet these ideals as well. In addition, the participants admitted that by looking at the images of celebrities and models before and after image manipulation, they felt more confident about their own physical appearance. Thus, my research applied feminist research practice not just to research and describe women's lives but, importantly, to also seek to improve them (Kirsch, 2005).

McClelland (2017) pointed out the difficulties associated with another part of the interview process, *listening*, which is frequently perceived as "easy and something that everyone is good at" (p. 338). However, as McClelland (2017) explained, this important skill requires both preparation and practice. In particular, McClelland (2017) pointed out the concept of *vulnerable* listening by explaining that "vulnerability encourages greater focus on the affective and embodied aspects of listening, as well as potential ethical considerations to support those

listening to participants" (p. 338). This approach accentuates the importance of vulnerability in feminist research in particular. Focusing on the participants' answers and stories enabled me to ask additional follow-up questions, thus creating a more complex discussion that could not happen if I planned to use only the prepared interview questions. One example illustrating me feeling vulnerable occurred when Bella shared the story when she and her friend were approached by a male peer who spoke only to Bella and ignored Bella's friend. Bella explained that it happened because the male peer did not consider her friend as attractive as Bella. This situation caused significant discomfort to Bella's friend, and as I listened to Bella's story and asked her further questions, I also started to feel uncomfortable and vulnerable, reflecting on the feelings of Bella's friend, and thinking how I would feel if I faced a similar situation.

Paying attention to emotions and carefully listening to the participants' answers was important to adequately react in case they started experiencing sadness or discomfort. During the interviews, the research participants appeared to be open and free in sharing their real-life stories. Across all of the interviews, there were only a few times when participants looked unsettled and it was visible that the experiences they described were painful or hard to recall. Their emotional response was not related to the wording of the questions I asked, but rather by the answers they were giving to me. It usually happened during the question: *Do you think that beautiful people are better off in life?* Here, they were reliving moments from their childhood or early teen years, when they were either exposed to unfair treatment, or described events they witnessed. For example, when I asked Hayley this question, she said that she did not consider herself to be beautiful when she was little, and she found it difficult when she noticed that the senior students that guided their PE classes would choose more beautiful students to join their teams.

Another aspect that triggered participants' emotions was related to the ideas of being skinny and losing weight, which will be further discussed in Chapter Five. For instance, Casey described that she was worried about her weight when she competed in beauty pageants, therefore monitoring her food consumption and practicing excessive physical exercises to stay as slender as it was expected from her. In such situations, I always tried to be supportive, to pause the interview, to give them time to calm down so they could tell their whole experience, to be patient and a good, attentive listener, thus showing them that I cared about their stories and experiences. I did this by speaking softly, never pushing them to tell me more if they looked upset, encouraging them to ask me questions about this research or my life if they wanted to, and by clearly explaining to them, before the interviews started, that they could stop recording and/or skip a question they did not want to answer.

Ethics of the interviews

I wanted to make the communication and interactions with the participants beneficial for both sides: me as a researcher, and the young women as the participants (Kirsch, 2005). My research valued the creation of a comfortable atmosphere, where participants could share their perceptions and ideas on the mass media, and beauty standards, and the role of these in their lives. A key ethical issue was the identified connection – primarily in the psychological research – between beauty ideals and body dissatisfaction or eating disorders (Groesz et al., 2002; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004; Stice et al., 2001). Because of this identified association, I was aware of the possibility that my interviews may bring up issues or concerns for the participants. Thus, I paid particular attention to how participants responded to questions that might trigger unpleasant feelings. I made sure that if any participant identified eating disorders, body dissatisfaction issues, or traumas related to body image, I would be able to provide them with contact information for appropriate free counselling should they wish it: as

university students, the young women were provided with a list of appropriate university counsellors. None of the participants advised me that they would like to use the counselling support. If the participants also appeared to be experiencing discomfort, I offered them the chance to stop the conversation and complete it at a later time. However, none of the young women asked me to do that.

The detailed information related to useful websites and counsellor contact information was included in the consent form and participant information sheet (see Appendix 1 and 2). Informed consent was obtained by participants by signing the consent form. The consent form provided a concise and jargon-free outline of the research context, purpose and aims, interviewing process, issues of confidentiality, and the intended use of the data. Additionally, I informed participants about who they could approach if they felt uncomfortable or had concerns about the research. I provided information about the research once again before I started the first interview (Hesse-Biber, 2007). I tried to ensure that my research participants were protected by properly worded forms – approved by the University of Auckland Human Ethics Committee – that explained that their confidentiality would always be the main priority. I followed and maintained the principles of voluntary participation, participants' freedom to withdraw from the research, and I was committed to maintaining confidentiality. Participants were informed that agreeing to participate, and continuing to participate, in the research was voluntary. The voluntary and free decision-making nature of participation was a priority throughout the study. As explained earlier, each participant was informed about her right to withdraw from the research at any stage without explanation. After the transcription process was finished, I sent each participant the transcripts of their two interviews. Participants were informed that they had a month to review them and suggest if they wanted to change, delete or add further information to their scripts. None of the participants made any changes.

The difference between anonymity and confidentiality was explained to participants before they signed the consent form. I could not promise anonymity because I knew their names and contact details, because I conducted the research. Confidentiality related to how data would be represented in research reports and the further management, storage, and destruction of data. To protect my participants' confidentiality, the hard copy of data gathered was securely stored separately from the consent forms in a locked cabinet at the University of Auckland, and only the researcher and the researcher's supervisors had access to it. All transcripts and analysis materials carried only the participant's pseudonym. To preserve their confidentiality in relation to third parties, I never used the real names of the participants. All participants chose their own pseudonyms.

I also took care of myself as a researcher, aiming not to put myself in emotional distress (Mutch, 2013), such as if participants' stories were very similar to mine or triggered uncomfortable memories from my past (described in Chapter One – Introduction). It was also essential to develop realistic expectations of the interview process, and to recognize that interactions between the researcher and the participants still were "shaped, like all human interactions, by dynamics of power, gender, generation, education, race, class, and many other factors that can contribute to feelings of misunderstanding, disappointment, and broken trust" (Kirsch, 2005, p. 2170). As I had never met any of my participants before and we did not have an established relationship, I was concerned about our communication, and I wanted the participants to feel empowered during the interviews. By following the principles described previously, I hoped that I created *empowering relations* with my research participants, the 16 young women (Burgess-Proctor, 2015, p. 133). To do this, I referred to Hesse-Biber (2007), who drew on her experience of interviewing other women. She paid attention to such issues as particular personal and research standpoints, and the role of the interviewer as a source of power and authority during the in-depth interview session. I aimed to conduct my study to respect the

participants and their experiences. The following sections provide a detailed description of the participant recruitment and interview process.

Selecting and Interviewing Participants

Research participants and recruitment

My central area of interest was the relationships between young women and the media in relation to beauty. In regard to age, I wanted to talk to young women, defined in my study as aged between 19 and 24. I was interested in young women who study at universities and have full access to various media channels and technologies, because of the proliferation of image channels for ideal beauty and diverse representation of women's bodies. These became the four criteria required for my research participants: young women, 19 to 24 years old, residing in Auckland, New Zealand, social media users, and university students.

My intention was to limit the study to 15 participants, conducting two interviews with each. I tried to make my research interesting and, at the same time, approachable for potential participants. From the very beginning, I wanted the young women to see not a faceless research project, but rather another young woman. As such, I created a poster (see Fig. 3) with brief information about me, my research, and my research goals. I included my contact details and inserted a photo of me holding my dog, Chase.

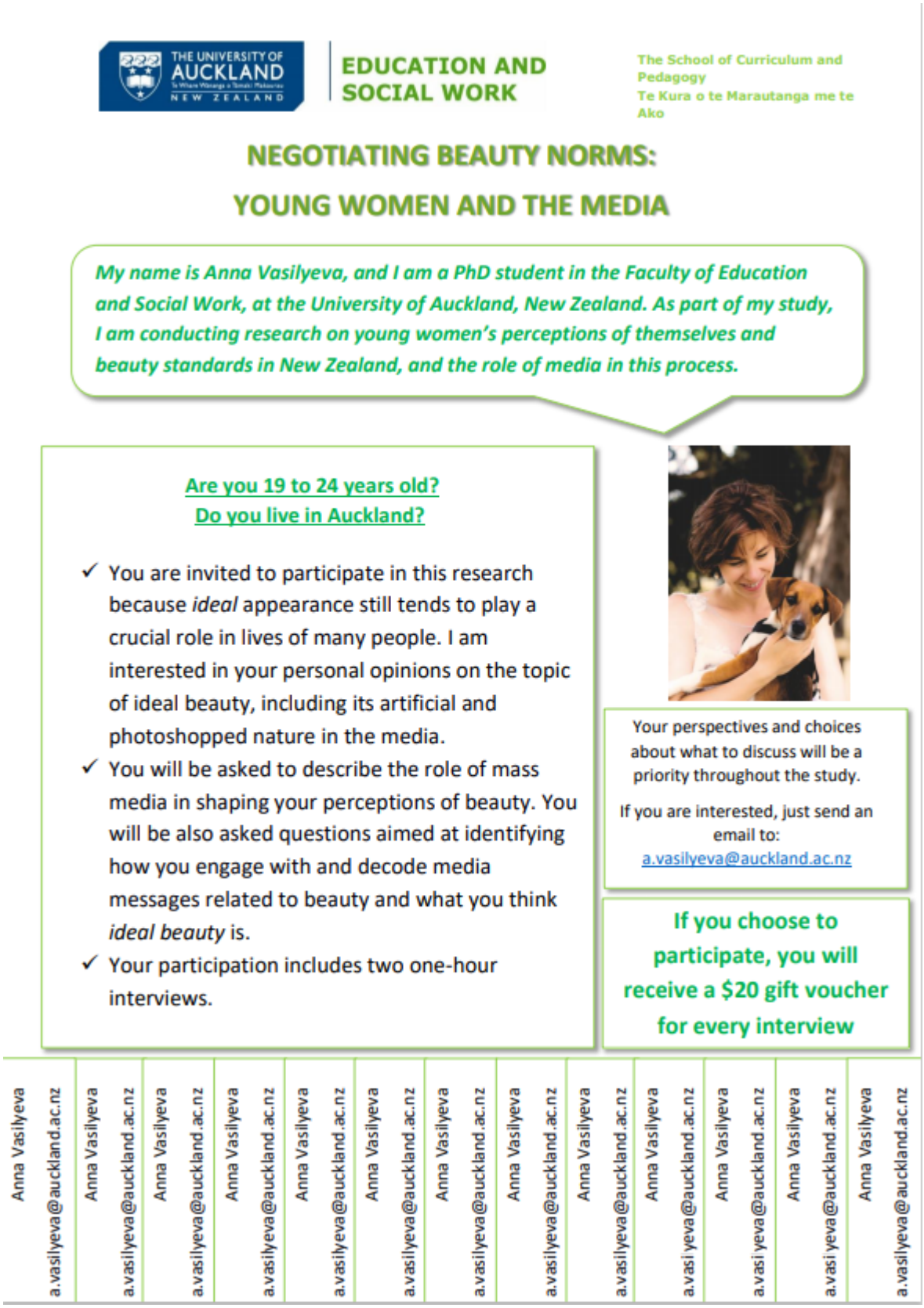

Fig. 3: The poster that invited participants to the study

The University of Auckland was an optimal and appropriate place where I could conduct the

interviews. As I was a doctoral candidate there, I was used to the way the university works. I had also worked as a research assistant at one Faculty, and I was familiar with the location of all major buildings, including libraries, on different campuses, and the best possible placements for my posters. I printed and placed approximately 40 posters in 20 different buildings, common areas, libraries, and lecture theatres. I was also able to present a short, five-minute description of my research before two lectures at the Faculty of Education and Social Work. In addition, another doctoral student who worked at the Faculty of Arts shared my posters with students before two lectures at that faculty. In my posters, I invited young women to email me for further information and questions if they had any. During the recruitment phase, I provided the following information to the potential participants: title of the study, summary of the study, requirements for participants, contact details, and overview of what will be required of the participants. A participant information sheet (PIS) approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee contained more detailed information and was sent to approved participants to read and sign before the interviews. By the end of the recruitment process, I had recruited 16 participants. I conducted two interviews with each participant, for a total of 32 interviews, over approximately three months.

The whole recruitment process took only two weeks. I received an expression of interest on the same day as I placed the posters (Monday), and during the first work week, a person a day was applying. I decided to accept them and start the interviews. As I began the interviews immediately, without waiting to have all 15 confirmed participants, two participants recommended their friends who were interested in my research. Their friends contacted me, and I accepted their participation. By the end of the first five days, I already had seven participants. After that, I started having more participants applying each day. This meant that by the second week, I only had eight participants more to recruit. Over the next seven days, I received another 12 expressions of interest. One of them was from a young man, who was

rejected, as I focused my research on the experiences of young women. With the growing number of applications, I began selecting the next eight participants using a random number generator. The only exception was made for participant number 16, recommended to me by one of the young women I had already interviewed. This participant had worked as a model since she was a teenager and had a deep knowledge of the beauty industry in New Zealand and the artificial nature of images in the media. After recruiting 16 participants, I removed all the posters. However, I still received four expressions of interest during the following three weeks; I declined them with thanks and advised that my recruitment process was finished. The total number of expressions of interest was 23. The recruitment and interviews were concluded well before March 2020 when Covid-19 significantly disrupted university life.

While planning the recruitment process and the selection of participants, I did not consider the factor of internationality. However, Auckland is considered to be one of the most diverse cities in the world (Tan, 2016). With 16 young women participating in the research, I interviewed participants from nine different countries of origin, including New Zealand. Of three participants who said that they were born in New Zealand, one explained her ethnicity as half Samoan and half Māori (father's side) and New Zealand European from her mother's side. Two participants did not want to identify their country of origin but from their accents they did not appear to be New Zealand born. The diversity in the countries of origin informed my attention to cultural differences (Beyer, 2001). Although it was not planned, it enabled me to focus not only on culture in the sense of culture manifested in texts but also "in the anthropological sense of the concept" (Ambjörnsson & Ganetz, 2013, p. 127). The participants' answers revealed the importance of cultural backgrounds on their meaning-making and perspectives. In my research, participants originated from New Zealand (3 participants), China (2), Germany (1), India (2), Iran (2), Philippines (1), South Korea (1), Switzerland (1), France (1), as well as the two participants who did not want to identify their country of origin. I

interviewed participants from nine different faculties. Three were undertaking conjoint degrees. Thirteen were undergraduate students and three were master's students. In relation to age, six participants were 19 years old, three participants were 20 years old, three were 21 years old, one was 22, two were 24, and one participant did not want to identify her age – however, she confirmed that she was within the study's age range.

The following section describes the preparations that were required to conduct the interviews with my participants.

Planning the interviews with participants

After learning about my research in the posters, chosen participants received a consent form (CF) and participant information sheet (PIS) to read (Appendix 1 and Appendix 2). If they agreed to be involved, I asked participants to bring the forms to the first interview.

The decision to conduct two interviews had several purposes. The first was concern for their time, as I wanted to find the most convenient option for my participants. After finishing six 'practice' interviews (one interview with my supervisor, two interviews with my friends, and three interviews with other doctoral candidates), one hour proved to be the most suitable duration of an interview. These practice interviews also helped me to practice asking research questions, listening to the interviewees' answers, and using my equipment efficiently. I also discovered that if the participants knew that the interview would be approximately up to one hour long, it would be easier for them to navigate between their planned activities, exams, study, work, and lectures. I welcomed them to speak for longer if they were interested in the topic and wanted to share more information related to my research. However, most actual interviews were between 35 to 50 minutes – this average was similar for both first and second interviews.

Secondly, I wanted to spend significant time exploring their understandings of media literacy and diverse representation of beauty in media, the topics that were slightly different compared to the main theme of the first interview, when we discussed their relationships with beauty.

Therefore, in order to properly address the issues of their understanding of medial literacy, I have decided to conduct two interview with each of the participants. As the second interview was interactive, I also believed that it would have been a better option to hold the second interview after the participants were already familiar with me. I hoped that the gap between the interviews provided the participants with some time to reflect on their relations with beauty, and I hoped it would lead to deeper insights into their experiences with image manipulation in media texts. At the end of the first interview, I explained to each participant the agenda of the second interview, which would involve looking at visual texts in the media. I also explained to them that we would be looking into images before and after manipulation on my computer, and that I would be asking their opinions about such images.

However, I did not ask them to prepare their answers in advance, or prepare the examples of image manipulation in media, as I wanted to hear their candid answers during the discussion of image manipulation and media literacy. During the second interview, each participant and I looked at the images related to image manipulation using my laptop. The visual texts used during the interview included an original photo of a model or celebrity, and the same photo after the image had been manipulated by editors using the most common professional editing software, Adobe Photoshop. In this research, I use the term ‘image manipulation’ to identify images edited with any such software. All visual texts used in analysis were freely accessible via an image search on Google, using keywords such as ‘image manipulation’ and ‘image manipulation celebrities and models’. After entering the keyword on Google, we would see a feed of images that features the examples of image manipulation, and then proceeded to asking

the questions I prepared for the interview. Even though we would see about 40 to 50 images every time the keyword was entered, the participants were free to select any image they wanted to talk about in more detail (as discussed in Chapter Seven). The participants who were aware about image manipulation would occasionally point out an image they had previously seen online (for example, see Figure 5), but mostly, they just wanted to talk the images that were presented on my screen. However, the participants drew on more example of image manipulation and diverse representation of beauty during the discussion of the brands that featured models who did not fit dominant ideals of beauty, of the celebrities that were speaking out about the use of image manipulation on their photos (for more information, see Chapter Seven). In my analysis, I attribute the original creator of the images where possible; the original creator could not be identified, I identified the source of the image.[3]

Indeed, the second interview was more active, and involved more discussion and interaction (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Kirsch, 2005; Naples, 2003), as I encouraged the young women to share their knowledge about image manipulation and media literacy.

Additionally, I carefully examined possible locations for the interviews. The options were public areas, like cafes and parks, and the University of Auckland libraries, as I could book a study room to conduct the interviews there. With regards to the interview location, researchers can influence perceptions of the roles and positions of people involved in the interview process. Elwood and Martin (2000) evaluated the importance and meaning of the place where the interview is conducted and argued that interview sites produce their own *micro-geographies*

3 Under s14(1)(a) of the Copyright Act 1994 in New Zealand, an artistic work is such a work, and this includes photographs. The images used have copyright under s22 for 50 years from the end of the calendar year in which the author dies. Under acts permitted in relation to copyright, works in s49 copyright is not infringed by anything done for the purposes of an examination such as a PhD, and the photographs fall within this exception. Pursuant to s94 moral rights, the copyright author has the right to be identified as the author.

with particular meanings and relationships between the researcher and participants (see also Berik, 1996; Nagar, 1997). I intended to make the participants feel comfortable and relaxed during our interview sessions by choosing sites they would be familiar with. Thus, within the concept of micro-geographies, the interview spaces would be the same as the ones they and I used on a daily basis. Therefore, both I, as the researcher, and they, as participants, would be less stressed, and find it easier to focus on the interview process itself. For example, I had two interviews with one participant at a business building where she worked part-time.

There were several processes associated with organisation of the interviews: scheduling interviews with participants; interview preparations; arrangements related to the locations where the interviews were taking place (e.g., booking rooms on campuses); time management, which was important in rescheduling interview timeslots if the participants were late or unwell; data storage and organisation (Robson, 1993; Wilson et al., 1989). For audio recording, I used my personal mobile phone. After each interview, the audio files were transferred to my university password-protected Google Drive and removed from my phone to protect participants' information in case my phone was lost or stolen. I used my personal password-protected laptop to look at images or Internet pages participants wanted to show me. The voice recordings and my notes were transcribed, and verified transcripts were used as the basis for data analysis.

The interview process

During the interviews, given the potentially sensitive nature of the topic, I carefully monitored when and whether the interview should be stopped – for example, when participants recalled their struggles to resist dominant ideologies of beauty, struggles associated with weight loss, body or face imperfections, or stories about them being treated unfairly based on their physical

appearance. If it was clear that the topic was making a participant uncomfortable (based on the long pauses a participant could take, changes in the tone of voice, etc.), then I would prioritise their comfort. Even if the participant did not ask to skip to the next question, I would ask if it was fine to speak about the topic. I did not push the participants to answer the questions, just as I did not push them to tell me their personal details, such as nationality or the faculty where they studied. I applied the following structure on how to organise the interviews, which helped me throughout the data generation process: introduction, main body of interview, cooling off, and closure.

Introducing myself and warm-up: Even though an outline of the interview and the topics of discussion were sent to the participants in advance in the consent form, each participant and I looked through the participant information sheet (PIS) and consent form (CF) together to check if they had any questions related to these documents. If participants had not already signed the consent form, I would give it to them during the first interview and would not start the interview unless they advised that they understood all the points, agreed to participate and signed the form. This process proved to be effective, and I had no issues during this stage of preparation for the interviews. At the beginning of each interview, I spent four to five minutes introducing myself, talking about the research, and asking the participant about their week and exams that were happening at the time of the data generation. After that, I usually asked the participant if she wanted to introduce herself and to tell me why she was interested in my research. Usually, the participants said they found it "interesting", they were excited about the topic, and they had something to share. At the same time, there were some participants who had been particularly interested in the media's role in their lives or were trying to take conscious actions to not focus on their physical appearance. For example, Candy explained a recent change in her approach to beauty:

> *I've always been a very self-conscious person, and I've been trying to watch videos to, kind of, help me to get over that… And, kind of, accept myself. I feel like I am working through that. So, when I saw your research, I thought it will be quite cool to be a part of that.*

This introduction stage of the first interview helped to establish an atmosphere where participants felt more comfortable (Naples, 2003). The introductions were not recorded, but I took short notes, for example, related to the exact age of the participant, her faculty, and country of origin. It is important to point out that I stopped taking notes if I saw that the participant did not want to share exact details. I also asked really simple questions, such as 'How did you find out about my research? Why did you find it interesting? Have you spoken to your friends about it?' I always thanked them for their participation and interest. Then, I explained to them the structure of the questions I would be asking and explained that the questions were grouped according to different themes. I always stated that we could skip any questions, stop recording at any time and that they were free to ask me any questions. The participants were also informed that they should feel free not to answer specific questions or questions they did not feel comfortable talking about during the interview. After that, I assured their confidentiality in the research, and asked permission to start recording the interview. With the permission given, I could start recording.

Beginning of the interview: In line with recommendations for qualitative research (Mutch, 2013; Naples, 2003; Robson, 1993), I started each interview with a series of easy, non-threatening, general questions. In my case, I began by asking a general question, 'Can you name three women you find the most beautiful?' I explained that, for this question only, it could be any woman they could think of (not only a media or popular figure).

Main body of the interview: This section was dedicated to the main purpose of the research and the interview questions. I kept the 'riskiest' questions for later in the interview, as if the participant decided to stop the interview, less information would be lost. By 'risky' questions I mean the beauty resilience questions, or when would they disagree with their friends about any beauty trends they find unappealing. The questions below were all identified as potentially risky:

- To be attractive, does someone need to meet society's ideals of beauty?
- Are physically beautiful people better off in life?
- What media has an influence on your perceptions of beauty?
- In your opinion, what dimensions/characteristics do your friends see as beautiful?
- Do you always agree with each other?
- Are there any major issues on which you disagree? (Can you discuss these?)
- What do you most dislike about this emphasis?
- Can you remember a time when you took action about this?

The complete set of all interview questions is presented in Appendix 3.

Cool-offs bring the interviews towards its close. As Robson (1993) argues, they are "usually a few straightforward questions at the end to defuse any tension that might have built up" (p. 235). For example, I asked further questions about participants' course of study, we discussed university life, public transport, and construction works at the campus during the time of data generation.

Closure in the first interview included setting up time for second interviews. For both interviews, closure consisted of thanking participants for their time and saying goodbye and giving them gift vouchers as a *koha* [a gift] to show appreciation for their time and contribution.

As discussed earlier, during the interviews, I did not want to follow a strict order of questions, but rather allow the discussion to flow naturally. I prepared two sets of interview guides. As I had two interviews with each of the 16 participants, it was important to be sure that I had a framework of questions. On the other hand, I was ready to add more questions during interviews in order to gain a deeper understanding. The follow-up questions were used to understand the complex nature of the subject and more nuanced answers to the questions.

Throughout the interviews, the participants seemed to feel comfortable: they were friendly and inquisitive about my own life and I welcomed them to ask me any personal questions. For example, a lot of my research participants wanted to find out where I was from, or where my wedding was held (the data generation took place just a few months after I got married).

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen as the technique to analyse my data. Even though thematic analysis has been criticised for a potential "lack of focus" on relevance (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3352), careful attention to details and planning makes thematic analysis one of the most popular tools in qualitative research. According to Alhojailan (2012), thematic analysis "is considered [to be] the most appropriate for any study that seeks to discover using interpretations" (p. 40) or patterns of meaning in qualitative data. Thematic analysis focuses on themes that emerge during the research process and data generation. As described by Maguire and Delahunt (2017):

> The goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes, i.e. patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue. This is much more than simply summarising the data; a good thematic analysis interprets and makes sense of it. (p. 3353)

At the same time, one of the most common mistakes associated with the use of thematic analysis is the use of "the main interview questions as the themes" during data analysis, as by doing so, the researcher creates data "[that] have been summarised and organised, rather than analysed" (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3353).

For this research, both *semantic analysis* and *latent analysis* were used. The use of the *semantic analysis* helped me focus on exactly *what* was said by young women (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and present their stories and experiences. For example, some participants associated being skinny or being skinny-curvy with ideal beauty. These concepts were discussed not only in one question, but rather throughout the duration of all interviews. Seeing these concepts discussed by the majority of participants in one question, I made sure to find all mentions of being skinny or being curvy in the interviews. By doing so, I was able to identify that skinny and curvy can be associated with ideal beauty but can also be a difficult topic for young women, as their stories mentioned the unachievable side of these physical characteristics, struggles associated with weight loss, or ideas of beauty in different social environments.

Semantic analysis helped me to present the voices of my research participants. Latent analysis was used to make sense of the themes emerging from the answers. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), latent thematic analysis "starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies – that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data" (p. 84). By utilising such an approach, I hoped to

look “beyond what has been said” (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3353) by my research participants during all 32 interviews. By applying latent analysis, I identified patterns based on the answers of the participants.

For the thematic data analysis, I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework: become familiar with the data; generation of initial codes; search for themes; reviewing the themes; defining the themes; developing the themes.

During the thematic data analysis process, I focused on three main areas of research interest. The first was related to the data transcription. I became familiar with the data by listening to the recordings multiple times, transcribed and edited them and, as the transcripts were finished, I emailed them to the participants and asked if they wanted to clarify anything, or to make any changes to or remove any parts from the text. None of the participants asked for any changes to be made. The second area was related to analysis of the themes. It included identification of the themes, and implementation of semantic and latent analysis of the data. In the following results chapters, it will be evident that some participants’ voices are more present – this was an outcome of the thematic analysis and was not caused by me prioritising some women over others. Additionally, some participants provided shorter answers, whereas others shared their experiences in more detail. The third was related to editing, rewriting the drafts, communication with supervisors, working with the supervisors’ feedback, and presenting my research at a conference in the UK (Vasilyeva, 2019). I was also interviewed by New Zealand news outlets (e.g., Evans, 2019; Reid, 2020) where I presented my research findings and, following a feminist cultural studies approach, made my research “accessible to everyone” (Stanley & Wise, 1990, p. 24).

It was important to pay particular attention to the discourses of the participants in relation to beauty and its representation in the media, as "what we know about the world is how we see it represented" (Jhally, 2005, p. 20). The previously discussed concepts from cultural studies enabled me to analyse two types of texts during the thematic analysis. As explained by Ambjörnsson and Ganetz (2013), "cultural studies works with 'texts', including both lived experience and texts narrowly defined, namely, spoken and written words, images, music and style" (p. 217). The first type of text consisted of the personal experiences shared by the participants, and the second type was related to visual texts that we looked at during the second interviews. I analysed how young women negotiated and made sense of visual texts of beauty in media, and the role of dominant ideals of beauty in their lives. I focused on the discussions in relation to both their daily beauty routines and the media they consumed, therefore acknowledging the multidimensional aspects of their relationships with beauty and influences on their perspectives and experiences from their wider social environments. The results suggested that meaning about beauty is produced from both texts and practices of everyday life.

Conclusion

To summarise, I approached this research from a feminist cultural studies perspective, and I positioned it as a feminist study about women conducted by a woman. I used an in-depth, two-interview format with 16 young women aged between 19 and 24 who were university students. Each interview was conducted in a neutral area chosen by the participants. Even though interviews had a structure prepared to guide the discussion, I integrated flexibility and follow-up questions so the interviews felt more like a free-flowing conversation. For data analysis, I used thematic analysis with semantic and latent approaches to enable me to focus on exactly what was said by the participants. Informed by the theoretical ideas that drove the research, I

detected patterns in the data and identified the key issues in the minds and experiences of the participants.

Even applying a feminist methodology, some risks still existed – for instance, the risks that participants could express pain, anger and/or hostility during the interview sessions (Kirsch, 2005). Even though this did not happen, some participants recalled either unpleasant moments or stories from their past.

Importantly, participants' information and responses were kept confidential. The University of Auckland ethics and privacy guidelines were adhered to, and Ethics Committee approvals were secured for all aspects of the study.

In the following three findings chapters, all quotes from participants are presented in *italics*, as a way of representing the feminist commitment to ensuring the centrality and visibility of the young women's voices.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven communicate the major research findings, with each chapter focused on one of the three dominant themes of the research: components of ideal beauty; pleasures, pressures, and resistance in relation to beauty; media literacy and image manipulation.

Chapter Five: Defining Ideal Beauty

This chapter considers how participants make meaning and focuses on the components that participants articulated to ideal beauty, as well as the major influences on these understandings. I examine the rise of the skinny-curvy body shape and other components of physical appearance that participants articulated to female beauty. Throughout the chapter, the voices of the participants are privileged as I explore the connection of their experiences to the existing published research and key theoretical concepts. I use previously discussed concepts of intertextuality and articulation, as well as the framework of dominant, negotiated, and oppositional decoding positions to understand the complex ways that my participants engaged with "circulating power relations" (Elias & Gill, 2018, p. 64) associated with dominant ideals of beauty.

I accentuate the importance of the growing popularity of skinny-curvy bodies that the participants most strongly articulated to ideal beauty. The indication of this shift is important as the current body of research articulates skinny and thin female bodies to beauty (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Ging & Garvey, 2018; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Lupton, 2017). The participants' discussion of the importance of skinniness and skinny bodies were strongly associated with more traditional media channels, like television and women's magazines, and such social environments as young women's families. Therefore, I would suggest that it could be expected that a more traditional dominant ideal of beauty such as skinniness was discussed in more detail than the emerging trend of being skinny-curvy. I use the term 'skinny-curvy' to indicate a shift from 'skinny' female bodies to a more complex integration of curviness. The integration of 'skinny' and 'curvy' produced new discourses of female beauty and created a new dominant ideal of beauty – the skinny-curvy female body. The skinny-curvy bodies were

identified by the participants as less achievable than skinny female bodies, therefore producing new, and potentially even more limited or unachievable, discourses of female beauty.

I also discuss how participants negotiate and make sense of dominant ideals of female bodies in various social environments, such as families, friendship groups, schools, universities, and workplaces. Additionally, my interviews revealed that social media had a notably strong influence on young women's discourses of beauty, particularly their discussion of skinny-curvy bodies.

I analyse the most common components of physical appearance articulated to beauty that emerged during the interviews. These components include beauty norms related to skin, hair, facial features, height, and other characteristics of physical appearance.

Finally, I discuss the participants' views on women they consider to be the most beautiful arguing that, despite the circulation of dominant ideals of beauty where "power in signification is [intending] to close language, to close meaning, to stop the flow" (Jhally, 2005, p. 19), participants make meaning about beauty "according to the logic of their own social, cultural and individual circumstances" (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 40). I also examine the importance of being skinny as illustrated by stories told by the participants.

Articulating skinniness to beauty

As discussed in the Literature Review, dominant Western ideals of beauty are represented in research by components that include whiteness, blonde hair, thinness, and a symmetrical face and body (Bordo, 2003; Castillo, 2013; Maslow, 2015 McClearen, 2015; Wood & Vialle, 2015), which portray a woman who is wholly "perfect" (Wolf, 2002, p. 1). Importantly, the existing body of research is strongly focused on the articulation of skinny or thin female bodies

to ideal beauty (e.g., Cash, 2002; Ging & Garvey, 2018; Tiggermann, 2002). This articulation is strongly reflected in the media's focus on 'ultra-slenderness' that has been associated with ideal beauty since the 1960s (Hesse-Biber, 1991). For instance, Yamamiya et al. (2004) emphasised that, according to media representations, of women,

> …in the United States, 94% of female characters in television programs are thinner than the average American woman, with whom the media frequently associate happiness, desirability, and success in life… the media also explicitly instruct how to attain thin bodies by dieting, exercising, and body-contouring surgery. (p. 75)

The importance of being skinny was articulated to beauty by eight participants (Bella, Jessica, Paula, Alice, Amanda, Molly, Candy, Hayley). Here, I illustrate the way these eight participants perceived being skinny as a beauty component, as well as the way it affected their perceptions of ideal beauty. For example, Bella acknowledged that she had understood the importance of being skinny since *I was a kid* and had always associated being skinny as a component of ideal beauty. However, she also identified different dimensions of skinniness. Bella explained that when she was a child, she did not understand the difference between *being skinny* and *being just skinny*. As she explained it, when she was younger, she believed that in order to be called *skinny*, a woman had to be like a *straight log*. Although Bella privileged skinniness as the dominant component of ideal beauty, she implicitly recognised the rise of the skinny-curvy trend. Bella explained that she felt that dominant ideas of female beauty have changed, as skinny bodies evolved into bodies that are *really skinny* but *also* have *an ass and boobs*.

Alice pointed out that one of the key features of ideal beauty represented in media was an expectation for a woman to be *super skinny*. Amanda referred to some examples of her communication with her friends, where even girls who were *not even that big* were worried

about their weight. Amanda referred to it as *people… want to be skinny*. Referring to her Dad's side of the family where *everyone is very skinny*, Amanda explained that she was *lucky to be blessed with these genes,* regardless of how much she ate.

However, some deviations from the articulation of skinniness to beauty were pointed out by Jessica, Paula, and Hayley. While recognising the role of skinniness in society and its representation in media, their personal preferences leaned towards a less extreme form of thinness. Hayley explained that on social media, *weight plays a crucial role.* She also identified a difference between her interpretation of how female bodies should look, and the way female bodies are represented on social media, thus demonstrating her reading "against the grain" (Baldwin et al., 2004, p. 259). According to Hayley's answers in relation to a woman's body, she elevated a woman of *an average size, not oversized, not super skinny*. However, she explained social media articulates female beauty to skinniness and *size zero* [the U.S. clothing size]. Jessica affirmed that in her opinion, a perfect female body could be described as *a normal build, like, not too skinny, not too big*. Similarly, Paula described her ideal of female beauty as *someone who's quite in-between, so not skinny or large… just medium*. The power of the media in promoting the skinny ideal was described by Alice when she said that a Victoria's Secret model is a perfect example of the media's representation of ideally beautiful women – *they are not, in particular, muscly or strong – they are just very skinny*. Importantly, the Victoria's Secret's representation of women has been recently "criticised for its sexist and outdated representations of women" (e.g., Lockey, 2021, para. 3), causing a major rebranding of the company. Participants' answers clearly indicated their awareness of dominant ideals, even when they did not agree with them.

Casey implicitly recognised the power of media to influence people's understandings of beauty. Casey's answers affirmed that she articulated skinniness to dominant ideals of beauty, stating

that these ideals influence perceptions of *just everyone around you*. She particularly highlighted the attention people pay to skinny women by drawing on an example of people's positive expressions like: *Oh my God, she is so skinny!* Casey mocked her friends when she was saying that, turning it into a joke; but at the same time, she meant that her friends were taking the representation of women's skinny bodies seriously. Casey discussed the importance of being skinny as an attribute of the dominant ideology of beauty and its role in the media by saying that *a model is considered pretty* if she is skinny. Casey also drew on her perceptions of teen boys' reactions to skinny girls by saying that *guys [are] commenting* and *that's what guys want*. Recognizing the intertextuality inherent in similar media images of ideal beauty that circulate across multiple media channels, Casey concluded that *it's just everything, TV shows, music videos, and movies…* Molly critically pointed out how American TV shows accentuate the importance of dominant ideals of beauty. Molly's answer highlighted a few issues. Firstly, that women with *bigger* bodies would not be *cool*, and would be portrayed as a *nerd* or a *comic relief* character. The second issue was associated with a makeover trope, when only a woman who fits dominant ideals of beauty can be *accepted*: *you know, [they] take their glasses off, and wear cool clothes – and then they would be pretty. Then they would be accepted.* However, regardless of Molly's ability to critically accentuate these problematic representations of women in media, she demonstrated her engagement in preferred readings of dominant ideals of beauty when she agreed that skinniness and beauty are highly important in life:

> *That's when I learnt that people don't care that much about … if you study hard… Really, one of the most important things is getting skinny and be pretty… like, you have to have a good education, but you also need to be beautiful to get anywhere.*

It also appeared that Molly had internalised historically dominant ideals of beauty when she pointed out that in order to look as good in advertised clothes, she also needed to be as skinny as the models who wear the clothes:

> *You go to the stores, and you see this big picture of girls in the catalogues, and young kids wearing this… and you put it on, and you realise that you also need to look like that for it to work well.*

Molly also saw her mother taking a dominant decoding position in relation to female skinniness. Molly expressed her concern that her mother attempted to project her perceptions of ideal beauty onto her children (Molly and her sisters):

> *I love my mum, I love her so much. But my mum, I look back now, and I think mum did not have the best relationship with her body and stuff. And I think that she has subconsciously projected it on us. Sometimes, she would be like, "it doesn't look that nice", or "you should wear that it will make you look slimmer"... okay, she would not say the word "slimmer", but she would say "it would make you look better".*

Molly's perceptions of beauty were clearly affected by the intertextuality of messages about the importance of being skinny: *it was a little bit of my mum's projection, a little bit of my sisters, and then, like, school, with all the magazines, and TV shows, what they wear and what they look like.*

As identified in the Literature Review, the role of families is significant in the formation of perceptions of beauty for young women, as discussed at length by Hesse-Biber (1991) in her research on female bodies, skinniness, and eating disorders. Additionally, as described by Hall in his interview with Cruz and Lewis (Cruz & Lewis, 1994), interpretive communities – for example, families – offer individuals "the tools of reading the text" thus creating "reading formations… [that can be mistaken] for the rest of the world" (p. 270). Indeed, even though Molly did not fit the dominant ideology of beauty with its requirement of skinniness, she

appeared to be fit and healthy. Therefore, it was important to analyse Molly's focus on the importance of being skinny. Based on Molly's answers, she believed that she did not fit the dominant ideal, as she clearly articulated skinniness to female beauty. Throughout her life, Molly's perceptions were affected by the visual texts in media and such interpretive communities as her own family and her school environment.

As a way to demonstrate the complexity of family influences, I next discuss Alice's responses in depth. Alice shared deeply engaging experiences associated with the role of skinniness in her life. As our first interview started, it appeared to me that Alice's ideas of beauty would be different from the dominant ideals of beauty identified by existing research, according to which skinniness, whiteness, and blonde hair are articulated to female beauty. Unlike the majority of participants who named young actresses, singers and models as the most beautiful women they could think of, Alice said that the most beautiful women she could think of were her mum, Judy Dench, and her best friend. When I asked her why she thought so, Alice did not provide me with a list of physical features but, rather, a list of personal characteristics she admired in these women. She loved her mum's confidence; she liked that Dame Judy Dench (a renowned English actress born in 1934) had her own style; and she admired that her best friend had a lovely personality and smiled all the time.

I asked Alice whether she could tell me more about the current beauty trends associated with female body shapes – and whether her friends or somebody she knew talked to her about it. Here, Alice discussed how her young cousins called her *fat*. However, based on my observation, Alice was a slender young woman. One of the first things I noticed was her sporty look and sporty fashion style – leggings, running shoes, and a sports top, which was later justified by Alice's discussions of her love of outdoor activities and sport.

Alice explained why she thought her cousins demonstrated such reactions to her body – their mother was focused on dominant ideals through reading magazines and dieting:

> *It's really sad, my cousin, she's… 13 now, and she has a sister who is nine, and they were making comments about their bodies by the time they were seven. They would say "I'm so fat!" They'd look at me, and they'd look at my thighs, or my calves, and how they move, and they are like "Fat! Fat! You are so fat!" They called me "chubby legs"; she was seven at that time. And I was like… What are you even thinking about these things? But I know for her, that's what she's like at school. But also, her mum reads these magazines; she talks a lot about dieting.*

Thus, from Alice's description, it appeared that her young cousins decoded female beauty from a dominant position, especially in relation to weight. Alice also shared that her aunt was open about her desire to fit into dominant ideologies of beauty, like being skinny and having blonde hair: *She is very open about having to look a certain way. She dyes her hair blonde.* Although Alice pointed out that *there's no problem* in relation to her aunt's beauty decisions as an adult, Alice's interrogation of her aunt's actions demonstrated how certain beauty practices might influence the beauty perceptions of others, like her young cousins in this case. Alice believed that her cousins' perceptions were influenced by their mother and, in particular, her aunt's embrace of the belief in the articulation of skinniness to female beauty. This articulation affected the beauty perceptions of Alice's younger cousins to the extent that they used such adjectives as *chubby* in relation to Alice's appearance.

Witnessing the actions of her family members, Alice engaged in conscious choices to avoid similar effects, thus adopting an oppositional code, being critical of media messages and aware of their possible negative influence. It was noticeable that recalling these memories was not easy for Alice, based on the changes in her voice and occasional short pauses that she was

taking. As explained by Frost (2001), despite the importance of examining young women's and girls' feeling associated with their bodies, this examination can trigger rather negative and painful emotions and feelings. Indeed, as Alice continued her discussion of her aunt and cousins, she pointed out the negative effects on her cousins:

> *They've been very exposed to this forever, basically since they were born. And now, watching them grow up – the 13-year-old, she's already got an eating disorder. She just looks as [if] she's at war with herself… And I can see, I think now it's even worse [than] it's ever been, with this social pressure.*

As she continued, Alice examined the long-term effects of her aunt's adherence to the skinny ideal. Alice also pointed out the exposure to negative effects of dominant ideals on her cousins that may have triggered a dominant reading of skinniness, and as further questioned by Alice: would you ever grow into yourself… *or you would grow into what everyone is expecting you to be? You just become a product of society's expectations*.

Alice's discussion of her cousin being at war with herself precisely resonated with Frost's (2001) argument that women might experience consequences such as "being at war with their bodies" and potentially cause "damage to their identities" (p. 4). The reasons for such behaviours demonstrated by Alice's cousins could be found in Widdows' (2018) argument that "beauty practices are pleasurable and harmful and sometimes both simultaneously" thus explaining "the dominance of the beauty ideal" (p. 157). Alice's story about her family members revealed the effects of ideal beauty as her cousins observed beauty stereotypes in the media and internalised ideals from their mother. Their desire to fit into the skinny (and blonde) ideal indicated their internalisation of the dominant ideals of beauty and also influenced their interactions with others, such as Alice, and their potentially problematic relationships with their own bodies. Her young cousins' beauty perceptions were caused by exposure to ideas of dieting

and skinny bodies adopted by their mother and were similar to Bordo's (1993) descriptions of the abnormal nature of women's preoccupation with diets, and body fat.

In the next part of this chapter, I shift from this in-depth discussion of Alice's story to the shared themes based on the answers of a range of participants. The power of skinniness being a dominant ideal of beauty could also influence people's beliefs, or as explained by Charlotte, *it's hard to remember that sometimes the bigger people are also healthy. 'Cause, they might not look heathy, but they can actually be healthy*. Charlotte, who was a model for a few years, said that she *would rather look at people who are skinny than obese*. However, she justified this position by expressing her general concern with health issues related to weight*: There are way less health related issues when you have eating disorders, like, anorexia comparing to if you are obese. So for me, it's more of a health thing*, reflecting the power of skinniness as a dominant ideal of beauty.

Aside from the role of the media, family, work, school, and peers, which affected participants' decodings of skinny as a central component of ideal beauty, country of origin was another factor that affected participants' beliefs about being skinny. For instance, Jay from South Korea spoke about her desire for people in her country of origin to stop seeing *skinny as the ideal body*. Like Bella, who described a skinny body as a *straight log*, Jay used a similar description: a *stick-thin skinny look*. Jay said that she hoped that the popularity of skinny female bodies would be over and replaced by a new trend (being curvier), so that *it will be okay for women to eat food, so they can actually gain weight and have a figure*. Then she explained that she went back to Korea and *it was still just the skinny girls*. It has to be noted that Bella and Jay had different understandings of the term *curvy*. Bella understood it as a skinny woman with an *ass and boobs,* and Jay referred to women who had *a figure*, mainly drawing on the importance of women eating without the concern of weight gain.

Jennifer, who spent her childhood in China, explained the importance of skinniness, drawing on the examples of beauty pageants (similar to Candy who grew up in India and participated in beauty pageants, where skinniness was highly important, as well as Jay, who identified the importance of skinniness in South Korea):

> *I guess, when I was younger, we would watch beauty pageants, like, Chinese beauty pageants, and also… I think, in Chinese culture, you're very open in saying that someone's fat, or… skinny, or ugly, or pretty. So, I've learnt very young, 'cause I was quite overweight as a child. All my aunties, and my mum, they would just point it out, and [they would] point the pretty girls on the table, when we have a big dinner…*

Jennifer also explained her understanding that such practices are not common in Western countries: *I know that in the Western society that is very, very strange*.

At the same time, mothers can be a source of confidence for young women, helping their daughters to resist the influence of dominant beauty ideologies by building their agency with constant reminders that the girls are beautiful, as explained by Jay:

> *… my mum was quite protective of me, and she was kind of anti-technology… So, I had no makeup, didn't know anything about what's beautiful. And my mum was, like, "you're beautiful!" And I believed it – I was, like, "I'm that!"*

Also, Jay pointed out that her healthy school environment helped her to have confidence in herself. At the same time, her confidence was affected by the fact that Jay could fit at least one indicator of dominant ideology of beauty:

> *See, 'cause I am not a big girl – I was skinny all my life – I've never felt pressured by the media, and I kind of [felt]… that I was great when I was younger (laughing).*

So, 'cause I was quite sheltered growing up, in my school where I went to, it was a private school, a very happy one. We didn't watch much of TV, that kind of stuff… That helps. My ego was up there (points above the top of her head, laughing).

An important focus of Jay's story is the presence of various media channels in her life and how they affected her later self-perception. Although she started the story with empowering memories about her mother's support, Jay admitted that as she started using social media, and in particular, Instagram, her body image was negatively affected: *So, I've never had a problem until, I guess, I started Instagram. I started to use Instagram more when I was about 15.* Indeed, with more than 1 billion Instagram users worldwide in 2021 (eMarketer, 2021), Instagram has been called "arguably one of the most influential social media platforms" (Woodley, 2018, p. 32).

Based on the participants' discourses, it appears that, of all interpretive communities, mothers play one of the most important roles in these young women's perceptions of beauty. Firstly, their mothers were an example of beauty for some of the participants, and secondly, as identified earlier, mothers affected the participants' ideas about their bodies and physical appearance, particularly in the early lives of these young women. This finding supports Shennar-Golan and Walter (2015) who argue that "the mother-daughter relationship greatly influences the formation of the adolescent girl's perception of herself and her body" (p. 549). Additionally, based on my analysis of the interviews, I identified young women's ability to both follow and resist dominant ideals, like the importance of being skinny. For instance, Candy demonstrated a transition from decoding beauty from a dominant position with her focus on constant *exercising* and *dieting*, to her current negotiated decoding position when she stopped the excessive exercise and dieting, but still recognising the importance of skinniness.

Despite the articulation of skinniness to beauty, participants' answers affirmed the emergence of a trend of skinny-curvy bodies, which will be further discussed in the upcoming section.

A shift in dominant beauty ideology: Skinny-curvy bodies

In this section, I indicate a shift in the dominant beauty ideology based on the interviews and the participants' answers – the rising popularity of skinny-curvy female bodies. As previously mentioned, eight participants articulated skinniness to female beauty; however, 12 participants identified what they called *curvy* as one of the most crucial components of contemporary dominant beauty ideology and addressed the intertextuality of skinny-curvy bodies that circulate in social environments, like peer groups, and particularly on social media. Amanda called skinny-curvy bodies *the type of the body everyone wants*, stating that *it's portrayed a lot in the media*. Even though the participants did not specify the exact time when skinny-curvy became more popular than being just skinny, Charlotte explained that about two years before our interview, in 2016, New Zealand modelling agencies and started *booking girls… who were curvy*. According to Bella, the popularity of reality shows was a factor that contributed to the growth of the skinny-curvy trend, as audiences *worship celebrities* who are *so powerful* in their representation of female beauty. However, Bella demonstrated an oppositional decoding position when she explained that the skinny-curvy bodies portrayed in media are unachievable for women outside of visual texts on social media or reality shows, as *you physically can't get a body like that*.

In the answers of other participants, the concept of curvy was associated with both skinniness and voluptuous body features, such as *small hips, fat ass* (Lina), *curvy-skinny* but with *ass and breasts* (Bella), a *really, really big… ass* (Casey), *bigger breasts, bigger butts* (Amanda), *big ass* but still *slender* (Hayley), *butts and boobs* and *shapes* (Paula), *a C cup* (Molly), *curvy*

waistline (Alice), and *an hourglass shape* with *a super skinny waist, but massive boobs* (Candy).

The young women provided a number of reasons why skinny-curvy and particular body features associated with it – such as *big boobs and big butts* (Jay) – became dominant. For instance, Alice described the representation of women in the media, as portrayed by Victoria's Secret models. As Alice described, these models are not necessarily *muscly or strong*, but rather *just very skinny*, but on the other hand, they are also characterised by the presence of a *curvy waistline*. Similarly, during the second interview, Casey described what she imagined to be the current dominant ideal of beauty. According to Casey, it would be a woman whose body would have an *hourglass shape*. Lina provided her understanding of ideal beauty, which she described as *curvy… small hips, fat ass*. Some participants demonstrated the importance of a modifier such as *not too*, similar to the use of the term as explored in the discussion of 'tall' being a standard of beauty later in this chapter. Like the physical attribute of height, skinny-curvy was the only other physical attribute where the term 'not too' was used a common modifier. For instance, Molly referred to the importance of *a small waist* together with *not too big boobs, not too small, probably a C cup* and *a butt, not too big, not too small*. Lina also highlighted the new trend of skinny-curvy bodies that became popular *all of a sudden*.

The pressure to achieve the new dominant ideologies of beauty clearly negatively influenced Lina's relationship to her own body, as she reflected that she could not control how her body could be shaped: *I am like, what? I don't get sad; I am just… Why can't it be me? Why can't my fat go to the right places? It just makes me question life. It just makes me miserable sometimes.*

According to the participants, the Kardashians were a strong factor that influenced the popularity of skinny-curvy, as their reality show and social media presence contributed to the development of discourses of female beauty.

The Kardashian effect

As argued above, skinny-curvy bodies were identified by the participants as a modern dominant ideal of beauty, more popular than the previously dominant ideal of skinny female bodies. The Kardashian family, and especially Kim Kardashian, could be identified as "famous for being famous" (Paquette, 2020, p. 2). As Paquette (2020) describes,

> Is Kim Kardashian famous because of special skills or incredible talents? Most would argue "no," except maybe her talent for marketing herself. (p. 2)

However, the Kardashians were recognised by the participants as one of the key influences on the growing popularity of skinny-curvy bodies. Jay identified how her ideas of beauty were *conditioned through the past five years* and the influence of Kim Kardashian. She even admitted that if she had to come up with a description of an ideally beautiful woman, she would suggest *a Kim Kardashian kind of look*, which, in Jay's opinion, is *curvy* and *beautiful*. Jay, who was 20 when the interviews took place, explained that her opinions of beauty *changed so much from what I'd describe as pretty when I was 15*, when she considered skinny as a dominant ideal. Lina also referred to the influence of the Kardashians on modern ideals of beauty, while when she critically pointed out that their appearances are unachievable for women, regardless how much effort is put in:

> *...a slim tummy, a round buttocks ... like they will be advertising at a gym when it's not really the reality of it. Gym can't really give you that. If you are now born with it, or you go under a knife. They will be advertising this image that can't be achieved*

> *by [going to] the gym. You can "gym" all you want, change the body, it will look good, it will not sag, but … you can't get this shape, which the Kardashians are giving out. That's just this new trend of a flat stomach … all of a sudden, really curvy [body].*

Meg's comments about the way the Kardashians project the idea of *what beauty is and should be* demonstrate the theoretical idea of the transition from signifiers to signs. Meg demonstrated her critical awareness of how images circulated in media to affect audiences:

> *I think there's definitely a projected way the media wants people to look like, so people… The Kardashians, a great example. There's definitely this projected idea of what beauty is and should be. And I am definitely one of those people that are affected by this – I think, most women are. And I think that definitely does impact the way we see beauty every day.*

The images of the Kardashians, signifiers, became increasingly popular. With time, these images evolved from signifiers into signs – visual texts that carry meaning (Jhally, 2005). This production of meaning was characterized by the growing popularity of skinny-curvy bodies and was affected by the Kardashians' reality shows and their influence on social media. The influence of the Kardashians has been noted by scholars. For example, Harris (2016) described the fast-growing interest in the Kardashian family and their ability to become trend-setters caused by their innovative strategies of self-marketing, well-integrated into their own brand and reality show.

The young women's discussions revealed the multidimensional nature of skinny-curvy bodies, allowing the production of various meanings in relation to female beauty. For instance, Jay differentiated between a positive perception of skinny-curvy bodies and a negative connotation

associated with someone who is just *curvy*, as it could be considered as being *fat*. She stated that while being skinny-curvy was *acceptable*, being fat would be associated with being *dirty and lazy* in South Korea. Jay stated that the ideal of a skinny body still dominated South Korean beauty perceptions in both society and the mass media. Similar to other participants, Jay also admitted that curvy in Western mass media was characterised by certain body features, which support the skinny-curvy ideal. Jay explained that *plus size* can be called curvy, but plus size models would *have no stomach, the arms aren't flabby, no face fat; they have just have big boobs and big butts*. Jay demonstrated her resistance to such unrealistic but dominating ideas of beauty by admitting that she was unhappy with such interpretations of plus size models in the media, partially because, in her opinion, unlike the plus size models she encountered in the media, who might have *small boobs, and a big tummy*, she recognised that *not every plus size girl is curvy – just big*. As well as pointing out the discrepancy between plus size women represented in mass media versus plus size women she observed in real life, Jay identified the fact that representations of more realistic plus size women are *missed out* in the media. Even though the discussion of the lack of such representation was not a prevalent theme in the findings, it is possible that my choice of the questions limited discussion. However, Jay was able to decode media discourses of ideal beauty from a negotiated position and demonstrated an ability to critically evaluate media representations of skinny-curvy.

Amanda was another participant who articulated skinny-curvy bodies to dominant ideals of beauty, calling it *the type of the body everyone wants – a curvy body*. At the same time, she recognised it was the type of the body characterised by unrealistic beauty standards. For example, Amanda pointed out that, in her opinion, *you tend to get skinny if you exercise*, whereas physical exercises could not assist in achieving the desired *curves*. Analysing Amanda's answers, it would be logical to conclude that, in her view, getting skinnier was, at least, an achievable goal for a woman, whereas striving to be skinny and having curves was an

unreasonable expectation. The main point here was, however, that unreasonable expectations of women's beauty dominate the portrayal of women in the media. Amanda also demonstrated an oppositional decoding when she admitted that she does not articulate beauty to skinniness or curves, but rather explained: *I prefer someone who is just strong*. Amanda critically addressed the unreasonable expectations of female beauty in her further discussion of the current popularity of waist corsets and shapewear among women in various social environments, including her friends in their 20s and her family members. Amanda's observations confirmed the growing influence of a skinny-curvy ideal that appeared in the rising popularity of waist corsets, shapewear, and waist trainers, or what the New Zealand Herald (2016) called a "bizarre beauty trend" (para. 2). Reinforcing the Kardashian effect, the *New Zealand Herald* (2016) identified that "the waist trainer craze" (para. 3) was "endorsed by celebrities like Kylie Jenner and Kim Kardashian" (para. 3) and "swept the internet last year as young women around the world sought to emulate their idols' hourglass figures" (para. 3). Amanda explained that the desire to obtain both *curves* and a *narrow waist* could be achieved by females wearing such shapewear to *hide their body fat* and *to make them look more curvy and more shaped* in order to achieve the goal of the skinny-curvy body, *so they can have it all, and bigger breasts, bigger butts*. Amanda concluded by pointing out that she doesn't *agree with the whole waist thing*. Bella also expressed criticism of such unrealistic expectations of physical appearance, calling it *unnatural*, even though she expressed her preference for the dominant ideal of beauty, the *curvy-skinny* body shape, thus demonstrating an inconsistency in her interpretations of dominant ideals of beauty. Bella acknowledged her concern that a skinny-curvy, *hourglass figure* is not a 'natural' female body type. She identified that she realised that image manipulation could be used in visual texts portraying the skinny-curvy body shape, explaining that *there're certain things which you can do to make it look [skinny-curvy]*. Bella

described skinny-curvy bodies as *unnatural* and *superficial*, as it is unrealistic for a woman to have *a skinny body and just have fat concentrated in… two areas [breasts and bottom]*.

Charlotte's experience in the fashion industry reinforced the other participants' perceptions when she explained that dominant beauty standards have changed over the past few years. Charlotte pointed out that when she started her modelling career, *girls who were skinnier were 'in', they were considered to be 'the look', and everybody had to book them*, whereas two years ago a new kind of beauty started dominating the industry. Charlotte called it *street beauty*, where girls who were *bigger and… curvy* caused the skinny girls to *get less work*. She concluded that the new skinny-curvy trend *changed the way people see beauty*.

Articulation of skinny-curvy bodies to beauty: Gender differences

In relation to female bodies, three participants mentioned that young men and young women vary in their identification of the value of *curves*, or skinny-curvy bodies, versus *skinny* bodies. For instance, Jessica described it as *boys and girls have very different opinions*, acknowledging that young women are *more affected* by such traditional ideas of beauty as *skinny, tall model types*, whereas young men idealise the concept of *curvy*. Jessica decoded society's and current media expectations of curves as an attribute of sexiness and a new dominant ideology of beauty. Jessica continued by explaining that in her view, *guys… want a curvy girl, curvy girls are sexy*. However, Jessica did not want to be identified as a *sexy* young woman: *I feel like I don't really want to be sexy – I want to be pretty*.

Amanda explained that from listening to *guy-talks*, young men also *think about [the female body] differently*, in comparison to her female friends. Amanda identified that males seemed to desire someone who is *tall, thin, a curvy body*, *big boobs, big ass*. During my first interview with Casey, she referred to young men's preferences for a curvy woman whose *ass is really,*

really big. Later she acknowledged that she doesn't like this *new trend*, demonstrating her critical awareness and media literacy skills by saying that *it's not even real*. For example, Casey also mentioned that she knows that *lots of guys like Kim Kardashian's body*, which she referred to as *fake*, pointing out the plastic surgeries that she believed Kim Kardashian had gone through in order to achieve such body features. Here, I draw on Hesse-Biber's (1991) argument according to which dominant ideals of female bodies are opposed to the culture's accessibility to food and resources: "In times or places where food is scarce, a plump, even obese, ideal may symbolize the societal desire for abundance. In societies of abundance, the slender body type is more often the ideal" (p. 177). It explains why skinniness has been so popular since the 1960s (Hesse-Biber, 1991), as Western societies produced more food than ever before. It also addresses why larger female bodies were regarded as attractive when food sources were limited, for example, in ancient history in the Mediterranean (Wolf, 2002). The new trend of being skinny-curvy, however, represents a more complicated matter as it combines both skinny bodies and large breasts and bottoms, therefore establishing a complex and new articulation of skinny-curvy female bodies to ideal beauty.

Other components of physical appearance articulated to beauty

After the examination of the emerging trend of skinny-curvy bodies and the role of traditional skinniness in the lives of my participants, I now analyse other characteristics of physical appearance that the young women articulated to dominant beauty ideals. My examination of participants' answers identified four main physical characteristics that young women linked with ideal beauty: skin, hair, facial features and height, as well as several secondary components (e.g., thigh gap, symmetry, posture). Across the course of each interview, the participants' answers demonstrated various decoding positions in relation to the media representation of beauty. One strength of the interview structure, which asked different kinds

of questions about their relationship with ideal beauty, was that it enabled these nuances and contradictions to emerge. For example, Amanda, who demonstrated an oppositional decoding position in relation to the value of diets, also strongly expressed her desire to straighten her teeth, which could be interpreted as a dominant code. Amanda expressed strong disagreement with what she saw as the dominant ideology of beauty; at the same time, by worrying about the look of her teeth and smile, she demonstrated an overall negotiated decoding position in relation to ideal beauty in which her decoding included "a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements" (Hall, 1973, p. 17). Even though certain dominant ideas of beauty, as circulated in the media and followed by her friends and family members, were decoded in an oppositional way by Amanda, she still expressed a desire to adjust certain characteristics of her physical appearance.

In the following sections, I provide detailed descriptions from the interviews that emerged from the semantic analysis, supported by extended quotations, as they reveal specific characteristics and the range of ways that the dominant idea of beauty enters and impacts participants' lives and self-perceptions as young women.

Skin

Throughout the course of the interviews, it was clear that the discussion of skin presented a strong interest to the participants. There were two dimensions identified in relation to skin: condition and colour. Although participants did not make an explicit connection between skin condition and beauty, the importance of clear skin with *no pimples* (Molly), or an *even skin tone* (Meg), suggest skin condition is linked to some extent. This is reinforced by Jessica's use of cosmetics to hide pimples and skin imperfections.

The major component was the importance of skin colour. This finding revealed important cultural and ethnic differences in what "colour" of skin was considered most desirable. In this section, I argue that participants' decoding positions related to how skin should look could be explained by the commodification of skin and promotion of skin adjustment practices, such as whitening or tanning (Kenway & Bullen, 2011). According to Foo (2010), "skin colour has always been a source of fixation for mankind from all cultures where it not only represents one's health condition or attractiveness but also his or her social status and wealth" (p. 23). Reflecting the diverse ethnicities and countries of origin of the participants, three non-white participants focused on the importance of *light* or *very fair* (Paula), *fairness* (Hayley) and *lighter* (Candy) skin. Skin colour appeared particularly relevant for young women of non-white or non-Western backgrounds. For example, Korean-born Jay identified paleness as an important element of beauty, explaining that, when she lived in Korea, the things she *found beautiful were more Korean* including the cultural preference for *kind of pale* skin. For Jessica, of Chinese heritage, pale skin was a key element of comparison between herself and celebrities she saw as *pretty*. Jessica explained, *I think, "hey, why are they pretty?" ...I notice…my skin isn't that fair as theirs*. Further demonstrating the power of whiteness in the global circulation of signs of ideal beauty (Jones, 2011), German-born Charlotte (of white ethnicitiy) explained that when one of her Ethiopian friends *talks about what beauty means to her, it's always someone pale*. In stark contrast, two participants of white ethnicity highlighted the importance of *being tanned* (Alice) or a having *nice tan* (Bella). Alice, originally from Switzerland, raised this point when discussing ideal beauty, and later in a discussion of images on Instagram. Alice explained that in Instagram images of *women who look perfect…all the time…it's always super tanned, in a bikini, super skinny*.

Overall, the participants experienced desires for skin tones that were different from their natural one. Participants with white, pale skin were eager to get tanned, and participants with 'darker'

skin desired or were recommended to pursue a lighter skin tone, thus affirming that dominant ideals of beauty are closely connected to consumerism and the beauty industry (e.g., Calogero et al., 2017; Sarikakis & Shade, 2008).

Hair

Hair as a component of ideal beauty was acknowledged by six participants. Length, colour, style, texture and condition were all seen as important. Three participants identified the importance of *long, shiny hair* (April) or *long hair* (Jay, Paula), which should be worn down (Charlotte). Paula referred to *long hair* as one of the components of ideal beauty and later indicated that she saw hair as part of a broader aspect of good grooming and presentation – *they look tidy, so their hair is done, they groom themselves*. For April, *nice hair* was something she observed in the media as a dominant characteristic of an ideally beautiful woman. Hair colour, specifically *blonde hair* (Meg, Alice, Molly), was also identified as a component of beauty. Alice identified blondeness as being valued by society and teenage boys: *By society's standard, I think, blonde hair. In high school, guys like the girls with blonde hair*. As blonde hair is generally associated with white ethnicity, this supports the emphasis of whiteness on Western ideals of beauty. In addition, Charlotte's discussion about her Ethiopian friend who *just hates her hair* makes visible the power of white Western ideals of beauty to inform how women from other cultures, with different hair textures and colours, can internalise the value of what Charlotte identified as her own naturally blonde *Western European hair texture*.

Two participants identified that hair might affect the way women are treated in our society. For instance, according to Meg, women with blonde hair are perceived differently in comparison with women who have other hair colours. Meg drew on her knowledge of case studies and experiments *done with women with blonde hair* that confirmed that women with blonde hair

would receive *more positive feedback* and for whom *challenges are much easier* compared to *women with brunette hair*. Meg also admitted that based on her life experiences, she would *agree with that, definitely*. Charlotte said that *just havi[ng] my hair up* rather than down can be one reason for her to be *treated differently* and *not as nice* compared to the times when she looked more *dressed up* and with her long blonde hair down. These participants articulated blonde hair to female beauty, suggesting that blonde hair is still considered as an important attribute of female appearance, possibly based on its high popularity in traditional media since the 20th century (Cash, 1993). The participants' comments suggest that blonde hair has sustained its role as one of the components of ideal beauty.

Facial features

A discussion of facial features was initiated by the majority of participants (11 participants). The importance of such features as noses, eyes, eyelashes eyebrows, smile and teeth are discussed here. Both Molly and Alice referred to a *small nose* as one of the key components of facial beauty; Bella similarly named a *nice slim nose*. Amanda referred to her Asian friends who complimented Amanda's nose as it was *thin and high*, which was not a common nose shape in Asia, again demonstrating the power of Western ideals of beauty. Amanda continued by saying that Asian noses are usually *quite wide and flat* and that her friends shared with her that they wanted to have surgery to change the shape of their noses. Amanda explained that such desires of her friends were *influenced by media back home [in Asia], even if they don't live there*. This difference in physiognomy was highlighted by Bergeron and Chen (2009) who argued that "compared with Caucasians, Asians generally have a shorter, wider, and less projecting nose" (p. 16).

The importance of *eyes* and *eyelashes* was also emphasised by some participants. For instance, continuing her discussion about *Asian* facial features, Amanda also acknowledged that her *Asian friends want and try to have big eyes*. Amanda shared her understanding by saying that *back in Asia, lots of girls get bigger eyes*, referring to the popularity of having plastic surgeries. Indeed, the desire to have bigger eyes is common for Asian women (Chung & Bissell, 2009). Jay, who originated from South Korea, commented on the popularity of *bigger eyes*, which represent a dominant cultural beauty concept of a *baby-ish* and *delicate* appearance for women. Jay also mentioned her personal preference for beautiful eyelashes and eyebrows. Other participants mainly drew on ideas about preferable eye colours, eye shapes and eye sizes, such as Bella who admitted that she likes *big eyes* and *kind eyes* and Jennifer who mentioned *interesting eyes*. Lighter coloured (not brown) eyes appeared to be a dominant beauty ideal in relation to facial features, as mentioned by Molly who said that she preferred *colourful eyes – blue eyes, green eye*s. Candy described *blue eyes* as one of the ideal beauty features and Casey referred to *blue eyes* when she was speaking about *something that isn't typical*, like the combination of *black hair* and *blue eyes* of actress Megan Fox who, in Casey's opinion, is *beautiful* and *stands out*. Jay said that she was *fascinated by… [the] colour of people's eyes* and *eye shapes*; and Meg mentioned that *eye colour* mattered to her perception of beauty. Candy was another participant who identified *long eyelashes* and explained that they are *always quite beautiful*.

Smiles and *teeth* were also discussed by five participants. Bella said that *a nice smile* together with eyes were *two key things* in her perceptions of female beauty. Both Amanda and Meg mentioned *straight teeth* as an important facial feature. As Foo (2010) described, good teeth "signify youth and good health, which are the desirable traits in seeking the perfect mate, but also as symbols for higher economic and social status" (p. 32). Rochelle admitted that *a smile* would be *the first thing I notice*. Jessica believed that certain facial features might *look nice on*

you, but not on someone different. What she meant was that, in general, even if she had her preference, the importance lies in balance and how *everything on your face comes together*. At the same time, Jessica discussed how dominant ideas of beauty influenced her perceptions of beauty, making her compare her own appearance with the appearance of beautiful celebrities and models. The interviews with participants proved that facial features are important in young women's understandings of beauty.

The only participant who clearly demonstrated her resistance and expressed the importance of individuality in relation to facial features was Hayley, who said that *you should look in the mirror and appreciate what you have, your eyes, your nose, your ears, your hair, the body that you are given*. Even though Hayley read certain components of beauty through dominant ideals, she also acknowledged the importance of accepting the way a woman looks naturally and appreciating it. Further, she admitted that she thinks *not everybody is made to achieve* an ideal physical appearance based on the dominant ideologies created by media producers. Hayley said *being at peace with yourself* is important for her. Her position reflected what Slater et al. (2017) identified in research in the psychological field of body image as a new tendency to focus on "emphasising one's body's assets rather than dwelling on imperfection" (p. 88). However, Hayley still read certain facial features according to the dominant ideals of beauty presented in the media, specifically naming *perfect eyebrows… a sharp nose… extended eyelashes… no black spots*. At the same time, Hayley pointed out that ideal beauty is a combination of physical attributes and personality characteristics: Hayley explained that she found beautiful a woman who is *smiling, with pinky cheeks, really humble,* and even drew on the importance of *innocent eyes*, admitting that the religious figure of Mother Mary would represent ideal beauty for her.

Height

For some participants, height was associated with attractiveness and ideal beauty, demonstrating that they decoded according to the dominant ideas of beauty in the media. For instance, one of the dominant ideals of beauty was the height of a woman, and in particular, the importance of being tall, represented by Western fashion models (Yan & Bissell, 2014). The most common adjective used in relation to height in the interviews was *tall* (Jessica, Paula, Candy, Amanda, Jennifer). Being tall was also associated with representations of female beauty in the media (Jessica, Amanda). The importance of being tall was highlighted by Paula twice during our interviews. First, Paula referred to tall as a component of ideal beauty, calling it *really pretty*. Second, Paula spoke about *tall* in relation to her opinion about characteristics associated with society's ideas of beauty: *we should go with the stereotype… which is what I always see as tall, thin, well-groomed, and… attractive*.

Another example was illustrated by Jessica who associated *being tall* with *models*: Jessica mentioned height in the context of the media's representation of the ideal female, as according to Jessica, height was one of the key characteristics of fashion models. She pointed out the idea that young women around her are more *affected by [the] skinny, tall, model type*, which she saw as embodying multiple attributes of the dominant ideology of beauty. Jennifer also mentioned that being tall was one of the most crucial components of beauty. Candy referred to the concept of *tall* twice when she spoke about the ideal female beauty. Amanda, who moved to New Zealand from India during her teen years, mentioned the importance of being tall when she was speaking about celebrities she admired. One of them was Indian actress and model Deepika Padukone. As Amanda described, Deepika Padukone was *really pretty* but, most importantly, Amanda acknowledged that [she is] *tall like me, so I can relate*.

Four other participants attached modifiers to the idea of tallness by using a modifier 'not too', like *tall, but not too-too* [sic] *tall… a nice, average height* (Bella), *tall, or not too short, just tall* (Lina), and *not too tall, but not too short* (Molly). Charlotte referred to an attractive and beautiful woman as someone who *wouldn't be short… wouldn't be too tall*. Thus, height for these young women proved to be an important aspect of beauty, even though they had different opinions on which height was ideal.

Additional components of ideal beauty

Certain components of ideal beauty were discussed by between one and three participants and are recognised in this study as less prevalent but still significant. Such components include *posture* (Paula), *thigh gap* (Alice and Candy), *cheekbones* (Alice and Jay), and *symmetry* (*symmetry* for Jessica, *facial symmetry* for Amanda, and *symmetrical face shapes* mentioned by Charlotte). For Paula, *nice posture* was among one of the first things she would notice in a woman, and one of the key components she would attribute to an ideally beautiful one.

Although Jessica discussed symmetry alongside other beauty components she found important, at the same time she identified that *symmetry* was particularly articulated to beauty as important *for everyone*. Similarly, Amanda referred to *facial symmetry*, saying that *it's just what a lot of people want*. Charlotte, in her discussion of the possible reasons why people *can be attracted to the other people*, drew on *all this science* that explores *symmetrical face shapes*, although she believed symmetry might not be an important component of *being beautiful* for everyone. She explained that *I think, society has these preconceived ideas of what beauty is, but then people might have differences in their attraction to people*.

Two participants, Alice and Candy, discussed *thigh gap* as a beauty attribute. According to the top definition in Urban Dictionary (2015), "a thigh gap is someone who has wide enough hips

so that a gap appears in between your legs. A thigh gap has nothing to do with weight, but more with how your hips are made." As Alice identified it, *a lot of pressure is on thigh gap*, and in particular, whether the thighs touch or not. She said one friend regarded thigh gap as *the first thing she is noticing about someone*. Alice said that she was surprised at her friend's views but, as Alice reflected on thigh gap as a beauty attribute, she acknowledged the difference in the opinions of *guys* and *girls* about the thigh gap, stating *within girls' groups they have these ideas [about thigh gap], but then you talk to guys, and the ideas are different, and they don't even notice*. Candy had a similar opinion, saying that *a couple of years ago, a thigh gap was super big*. At the same time, Candy acknowledged that she did not even know what it meant then, and that she *literally didn't care*.

Two participants discussed *cheekbones* as an attribute of idea beauty. According to Alice, who moved to New Zealand from Switzerland, society had a certain *standard* of beauty that included *having high cheekbones*. For Alice, high cheekbones were not even a feature women had to have naturally. She identified that women could undertake everyday actions, such as the use of *makeup and stuff*, which were acceptable in order to *bring it up and shade it*. In contrast, based on the answers of Jay, who moved to New Zealand from South Korea, these two countries had different dominant ideologies of beauty in relation to this characteristic of physical appearance: in South Korea cheekbones had to be smoothed out by makeup, otherwise, the *softness* of the face would be lost. As Jay described it, desirable features included *not strong cheekbones or jawlines, like delicate looking*.

Thus, as has been revealed in previous sections, cultural differences emerged in what aspects of each component were important, and suggested that although all the participants could identify attributes of white Western ideals of beauty, different cultures have some unique attributes related to dominant beauty ideologies, particularly in relation to facial features.

Participants naming three women they find the most beautiful

At the beginning of the first interview with each participant, I wanted to understand how they make meaning about beauty from a broader perspective. I also wanted to analyse whether representations of beauty in the media were regarded by the participants as the only source of beauty inspiration. At the start of the first interview, the participants were asked to name the three women they found the most beautiful. For this answer, I told them that they could name any person. Based on the data presented in Table 1, the most popular categories included the participants' family members and their friends. I suggest that this categorisation was caused by an existing relationship with the women in their close social environments. This finding also confirmed that the power of images circulated in media is not absolute, and young women make meanings about beauty based on a variety of reasons, such as personal characteristics of women, and existing relationships with women they know. I identified the following categories based on participants' answers: within the family and friends category, which received 22 votes out of 48 (46%), mothers were identified most often with 10 votes; sisters had 5 votes; followed by friends (4 votes), grandmothers (1 vote); and girlfriends (1). Outside their close environments, singers and actresses had 8 votes each (17%), followed by Victoria's Secret's models, members of the Kardashian family (categorised as influencers), and public figures with 3 votes each (6%). Only one sportswoman was named (2%). The answers were as follows:

1	Alessandra Ambrosio (Victoria's Secret model)	Miranda Kerr (Victoria's Secret model)	Halle Berry (actress)
2	Mother	Friend	Michelle Obama (public figure)
3	Friend	Kourtney Kardashian (influencer)	Sister
4	Sister	Mother	grandmother
5	Mother	Sister	Mother Teresa (public figure)

6	Sister	Sister	Mother
7	Mother	Friend	Deepika Padukone (actress)
8	Mother	Sister	Kim Kardashian (influencer)
9	Celine Dion (singer)	Saoirse Ronan (actress)	Gal Gadot (actress)
10	Nicole Scherzinger (singer/songwriter)	Shakira (singer)	Rihanna (singer)
11	Meghan Markle (actress)	Selena Gomez (singer)	Blake Lively (actress)
12	Blake Lively (actress)	Mother	Miley Cyrus (singer)
13	Beyoncé (singer)	Janelle Monáe (singer)	Anne Hathaway (actress)
14	Mother	Serena Williams (sportswoman)	Kim Kardashian (influencer)
15	Mother	Gigi Hadid (Victoria's Secret model)	Girlfriend
16	Mother	Dame Judi Dench (actress)	Friend

Table 1: Participants identified their list of three most beautiful women

It appeared that the feelings of the participants about a particular person, as well as her personal characteristics, such as kindness and care for others, were more important than the ability to fit into dominant ideals of beauty. The participants considered family members and friends to be beautiful because these women were good-natured and loved by the participants. Amanda considered her best friends to be the most beautiful women because they *made her feel comfortable* around them. Paula admired her mother and sister based on *how they behave and act towards others*; Alice considered her mother to be beautiful because *she is so confident in herself. She does not care what anyone else thinks, and she's always tried to instil it*

[confidence] *in me as I was growing up.* Meg explained that despite the beauty of her sisters, she admired them because of their positive interactions with other people:

> *So, they are really… beautiful to look at. And, I think for me, it's the way that they make other people feel… So, my younger sisters, in particular, you know, they walk in a room, and people feel happy to see them. And I feel for me, that's what [is] making them beautiful – not just visually looking at them. Though, I think, they both are quite stunning. But it's more, like, their effect on other people.*

Interestingly, Rachel explained that she considered Miley Cyrus as the most beautiful woman not only because of her physical appearance, but also because Rachel respected her actions:

> *I think she's beautiful because she's so strong about so many things, issues in the world, and she really is like an advocate for equality and gay right, and homeless people. And things like that. She also stands for a lot in the world, which is… yeah, powerful.*

Mothers were identified as the most beautiful women because a mother can be the most *favourite person in the world* for a young woman (Rachel); because a mother can be *perfect* even without any makeup, and a mum can have *a heart for people* and demonstrate *kindness* (Molly). Charlotte explained that she considered her sister, mother, and grandmother to be beautiful because of their admirable personal characteristics:

> *They are decent people. From the inside and out. So, for me, beauty, it is not just physical beauty. It's also how they act. And they all are selfless and generous people. Really kind people. So, that's kind of what I define as beauty, I guess.*

The juxtaposition of personal qualities and physical appearance suggested that the participants prioritised what they feel about a person, rather than their physical appearance. As participants

identified their mothers as the most beautiful person more frequently than any other category of women, I suggest that mothers have a strong influence on how young women perceive and make meaning about beauty, a point also confirmed by existing research (e.g., Shennar-Golan & Walter, 2015) and in the previous chapter. However, as it was evident from the participants' answers, celebrities and models also influence young women's perceptions of beauty.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined which components of physical appearance are articulated to beauty by young women. Despite the importance of a traditional component of dominant beauty ideology – skinniness (which was recognised by eight participants), I identified the emerging trend of skinny-curvy female bodies (recognised by 12 participants).

The rise of skinny-curvy bodies is directly related to the production of new discourses in relation to female beauty, especially with the current popularity of social media. According to the analysis of my participants' answers, I suggest that skinny-curvy bodies became a dominant ideal of female beauty per their representation on social media.

The Kardashian effect was also visible in the list of three most-beautiful women, with three participants explicitly identifying a Kardashian as a choice of the most beautiful women they could think of, as previously discussed in this chapter. Additionally, I pointed out that skinny-curvy bodies were articulated by participants to sexiness and the male gaze. However, the participants decoded skinny-curvy bodies in complex ways, admitting that skinny-curvy bodies are a part of dominant ideology of beauty, but also critically accentuating the unnatural and unachievable nature of this body shape.

Based on the analysis of the participants' answers in relation to skinniness, I determine that young women still desire to have thin bodies, primarily as thin female bodies were a dominant ideal of beauty when they were children and teenagers, and its representation, primarily in traditional media, affected young women's perceptions of beauty. Another finding was related to the significant role of mothers and how they influenced participants' perceptions of their bodies and beauty.

In relation to other components of physical appearance that were articulated to female beauty, I suggest that the participants' answers aligned with characteristics of dominant ideals of beauty as described by the current body of research. Participants' answers demonstrated that beauty ideals are also racialised, especially in relation to the perceptions of skin colour. Fair skin was articulated to ideal beauty by non-Western participants, whereas the participants with naturally white skin valued being tanned.

Despite the consistency in the answers in relation to the components of ideal beauty, when young women had to choose the most beautiful women in their personal opinion, they prioritised a personal connection and personal qualities over physical appearance. According to the answers of the participants, the most popular category was represented by women who participants had personal relations with, such as their family members – especially, their mothers, sisters, and their friends.

The participants' answers in relation to the media's power to circulate dominant ideals of beauty confirmed that despite young women's ability to decode media messages from multiple decoding positions, media still influences audiences' perceptions of female beauty.

Chapter Six: Pleasures, Pressures, and Resistance

The previous chapter analysed the components of ideal beauty as identified by participants and explored how media and various interpretive communities (Cruz & Lewis, 1994) affected their perceptions of beauty. This chapter delves more deeply into the participants' meaning-making about beauty and the specific practices the young women engage in, avoid or reject in relation to ideal beauty.

The first part of the chapter also addresses the complexities of pleasure and pressure associated with beauty. I start with an analysis of beauty pleasures, and how participants articulate notions of beauty to success and popularity, thus associating beauty with the "bodily capital" of women (Baldwin et al., 2004, p. 301). I consider how a woman's body can be viewed as a "medium of expression, its techniques serving as a vehicle for our being-in-the-world" (Baldwin et al., 2004, p. 300). Further, I focus on the beauty practices associated with pleasure. After that, I explore negative discourses in relation to fitting dominant beauty ideals.

In the second part of the chapter, I focus on how participants resist and contest meanings about beauty by analysing their resistance to dominant ideals of beauty, including "the dialectical play between resistance and incorporation" (Storey, 1997, p. 11).

Negotiating Beauty: Pleasures and Pressures

Pleasures: The power of beauty

As previously discussed, the existing research suggests that female beauty is frequently connected to success and popularity at various stages of women's lives, starting with its importance for girls in school (e.g., Francis et al., 2012; Tsang, 2017), and continuing further

in their lives (Hesse-Biber, 1991; Margariti et al., 2021). As Kwan and Trautner (2009) argued "appearance matters on both an individual and institutional level" (p. 51). Peng and al. (2020) confirmed the importance of physical attractiveness in a variety of social interactions:

> The role of attractiveness in social judgments and the beauty premium have been well documented in various social settings such as dating, hiring, selling, and advertising, especially when the task or product is related to appearance. (p. 67)

As argued by Raudenska (2018), "we live in a society where physical appearance matters. Attractiveness clearly plays an important role both in our social lives and in workplace outcomes" (p. 12). While this thesis considers the power structures that shape women's bodies and bodily expressions, it is important to note that everyone is captured in these frames. For example, Nienaber and Moraka (2016) argue the "interconnecting structures of power and privileges that make one group of men (and women) dominant and ranges everyone else in a complex hierarchy of increasing disadvantage" (p. 150), thus creating a contemporary beauty culture associated with "the intensified surveillance of women's bodies" (Elias & Gill, 2018, p. 61). For instance, Amanda referred to her observation of the reactions of others to girls who were perceived as *perfect*, which indicated how beauty is associated with popularity:

> *It starts from school. Like, until intermediate, everyone is just… still lots of kids, but, that's when you have puberty, and everyone goes through the whole emotional change, and at school, you just see some see some girls who are just perfect, and all guys date them, and all the other girls try to look like them – those girls. That's when you start getting an impression that "that's how I should be looking like". I reckon, it starts when you have puberty.*

Amanda's observations are affirmed by the existing research that suggests that the physical attractiveness of girls affects their popularity at schools (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte,

2020; Helfert & Warschburger 2013; Wood, 2017) and their peer acceptance (Chang et al., 2019). This section analyses the value of beauty for young women, and whether participants believed that beautiful people are treated better. Crucially, beauty was articulated to *power*, which Rachel explained in the following way: *especially for women, when they have beauty… if you know how to use your beauty, [you can] get what you want*, as beauty can make life *very easy*. Bella discussed the dominant role of beauty in the lives of women and she pointed out that *beauty is over everything else*. She noted that: *It's really powerful! I feel like you can do anything you want if you're, like, beautiful*. Jessica also referred to beauty as power, especially if a woman knows that she is beautiful:

> *I have friends who know that they're beautiful, and I know, like, I go out with them, and stuff… and, I can just tell that they know that they can just smile and... they'll get something. It's kind of… when you know you're beautiful, there is a certain power to it.*

Jessica also pointed out the unconscious ways people treat beautiful people better. Beauty can thus be described as "a defining feature of identity for women" (Elias & Gill, 2018, p. 64) because attractive people tend to easily find friends and are generally treated *nicely* by others. Jessica *distanced* beautiful people from people who were not as beautiful, therefore suggesting that, by meeting the dominant ideals of beauty, some women are better off in life:

> *I've met attractive people being nice, attractive people who were not nice, but I think sometimes, they don't experience things in the same way like the people less attractive do. And they may think like, oh, everyone is just nice; they may think "Oh! I've never had problem making friends. Is it that hard?" It's things like that. But, for those things, I won't blame them. It's not something they do… consciously.*

Hayley suggested that, at her single-sex girls' school, the senior students would pick pretty pupils during sport activities*:*

> *I felt when there are seniors who come to teach us – they are not teachers, they are, like, senior students – like, to do sport activities with us, they would always pick pretty ones first. At that point, they are always friendly with them, they would talk with them…*

Even when Hayley was a child, she was able to recognise this preference for beautiful students over less beautiful ones: *at that time, it was like that, like, they're beautiful, that's why…. That feeling, actually, got into me.* At the same time, she admitted that her teachers would respect and appreciate the hard work of a student: *they would be keen for the person who is working hard, and interested in the subject – instead of being beautiful*. However, Hayley concluded that *everybody would like to be next to a beautiful person.* Jennifer also articulated the ability to meet dominant ideals of beauty to popularity at school. Jennifer was born in China but schooled in New Zealand from her early teenage years. She perceived that the boys at her New Zealand school preferred the girls who met Western ideals of beauty, in particular, those with features associated with whiteness and blonde hair: *when I was younger, I was, like, the one Chinese kid in my class… So, I would feel very insecure, 'cause… I feel like the other girls, the white girls, boys liked them more.*

Hayley explained that she was affected by beauty representations in both Western and Bollywood movies, drawing on the way attractive characters were treated better in a range of situations in comparison with less attractive ones. Molly described her experiences in the workplace, where she perceived that more beautiful people experience more positive attitudes from others. In Molly's answers, two aspects emerge: firstly, that her manager's actions privileged more beautiful women in the workplace; and secondly, how her more attractive

female colleague, who – as described by Molly, fitted the Western ideal of beauty – was treated better than Molly:

> *I work in a cafe where one of the managers … he openly talks about not hiring someone because of… their looks, or he makes jokes like that… he would always talk about that. There was a girl who started at the same time as me. She was a year older and she was just stunningly beautiful – blonde, blue eyes, just gorgeous… and everyone knew it. And she was always talked to [by the manager] … he didn't treat me like trash, but she would always have more attention.*

Molly also noted that other staff members would have a more positive attitude towards a *beautiful person*, a client or another staff member. Molly's interactions within her wider social environments influenced her meaning-making in relation to the importance of beauty for success:

> *I do believe that prettier people are treated better because media has made them seem more approachable, so that's all you see… [who] you want to approach – rather than other people... and I don't say that people who don't meet beauty standards are not approachable, because you know, it doesn't mean the people don't talk to them, or talk to me, or whatever, because I'm a typical beauty standard… But it's just different, you can see it… like, I thought a customer is rude to me one day…. and then my [beautiful] friend was like, "What? He was so nice to me!" So that's the difference, so you do get it easier sometimes…*

Jennifer and Rachel, on the other hand, articulated confidence to beauty. Jennifer critically pointed out that people who fit dominant ideals generally feel better about themselves. She continued by explaining that in her opinion, *confidence* was an important feature for women, but it would be harder to develop confidence if you do not meet dominant ideals of beauty:

> *I think it's easier to be confident and happy with yourself if you fit the conventional beauty standards. But, I don't think that that should be limiting. I think… I think every woman should have confidence in themselves… But that's obviously easier if people tell you that you're beautiful… "Just love yourself" and "be beautiful", but it's harder if you're told that you're not. Yeah.*

Rachel explained that *when people are beautiful, and they know they're beautiful, and they are treated as beautiful, they have this, like, confidence about them*. Further, she said that beauty can be an advantage in *making friends, meeting people, going for jobs*.

Similarly, in answer to my question about whether people who are beautiful were treated in the same way as people who are not beautiful, given the same circumstances, Charlotte said that she believed that more attractive people can be treated better, and in general are better off in life: *Ah… I just think that if you are good looking… Like, it's really shallow, that people are more likely to treat you better*. Charlotte also admitted that she quite often felt that people treated her differently based on her physical appearance, clothes and make-up choices. According to Charlotte, they were *not as nice* when she was wearing glasses, had no makeup, or dressed down. At the same time, both Molly and Charlotte highlighted a possible disadvantage of meeting dominant ideals of beauty. As Molly explained:

> *It can also be a downside, if you are [in] a really professional business job and people can't take you seriously, because all they can see is a pretty one, or you are seen as a sexual object or whatever… so it goes both ways, it can be biased, yeah…*

Charlotte also pointed out the duality associated with female beauty, illustrating it with the assumptions carried by people who do not associate beauty with brains: *But then also, I think,*

if you are good looking, people also have these ideas about you. You know, that you're maybe not that smart, or things like that. As you can't be smart because you're too good looking.

The participants' discussions affirmed the complex nature of beauty. Beauty is simultaneously viewed as a "blessing and a curse" (Marson & Hessmiller, 2016, p. 58), and could be articulated to both "female desirability" (Elias & Gill, 2018, p. 74) and "such negative emotions as stress, anxiety, and self-doubts" (Marson & Hessmiller, 2016, p. 65). The self-doubts associated with beauty were illustrated by Paula's story, where she described the experiences of her friend who worked as a professional model and met dominant ideals of beauty, yet she still experienced negative emotions associated with her appearance. Her story revealed that even when a woman fits the dominant ideas of beauty, it does not necessarily mean that she is satisfied with her appearance. Paula used the word *sad* when she described the emotions of her friend. Paula's story emphasised the point that beautiful people might still experience self-doubts and insecurities associated with their physical appearance:

> *I guess I [can] speak about one of my modelling friends. I thought she's all confident, 'cause she seems like quite a confident person, and has a very nice appearance. And, after her shoot she came home and she was very nervous, 'cause she didn't believe in herself. And it was a real shock to hear. Because, my expectation was that she was very prepared for something like this. Oh, she's a model, so must be wanting to show the world everything. But she was really shy. She really didn't want to talk about the photoshoot with us and the friends. She was nervous for a week, until she's got a phone call back, saying that they liked her shoot. And, she was happy again, and I realised two things from that: I expected something different from what she'd experienced, and it felt like that phone call had measured how beautiful she was. Like she was sad for a week, and it was really sad to watch, but as soon as she's got a phone call, it was like, all of a sudden, she was*

> *beautiful. And, it was really, really sad, cause I felt like she'd depended on a lot of judgements from other people. And this is coming from someone that I thought had a lot of self-strength.*

This section analysed whether the participants considered beauty as a factor that influences an individual's interactions with other people. Similar to the previous chapter, I identified how beauty has power; however, this power is associated with both positive and negative aspects. The participants' answers and reported experiences suggest that they believed, in most situations, beautiful people who fit dominant ideals of beauty were better off in life. The participants' judgements of the importance of beauty were aligned with the existing research that suggests that beautiful people tend to have more positive engagements with other people, based on their physical attractiveness (e.g., Gurung & Chrouser, 2007; Margariti et al., 2021). At the same time, the participants argued that there were disadvantages associated with female beauty, such as possible assumptions that beautiful women lack competence in the workplace – unless the workplace is encouraging the women to look beautiful, for example, in a café or in retail. As Jennifer pointed out, *when you know you're beautiful, there is a certain power to it that motivates a lot of things:*

> *I think that people ultimately search for beautiful things… I was reading, like, Oscar Wilde, and The Picture of Dorian Grey, and I think it was talking about the pursuit of beautiful things. I think that the definition of beauty changes for each person, but I think we do, kind of, pursue that.*

Jennifer recognised the circulation of power relations, where despite the changing nature of dominant ideals of beauty, people *pursue* beauty and physical attractiveness.

The participants articulated beauty to both advantages and disadvantages in relation to their interactions within various interpretive communities. The following section will provide some insights into the pleasures and pressures associated with beauty practices.

Pleasures: Practices

Another theme that emerged during the interviews was participants' interest and engagement in beauty practices. Participants' answers revealed complex engagements that involved agency, resistance, and incorporation, affirming that beauty practices could be associated with both pleasure and pressure. I start this section with the discussion of pleasures, and I continue with my analysis of discourses in relation to participants' embodied beauty practices.

In relation to the pleasures, the participants spoke about the ways they *invest* in their bodies, such as self-care, fitness, make-up, diets, clothes choices, and healthy daily routines. As discussed by Shilling (2013), "investing in the body provides people with a means of self-expression and a way of potentially feeling good and increasing the control they have over their bodies" (p. 6). It can be also argued that practices related to beauty enhancement are created by the "fashion, fitness, and diet industries" (Dolezal, 2010, p. 366). The choice to conduct beauty routines was an indicator of participants' engagement with dominant ideals of beauty. However, my analysis indicated the pleasures associated with their daily beauty routines. The beauty practices described by the participants included self-care focused on their health, bleaching hair, makeup, or dieting. As Shilling (2003) explained, self-care presents the actions we take in order to make us feel good about how our bodies appear to ourselves and others. For instance, April focused on drinking more water to improve her general skin condition and avoiding chemicals in her makeup and beauty products. Discussing her belief that water was important, she said:

I think, everyone knows it. Like, drink a lot of water. When I don't do it, I have breakouts and stuff. And I think that sweat is good. So, drink lots of water, eat healthy. Instead of those chemicals, and substances…

For Casey, physical activities were important, especially to keep her weight under control:

I got my period, I was able to gain weight a lot quicker, and then I kept noticing it and stuff, and I was thinking, I have to do something. And then, when I started gym and stuff, it was fine.

Like April, Paula highlighted the importance of organic products that did not contain chemicals. For her, it was important to be clean, avoid makeup, and use natural ingredients in her daily beauty rituals:

Yeah, most mornings, I have a shower, and after that, I shampoo and condition my hair, and… usually after that I have a face routine, but a lot of it is organic, so I make products at home, or using what's from a store. For a toner, which is, like, cleaning, I use vinegar, and then coconut oil, which is good for repairing skin and is a natural thing. And then, I usually just tie up my hair and no makeup.

However, the use of makeup could be a source of pleasure. For instance, Jessica, Meg, Hayley, and Lina identified makeup as a tool to enhance beauty. Jessica referred to makeup as a tool that helped her to feel more beautiful, made her *skin look better* and helped her to hide unwanted pimples and skin imperfections, thus implying that smooth and unblemished skin is a significant component of female beauty. As a source of pleasure for Jessica, makeup was associated with a constructive and positive practice. Jessica acknowledged that she was looking for inspiration online, following online makeup tutorials and some celebrities' beauty tips on how to *look nicer*. Meg similarly reflected on her experiences with media in relation to makeup

tutorials and beauty inspiration, specifically drawing on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat for online tutorials on *how-to-do makeup*, suggesting that she decoded beauty trends in the media from a dominant position. In particular, she followed New Zealand vlogger and influencer Shannon Harris, also known as Shaaanxo. Even though Meg described Shaaanxo as *very, very famous in New Zealand*, there were no other mentions of this vlogger in the interviews with other participants. Meg was also the only participant who made a reference to New Zealand media culture in relation to beauty. Makeup was a component of Lina's discussion of a time when she felt beautiful. Discussing a date, she explained, *it actually took me a long time to dress up, wash my hair, curl it, put on my makeup. I bought a dress… And, for once, actually, I felt – I am a girl. … I felt like a strong girl, really beautiful*.

Another beauty practice discussed by participants involved the use of face masks. Lina, like April and Paula, preferred to use natural ingredients, like face masks made by LUSH, a company that promotes itself as a producer of 100% vegetarian, ethically sourced, and handmade products (LUSH, 2021). At the same time, Lina made a reference to Kim Kardashian's skin as an ideal:

> *I have a routine at home. I have some facial masks. I buy them from LUSH, even though, it takes some time, to sit around and wait for it, doing this job. But knowing that "Hey, I've finished 10 minutes doing this! Okay, next step, face cleanser." After doing that, I just feel like a brand new person. Just going to sleep feeling, "Ahhh, yes!" And wake up with this nice, Kim K skin. It makes me feel good about myself.*

Charlotte also shared that she loved face and hair masks and pampering: *I have my set of face masks. I love masks and care… Even though my skin is really bad at the moment… Yeah. I have my skin care routines, my hair masks…*

Even though the young women implemented some beauty rituals to feel better and pamper themselves, which included face masks, going to the gym, and drinking water, they also engaged in a range of other routines. These routines included the use of makeup to hide skin imperfections, changing their natural hair colour, enhancing their appearance with hair styles, bleaching facial hair, wearing expensive clothes or new outfits, or shaving their legs. As Jessica explained, she used makeup mainly to hide skin imperfections:

> *Makeup for me works to make my skin look better. Not necessarily to make my eyes look bigger or, like, I don't really do anything crazy, but my skin… You know, sometimes, if you get, like, pimples, and makeup is just wooooh [hides them]!*

Paula arrived at the interview dressed casually. During the interview, she indicated that she would wear more elegant shoes and fancy clothes to feel beautiful, highlighting the contrast with her current clothing style – sporty and comfortable. Paula also explained that for her to feel beautiful, she would also prefer to use makeup, shave her legs, use nail polish, and style her hair:

> *Yeah, putting on makeup, doing my hair, usually do my nails, and shave my legs, because hairy legs aren't seen as… pretty. What else? Oh, I wouldn't wear these shoes [points at her sport shoes]. So, my clothes, I guess, because they're a physical thing, they'll be a lot nicer than what I am wearing today. And also, probably, more expensive clothes, rather than normal cheap stuff I wear every day.*

Meg pointed out the beauty practice of straightening her hair:

> *It's naturally curly, so I straighten it, maybe, every second day – it's kind of a very big thing for me to feel beautiful.*

Similar to Paula and Meg, Candy explained that the last time she felt beautiful was when she had her hair done and had a nice outfit on:

> *Hmm… It was, it would be, like, a month ago. I've just gone to have my hair done. And, I bought a new outfit, and I was going out for a dinner, and I was, like… When I was done up, and everything – that's when I felt beautiful.*

Casey also commented on her beauty routines focused on her facial hair: *Personally, I felt beautiful once I've got my eyebrows done [shaping them], and before, I used to bleach my facial hair.* Bella focused on her hair condition, and the need to use makeup to enhance her skin's appearance:

> *My hair has to look good – if it's like an 'off day' and my hair doesn't look good, then it ruins everything. I usually have to have clear skin, or covered well enough with makeup… for it to look clear. Yeah… and I can't have a bloated face… If my face is bloated, then it ruins everything. In my bag … I always have my makeup bag! And I have a hair treating oil, just in case… Like, my necessities.*

Finally, Jessica demonstrated her negotiated decoding position by saying that she recognised and followed the trends related to dominant beauty ideals, but she described her social media use as *constructive*, as she used social media content to educate herself:

> *Sometimes the celebrities that I watch, sometimes the celebrities share beauty tips, like, if you put your eyeliner this way, and your eyes are this shape, it will make it look nicer. I watch some YouTube make-up tutorials. I guess that's okay, that's constructive.*

The young women's discussions suggested that there are certain beauty practices they use to feel better, or beauty rituals they use to hide imperfections and accentuate beauty. In my study,

beauty was associated with the pleasures of pampering and self-care. The participants performed beauty routines to feel healthier and highlight and enhance their physical appearance. These routines included healthy eating, drinking water, going to the gym to exercise, makeup use, application of face and hair masks, and self-care.

Pressures

In this section, I focus on how participants dealt with daily challenges associated with attractiveness and the "demandingness of the beauty ideal" (Widdows, 2018, p. 98), or what Paula referred to as the pressure to *meet society's standards* of beauty. I examine how young women thought they were judged by others based on their physical appearance, and the practices associated with the pressures of dominant ideals of beauty.

I start with Bella's story that illustrates the "complex hierarchy of increasing disadvantages" (Nienaber & Moraka, 2016, p. 150) associated with the experiences of young women who do not fit dominant ideals of beauty. Bella could be regarded as a person who meets dominant ideals of beauty – she was tall and slender, had long and healthy hair, clear skin, and big eyes. She noted that one of her female friends, who did not meet these beauty ideals, experienced negative treatment from a male peer:

> *It happened to a friend of mine, but I was there. And a guy came to talk to me, and he was fully directing all his attention to me. But then he, like, complimented me and everything. And my friend was standing there... And he just kind of looked at her and looked away. And she felt like she wasn't like pretty or anything. And it was a really mean thing for him to do. Like, yeah. That was an idea of... beauty over everything else.*

Bella also described the time when she disagreed with another female friend who would ignore other students if they did not fit into dominant ideals. In a critical tone of voice, Bella explained:

> *Some of us have different scales… how much beauty matters in a person. Like, I have a friend who will not speak to a person who looks a certain way. It's about an amount of beauty. It's very dependent if she likes the way you look. We have different reasons why you will talk to somebody…*

As discussed in the section on meaning-making, Bella's story articulated female beauty to popularity among peers. However, peer acceptance was not the only factor identified by the participants. Meg pointed how the people in her close social environments negatively assessed her physical appearance by referring to her appearance as *tired* when she did not wear makeup – it was particularly hard for Meg as she explained that she was not good at applying makeup products: *I'm terrible at putting them [on], actually!* Meg also pointed out the pressure to wear heavy makeup at large events:

> *Weddings... because I sing at weddings and funerals, and that's when I use more makeup. So, eyeshadow, mascara, foundation, and lipstick. And sometimes when we are going out, or we're going clubbing or something… That's when I would do the full face one… like, eyeliner, fake eyelashes.*

Lina also mentioned to the pressure to wear makeup for *job interviews and events*, and Jennifer identified makeup as an expected *standard* in her job in women's fashion: *a part of my job is that I need to put on a full face of makeup, and wear really nice clothes*. Interestingly, despite Meg's previously discussed interest in makeup and beauty routines, Meg also referred to arguments with her friend who works as a makeup artist. According to Meg, her friend adopted a *heavy* makeup style that included such practices as putting on *a heavy makeup look*; *she always has to have a full eyeliner, and a full face on, even to go to uni, [taking up] to two hours*

when we go out, to get ready, to put her face on. For Meg, such significant use of *heavy* makeup was associated with dominant ideals of beauty on social media; here, Meg demonstrated how she navigated the structure of her friend's representation of beauty with her own agency and how she disagreed with what she interpreted as her friend's excessive use of makeup and her friend's attempts to convince other young women to use more makeup on daily basis:

> *... it's also about convincing her friends to do so as well. And I don't know if it's just because of her profession. 'Cause I know that during her study to become a beauty therapist she had to have a full face makeup every day. So, she definitely was not like that in college. She's changed. And we disagree on it.*

In regard to the pressures associated with makeup use, Amanda, who did not wear any makeup during the interviews, reflected on her relationships with her mother in relation to makeup: *my mum, she doesn't really wear makeup, so you just see the beauty, and it's, like, perfect*, thus showing an oppositional decoding position, in contrast to the example of Meg's friend who used heavy makeup as a part of her job. Amanda saw her mother as one of the most beautiful women she could think of, respecting and adoring her natural beauty, rather than following beauty trends on social media, thus demonstrating her resistance to makeup use. Similar to Amanda's relation with makeup, Charlotte stated the pressure she felt from society itself, which was biased towards her physical appearance. However, Charlotte chose *not* to engage in the beauty practices associated with the "cultural pathologization of femininity" where dominant ideals of beauty are strongly connected with "aesthetic surveillance" (Elias & Gill, 2018, p. 68):

> *I wear glasses. And, like, if I just have my hair up, and kinda dressed like, very comfortable, rather than dressed up; or I don't have makeup on, something like that, then, I feel like I am treated differently. If I am dressed up, people are a lot nicer, they go out of their way more for you. And if you are, kinda, dressed down,*

or, like, you know… even if you're wearing glasses, they treat you differently. It's really weird. They are just, not as nice…

Casey pointed out her struggles associated with the pressure to change her embodied practices when she entered university, based on the circulation of ideal beauty in social media: *Oh my God, I am going to uni. I need to start looking hot, you know. This is the year that matters. It was also social media. Not friends. Social media.*

Similar to the previous discussion of cultural influence on young women's perceptions of beauty in Asia, Candy spoke about her experiences as a young woman originally from India. She identified that, in India, fair skin is one of the attributes of ideal beauty. Therefore, women want to keep their skin as fair as possible. Yan and Bissell (2014) argued that "Asian women are obsessed with skin whitening" (pp. 197-198) as women use "whitening cosmetics and even surgery to achieve lighter, flawless skin" (p. 198). One practice is to avoid being in the sun: *…growing up in India… my family, my mum, she'd always tell me that… Limit your time in the sun, 'cause you don't want to become dark, and stuff like that.* Another beauty practice identified by Candy was a skin bleaching procedure at a beauty salon in India:

I didn't go ahead with a bleaching treatment, but I did do something with, kind of, to lighten my skin tone. And, I remember, the lady told me that I should come back every month, and we can really get your skin a lot lighter.

Another important aspect emerged in the discussions of beauty by the participants from non-Western countries. Jay and Amanda (Jay originated from South Korea and Amanda originated from India) both explicitly named the popularity of plastic surgery in Asian countries. Jay demonstrated her awareness that plastic surgery has become increasingly seen as normal and unremarkable in South Korea:

> *Eye surgeries, and I heard some other surgeries, in Korea, they are not even counted as surgeries, it's like a "procedure". Like a Botox, like a lip filler. Like a day thing you go away and you get it done. It's like a tattoo… and it's funny, 'cause they [parents] would hate if I got a tattoo – they would get so mad at me. But they were okay with, like, a plastic surgery thing…*

Jay's answer pointed out the "changes and preferences" associated with the "adornment of the human body" (Baldwin et al., 2004, p. 290), explaining that even seven years ago plastic surgeries were uncommon and considered to be unacceptable in South Korea. Jay explained that when she was in middle school in South Korea:

> *…plastic surgeries were the worst thing to do. There was this one singer, or an actress, and she had a surgery. And she was just dragged through the mud. She was pretty much not allowed to be on air for three years. And when I came back to Korea [a few years later] – oh, she's back again.*

The popularity and pressure of having plastic surgeries in South Korea is influenced by the contemporary "social pressures" (Voinea, 2017, p. 69) as beauty discourse is strongly connected to the "personal narrative of success" (Vionea, 2017, p. 78). As Ee (2015) argues, this narration is widely advertised in Korea "on public transport systems, such as subway stations, trains, bus stops and the back of bus seats" (p. 2) and is mostly "targeted at Korean women" (p. 2):

> These advertisements used a speculative type of design, using a clever twist on "Before and After" photos. The graphics, mainly comprising of simple lines and shapes with solid colours, promote the clinic without mentioning plastic surgery (other than the logo). The posters move away from biting messages and "perfect" faces, to appeal to the masses without belittling one's self esteem. It is a more subtle

> approach to instil insecurities without human imagery, therefore, creating an artificial demand for plastic surgery as a benefit. (Ee, 2015, p. 5)

Amanda also commented on her Asian friends' concern about the size and shape of their eyes and so-called *Asian noses*. Additionally, Amanda pointed out the influence of media on the growing role and popularity of plastic surgery:

> *I do have some Asian friends, and they want, like, big eyes. That's where I am like, "it's okay, the eyes you have. It's fine." And they want and try to have big eyes… and noses! Noses as well. Like, you know, Asian noses are quite wide and flat. Whereas… They told me that I have a high nose. Like, thin and high. They try to have surgeries done – not them – but... back in Asia, lots of girls get bigger eyes, and try to lose cheek fat. They [friends] told me about that stuff. 'Cause they are Asian as well, so they have been influenced by media back home, even if they don't live there.*

Jay also commented on the contextual interpretation of beauty ideals by comparing beauty discourses in New Zealand and South Korea. The complexity of beauty discourses could be illustrated by the following example: particular facial features that would be considered attractive in New Zealand, in South Korea would be subject to plastic surgeries, commonly offered to young people by their parents:

> *In Korea, if you are ugly, you have very high cheekbones, very strong jaw line, small eyes. That was ugly in Korea. But in New Zealand, people like that. They like strong bone features. And I remember I came back to Korea in 2014, and there was a guy I knew, older than me… and he had a very strong jaw line. And his mum was, like, "You know, before you go to university, we should shave some of that off", and I was, like, "oh, wow!" It was like a cultural shock, I guess.*

As previously discussed, Jay's culture shock could be explained by the strong cultural articulation of beauty to success, thus creating a pressure to fit cultural dominant ideals of beauty. As Park, Meyers and Langstein (2019) argued, "aesthetic surgery is prevalent in South Korea as external appearance is considered as an important factor for relationships and achievements" (p. 612). Although Park et al. (2019) explained that external appearance is more important "for women compared to men" (p. 612), Jay's example of a male friend shows that it is not only women who are subjected to cultural ideals of beauty and "aesthetic surgery" (Park et al., 2019, p. 612) commonly practised in South Korea.

The participants' interrogation of beauty practices suggested that the desire to fit into dominant ideals of beauty could be identified as a *hard* process (Jessica), especially as "the beauty ideal is increasingly demanding, and, as normalization of beauty practices and procedures continues apace" (Widdows, 2018, p. 253). During the discussions of the pressures associated with beauty practices, one of the challenges was illustrated by the moments when participants felt insecure about their physical appearance. For example, April shared the last time when she felt beautiful when she was *skinny*; however, she continued by stating that *I am not like that anymore*.

The production of meaning about beauty, as identified in this chapter, addressed the dynamic discourses about both pleasures and pressures, where the same beauty practices were recognised as both pressures and pleasures, further confirming the non-homogeneous (Cruz & Lewis, 1994) power relations existent in relation to beauty discourses. This ever-changing decoding of dominant ideals of beauty proved to be influenced by the context where the participants found themselves. Meaning-making about beauty was associated with the personal interpretations of social interaction and expectations on the participants. As illustrated by Amanda's answer in relation to makeup use, she explicitly acknowledged the role of makeup in media representations of beauty: *What I see in the media are these bikini bodies, nice hair,*

nice makeup on. That's what they are trying us to make us think of the ideal beauty. For April, makeup was associated with the ideal and idealised women portrayed in the media and was what various media channels *are trying to make us to think of the ideal beauty.* She also recognised the intention of the image producers, which she saw as trying to *sell the products*. April called media *persuasive* and recalled the media's attempts to *always highlight particular stuff*. However, despite her critique, April also pointed out that makeup could improve women's facial features, for example, *bring up and shade* cheekbones, therefore suggesting that makeup could be seen as both a pleasure and a pressure.

Additionally, based on the answers of the participants, it was evident that Western ideals of beauty represent global dominant ideals about beauty. However, the participants who moved to New Zealand from non-Western countries identified cultural specificities of their countries of origin.

Resisting dominant ideals of beauty

Despite participants' incorporation of dominant ideals of beauty in their meaning-making about beauty, one theme appeared to be particularly important – the participants' ability to resist these ideals. The implication of their resistance suggested that even though young women engaged in environments where dominant ideals of beauty were powerful, they were capable of acting against beauty ideals, therefore being engaged in "circulating power relations" (Elias & Gill, 2018, p. 6). Some participants, through their conscious actions, tried to resist the dominant ideals of beauty in order to feel empowered, be more confident, be strong, and develop their inner beauty. Researchers recognise the significant presence of dominant ideals of beauty in the media (Brumberg, 1997; Hendriks, 2002; Herbozo et al., 2004). The persuasiveness of dominant ideals of beauty circulated in the media was also recognised by Alice. Alice explained

that, in her opinion, Instagram is an influential media platform as it circulates images of *'fake life', people, what they portray, these women who look perfect, you know, all the time: always super tanned, in a bikini, super skinny*. As Alice recognised the negative influence these images had on her, she chose not to engage with such content by unfollowing women who represented dominant ideals of beauty. Paula also criticised the representation of female beauty in the media and called it a *stereotype, which is what I always see as tall, thin, well-groomed, and just, attractive, maybe they've done something with their physical appearance*. Paula explained that she believed that celebrities and models *had plastic surgeries, enhancements*. Paula recognised that the pressure to fit into the dominant ideal of beauty is affecting not only women who need to have the skinny-curvy bodies with *butts and boobs*, but also men with the expectation and pressure to have developed and large *muscles*. Interestingly, Amanda criticised her male friends who were affected by the circulation of images portraying dominant ideals of female beauty in media. Amanda critically pointed out that her male friends were applying dominant codes in their expectations of female bodies with a particular focus on previously discussed skinny-curvy female bodies. Amanda further explained that young men in her social environments had seemingly unrealistic expectations of how a girlfriend should look: *that's how guys see it. I asked one, what does he mean, and he said, "Like, a Victoria's Secret model", and I was like, what???... Okay! Keep dreaming.* Amanda also illustrated her resistance by drawing on an example from her school years, when she prioritised her "individual achievements" (Harris & Dobson, 2015, p. 150) over makeup, unlike other girls who *tried very hard to look… to become a certain person* by fitting dominant ideals of beauty:

> *In high school, for me, even though a lot of girls were wearing makeup, I wasn't too focused on that. I remember at high school I didn't put a lot of efforts in how I look, because it was just a uniform, I just tie my hair up, and I don't have time for any of these.*

The circulation of power relations was illustrated by Candy's multiple readings of beauty, as she demonstrated a transition from a dominant decoding position to resistance that involved rejection of particular beauty practices. Candy explained that she used to participate in beauty pageants when she was younger, but in her late teen years and early twenties, she recognised the problems associated with the demands of ideal beauty as she felt oppressed by her participation in competitions dedicated to the celebration of ideal beauty. Therefore, she decided to demonstrate her resistance by stopping her participation in beauty pageants. Candy also decided to stop wearing makeup in order to develop a sense of comfort with her appearance without additional enhancements. However, Candy was still engaged in the surveillance of her physical appearance, thus affirming the importance of skinny ideals of beauty by describing her concerns with getting *fat*.

The following examples of participants' answers illustrate their resistance to dominant ideals of beauty. The resistance involved participants' discussions of "conflicting messages about beauty" (McCabe et al., 2017, p. 659) followed by the examples of their oppositional decoding. The participants demonstrated a clear understanding of a "connotative inflection" of particular beauty trends but decoded these trends "in a globally contrary way" (Hall, 1973, p. 18). For instance, Candy demonstrated an oppositional decoding position in relation to the beauty trend *thigh gap* by acknowledging its popularity among her female friends. However, Candy resisted following it:

> *I remember a couple of years ago, a "thigh gap" was super big, and didn't even know what it was, and literally didn't care. Whereas girls would work so hard to get that gap. I remember some girls would stand in a certain way to catch it and post it.*

Casey pointed out her interest in beauty discourses on social media. However, her engagement with dominant ideals of beauty had negatively influenced her own perceptions of beauty. Therefore, Casey consciously chose to stop her engagement with social media in relation to ideal beauty. She pointed out her initial dominant decoding position by explaining that *the girls on social media were the ones I looked up to. Like, "I want her body."* However, Casey demonstrated her resistance when she explained that in recent years, she did not want to follow the dominant ideals of beauty, but rather wanted to work out and look good for herself, rather that *anyone* else. Candy also expressed an oppositional decoding position in relation to her disagreement with the excessive use of plastic surgeries, explaining that it was a trend that she particularly disagreed with:

> *For me, some women who go overboard with plastic surgeries… Especially with the cheeks, so they can't move their face. And lips. And also, women who would get boob jobs and stuff… So they would have a super skinny waist, but massive boobs.*

Lina's oppositional decoding was evident in her use of the word *ridiculous* to describe some eyebrow trends and her expressed desire to stop this trend:

> *Not long ago, I saw a trend on how to do eyebrows. I just thought it was very ridiculous. I was like, not gonna go to school with the, they say "mermaid", "fishtail"? I was like, it doesn't look like a fishtail. And it had, like, a wiggly stuff on them. No, people, just stop.*

Lina also critically identified the conflicting discourses of beauty representation on social media, particularly in content associated with the gym industry. She identified the articulation of skinny-curvy bodies to female beauty; however, she assumed that skinny-curvy bodies were created through the use of plastic surgeries, rather than the depicted workouts:

> *It's usually when I see these posts, about squats, which will give you a nice ass… Only to find out later that it's, like, pumped up. Up until now, I see, it's really hard to find a post which really works and gives you a good body. I really don't like seeing stuff like that. And the whole training industry. You know, training to slim your stomach.*

Alice demonstrated an oppositional decoding position by explaining that some social media trends, like *boob jobs*, could influence women's insecurities and called it *sad:*

> *I noticed, again, on YouTube… If I haven't watched it, I would not even realise… getting boob jobs… 'Cause boobs are in… I didn't realise, but it's very, very common…. And it's from insecurities… They feel they have to be bigger…. Just for me, thinking about going under a knife, and physically alter something about yourself…. It is sad. I think.*

Jessica demonstrated her resistance by criticising the messages used in advertisements, thus allowing me to identify her decoding position as an oppositional one: *"Don't you wanna show off your body and not be ashamed of it?" What? That doesn't apply to me… Maybe to some other people, but not to me.*

The experience shared by Jay demonstrated that she developed an oppositional decoding position and critical thinking about South Korean dominant ideas of beauty after she moved to New Zealand, therefore suggesting that moving to another culture could lead to questioning normalised beauty ideals within particular social environments. In contrast, her parents continued decoding within a South Korean dominant position and offered Jay plastic surgeries, which Jay refused. The discussion developed from my question about whether Jay had ever resisted following any mass media ideas of beauty:

> *I think… when I am accustomed to what Western media wants, then I can't see what's wrong with it. But when I go to Korea, like, I didn't realise that was a problem. You know, like, whenever I go to Korea, double eyelids are a big thing. I remember when I was younger, I wanted it but now I don't. And my mum and my dad, they are, like, "Do you want it done?" And I am, like, "No, I don't!" I don't want to get it done.*

Despite the fact that Jay had previously considered the option of going through with plastic surgery to make her eyes look bigger, her exposure to a different social environment provided her with tools to develop an oppositional decoding position and she refused to follow South Korean standards of beauty. She described the eye lid surgery as *the crease gets deeper, so it makes your eyes look bigger.* Jay explained that she transitioned from a dominant to oppositional decoding position as she decided that she wouldn't undergo this surgery:

> *I remember, I considered it… when I was, like, 15, when I was young. I wanted it. But nowadays, I don't want it. I love the way my eyes are, and I'd hate to change that about me. And also, I am scared of any form of pain, so I don't think I will go through with a plastic surgery.*

Amanda illustrated her resistance by speaking confidently about her disagreement with certain body expectations and especially the trend to be skinny. Amanda explained that her main goal was to be *healthy*, not skinny, and she would rather speak about the importance of healthy dietary plans and exercise. During our interview, we covered the topic of beauty trends she does not agree with, which included waist strainers, previously discussed in Chapter Five in relation to skinny-curvy female bodies: *I totally disagree with this idea. I feel, girls don't need to put themselves through it… it's like, a wide square, and you put it around your waist, and you button it. So, it makes your waist thin*. Amanda pointed out that she shared her oppositional

decoding position and actively disagreed with possible harmful beauty trends in conversations with her mother and friends. Amanda, as a daughter, demonstrated an organised effort to demythologise the myths about beauty to her mother. Discussing waist trainers, Amanda explained:

> *Even my mum wanted to get it, and I was, like, no!!! No! You don't need it. All you have to do is to exercise – you don't need to put your body through so much pain. Because, when you put them on – I've seen on Instagram, girls take them off, to show what's actually under it… like, when you take it off, you see all these marks, all these lines, from the stretches of the waist strainer. And the buttons, you can see where the buttons were. The skin is pressed in.*

As well as the visual evidence that represented pain, lines and marks, Amanda was critically aware of possible health risks:

> *And, it's not even healthy for you. Because, when you put it on, you compress all your ribs inside, and all your food. You eat less, as well, and you don't get all the nutrients you need in your diet. You restrict your stomach… Instead of letting the body to be the way it is, and function properly, you are compressing everything together. So everything is not working properly in your body, so it will create more side effects.*

Thus, for Amanda the solution was not to harmfully constrain the body to fit current ideals, but to enact a healthy lifestyle focused on healthy choices and body investments. As she explained:

> *Instead of doing all that, you could just go and put more efforts into exercising. If someone is very conscious about their waist, they should just stick with healthy eating. Eat as much as you want, just more of the healthy eating. Do more exercises. It will put your body through less pain.*

Amanda not only expressed her strong opinion on what she saw as unhealthy beauty trends but was confident to both resist and speak up against these trends. Amanda's university degree was connected to the study of health and as revealed during our interviews, that is why she considered herself a reliable person to comment on a healthy lifestyle and the importance of exercise.

Participants' answers demonstrated multiple readings of the "connotated code" (Hall, 1973, p. 16) of dominant ideals of beauty, thus affirming the concept of resistance described by Baldwin et al. (2004) as "embodied and agentic characteristics of persons and the creative and contested dimensions of culture" (p. 259). The participants' perceptions of beauty showed the complexity of their discussions of beauty: despite the importance of dominant ideals of beauty, young women were able to resist beauty ideals by making conscious decisions focused on their emotional wellbeing and inner beauty, thus indeed creating a discourse of the body as a "project" that is "open to reconstruction" (Shilling, 2003, p. 4), subject to both resistance and incorporation. For example, Hayley's perspective on beauty was reflective and thoughtful. It was clear that she did not focus on physical attractiveness, but rather wanted to develop her inner beauty and her personality. She also demonstrated appreciation of her body and the physical appearance she was born with. An important idea expressed by Hayley was her belief that it is important to live in peace with yourself, rather than trying to achieve the ideal beauty as portrayed in the media:

> *I think beauty is a feeling you should develop within yourself. You don't have to show the world that you are beautiful. I feel like you should become beautiful for yourself. You should look in the mirror and appreciate what you have: your eyes, your nose, your ears, your hair, the body that you are given. Everything is a part of beauty. And just because society has a model picture of what's called beautiful – if we try to achieve that, we will go into depression, because not everybody is made*

to achieve it. Be satisfied, appreciate the fact that if you have any defects you don't like, appreciate it, be in peace with yourself… I develop my mind, I read a lot of spiritual stuff, and deal with it…

Conclusion

In this chapter, I focused on participants' meaning-making about the effects of ideal beauty in their social environments, their embodied practices associated with ideal beauty, and the participants' resistance to dominant ideals of beauty. My findings suggested the participants recognise that beauty is an important part of women's lives, thus articulating beauty to success, confidence, and popularity.

The participants articulated beauty to practices that brought both pleasures and pressures, expressed in their embrace of and resistance to different beauty practices. As argued by Shilling (2003), "recognizing that the body has become a project for many modern people entails accepting that its appearance, size, shape and even its contents, are potentially open to reconstruction in line with the designs of its owner" (p. 4).

Despite the influence of media and interpretive communities on participants' perceptions of beauty, young women demonstrated their engagement in "circulating power relations" (Elias & Gill, 2018, p. 64), expressed in multiple readings and their resistance to some dominant ideals of beauty. The participants' responses to questions of what constitutes ideal beauty indicated their "negotiation" between the "preferred reading" (Baldwin et al., 2004, p. 258) of ideals of beauty and their decoding positions. While all participants could identify elements of ideal beauty, their decoding positions were not consistent with each other, nor were they necessarily consistent within each individual. As demonstrated in the participants' answers, young women are actively engaged in resistance by applying both

negotiated and oppositional decoding positions. My findings reflect Widdows' (2018) argument that beauty is "dual, it is demanding, and rewarding and, as it transforms into a dominant ethical ideal, it profoundly shapes the ways in which we understand and create our very selves" (p. 256).

Similar to the findings in Chapter Five, the sociocultural environments of the participants (e.g., family, friends, school, university and workplaces) had a significant influence on their meaning-making about, and practices in relation to, beauty. As argued by researchers, social environments play a significant role in perceptions of physical appearance and attractiveness (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2020; Francis et al., 2012; Mitchell & Blaeser, 2000), thus creating a tension between the body as a living organism (representing nature) and as a cultural product (Turner, 2008). For instance, the participants with Asian heritage or backgrounds were aware of the importance of non-Western ideals of beauty, such as fair skin, bleaching practices, and particular surgical procedures. However, the participants' answers demonstrated an ability to identify culturally specific ideals and growing ability to critique those ideals as a result of exposure to different ideals as they moved countries, thus demonstrating the complex ways to decode messages about beauty.

The following chapter addresses the discussions of young women's engagements with representation of beauty in media and media literacy. As well as the young women's social environments, media is clearly influential in their understandings of, and practices in relation to, ideal beauty. Therefore, it is important to understand the knowledge that can enhance resistance to media messages and young women's critical awareness in relation to image manipulation.

Chapter Seven: Young Women's Knowledge and Experiences of Media Literacy

The final chapter of my findings analyses the complexity of participants' understandings of representations of beauty in media. It includes their critical awareness of image manipulation, as well as their knowledge – or the lack of it – of media literacy. Based on the participants' answers, I accentuate the importance of media literacy, focusing on individuals' ability to "create their own meanings" (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 18) about the content they observe in the media, rather than decoding messages as intended by media producers.

This chapter is primarily based on data from the second set of interviews, during which I showed the participants images – signifiers – of models and celebrities that were used either in advertisements or on magazine covers; a more detailed discussion of the process will be described further in the chapter. During the second interview, the participants were asked to discuss the signifiers (visual texts), thus transforming them into signs – visual texts that carry meanings (Jhally, 2005).

Further, I analyse the circulation of power associated with their emerging awareness of image manipulation and explore the power of this knowledge to shift the young women's perceptions of dominant ideals of beauty, as well as their perceptions of their own physical appearance – therefore, reinforcing earlier findings in relation the complex and sometimes inconsistent ways in which participants decode and engage with ideal beauty.

I also identify what participants focused on when trying to recognise image manipulation after analysing the images before and after they had been manipulated. I analyse the answers of the participants who talked about feeling *better* about their own physical appearance as a result of

their increased media literacy. Finally, I examine participants' opinions of celebrities who have publicly addressed having their images manipulated. I also analyse the participants' knowledge of consumer brands and marketing campaigns where advertising images challenged dominant ideals of beauty, their reactions to these campaigns, and the effects on their understandings of ideal beauty or their own sense of self. This chapter continues the theoretical discussion about non-homogeneous flows of power, specifically focusing on the analysis of image manipulation in visual texts created by hegemonic media producers.

Image manipulation in media

Representations of beauty in the media include the use of visual texts that are manipulated to create images of ideal female beauty (Lupton, 2017; Yan & Bissell, 2014). At the beginning of this research, I incorrectly assumed that during the discussion of the presence of image manipulation (e.g., Photoshopped images) in media, the participants would demonstrate a deep knowledge of this topic. My assumption was based on the age of the participants, 19 to 24, and I further assumed that they would be more tech-savvy compared to the older generations who did not engage with social media as much as the young people born after the end of 1990s, thus being the younger generation of millennials or Gen Z representatives, generally known as "digital natives" and "history's first 'always connected' generation" (KPMG, 2017, p. 6). Indeed, as these young women were growing up in the era of modern technologies and social media, I assumed that their age would make them knowledgeable and confident critical consumers. However, the results reinforced boyd's (2014) view that it can be misleading to assume that young users are "savvy interpreters of the meanings" (p. 177) behind media's visual texts. I realised that the way some of the young women reacted to the revelation of visual texts before and after image manipulation confirmed that there is a need to promote awareness that visual texts representing dominant ideals of beauty might not reflect reality. To illustrate

the effects of image manipulation, I refer to two visual texts: an original image of a model or celebrity, and the same image after image manipulation, where both-images are positioned next to each other, thus making the image manipulation evident [see Figure 4]. I again refer to the argument of van Zoonen (1994), according to which "media production is not simply a matter of reflection but entails a complex process of negotiation, processing and reconstruction" (p. 40). Media production is associated with complex power relations where, as Hall described it, hegemonic media producers "control the means of production; they try to get into the message itself, to give you a clue: 'Read it in this way'" (Cruz & Lewis, 1994, p. 262). However, Hall continued by arguing that "it's an attempt to hegemonize the audience, which is never entirely effective" (Cruz & Lewis, 1994, p. 262). Indeed, as explained by van Zoonen (1994), "media audiences do not simply take in or reject media messages but use and interpret them according to the logic of their own social, cultural and individual circumstances" (p. 41).

Fig. 4. Example of image manipulation. Source: Marie Claire

For example, decoding against the preferred reading could be illustrated by Meg's answer where she pointed out the artificial perfection of social media's representations of the lives of celebrities and models. Meg told me that she had a class on media literacy, and drew on one of the studies on Instagram's influence on people:

> *We actually looked at one study, and Instagram is the worst thing for people's self-confidence. Because you look at these pictures of almost perfect lives… So, I am very aware of that, when I look at Instagram.*

Meg's answer aligned with Hall's (1994) argument that despite the audiences being not "in the same position of power with those who signify the world to them" (p. 261), with help of media literacy, they are able to decode the messages from either negotiated or oppositional position, therefore rejecting the "exercise of power" (Cruz & Lewis, 1994, p. 262) of hegemonic media producers.

Participants' knowledge of image manipulation

Image manipulation is an important beauty industry practice as that normalises "an unrealistic body ideal, which is problematic as they [models and celebrities] serve as role models for girls and young women" (Kleemans et al., 2016, pp. 1-2).

During the second interview, after presenting the comparison images to the participants, I asked them if they were aware that some images in the media might be subject to manipulation. Only five out of 16 participants – less than one third – gave a confident yes as an answer (Jessica, Amanda, Casey, Charlotte, and Paula). For instance, Jessica noted that the knowledge about image manipulation was *not something new* to her. These participants decoded visual texts in Interview 2 in oppositional ways, appearing confident and aware of the presence of image manipulation in the media. The majority of the participants (11 out of 16) decoded the messages

in Interview 2 in other ways: a negotiated position was demonstrated by six (Jennifer, Rachel, Lina, Candy, Alice, and Jay) as they were more or less aware that images were subject to manipulation, but they were either not entirely sure or admitted that they tended to forget about the presence of such adjustments. For instance, Jennifer explained that she would expect for the body of a celebrity or model to be subject to image manipulation. However, after looking at the photos we discussed, she admitted that *it actually blows my mind a little bit* observing the various image manipulations used in media. Five participants (Molly, April, Meg, Bella, and Hayley) decoded visual texts from a dominant position, demonstrating no knowledge about the existence of photos before image manipulation. I suggest that the 11 participants who demonstrated either negotiated or dominant reading positions could be categorised as *assumed digital natives*, despite being active social media users. This suggestion is aligned with the findings of other researchers who argue that despite the expectation of younger generations to be tech savvy, young people might lack the critical awareness required to critically analyse and interrogate messages in the media (Jenkins, 2009; boyd, 2014; Kellner & Share, 2005). Indeed, based on the discussion of the 11 participants who demonstrated dominant and negotiated readings of visual texts representing dominant ideals of beauty, the introduction to media literacy assisted the participants in raising their critical awareness about image manipulation in media. My argument is connected with the process of interrogation of visual texts (Jhally, 2005). This is an integral element of cultural studies and emphasises the importance of critical thinking, in this case, in relation to the representations of dominant ideals of beauty created with the use of image manipulation. Hall discussed the interrogation of visual texts as (Jhally, 2005):

> [bringing] to mind asking hard questions of a suspect. But how do we interrogate an image? By examining it, asking the hard questions about it rather than just

> accepting it at face value. Just as a good interrogator looks behind the suspect's story or alibi, so must we probe inside and behind the image. (p. 3)

Before starting a more detailed analysis of participants' answers, it needs to be acknowledged that the decoding positions of the participants were not consistent but flexible and changed during the course of the interviews. For instance, some participants who were surprised by the amount of image manipulation present in the photos analysed in the first part of Interview 2 were able to critically interrogate dominant ideals of beauty and acknowledged their unrealistic nature in the second part of the interview. My observations aligned with Kellner and Share (2007), who pointed out that "empowering the audience through critical thinking inquiry is essential for students to challenge the power of media to create preferred readings" (p. 13).

Young women recognising image manipulation: Demonstrating an oppositional decoding position

As described earlier, the majority of participants did not know about image manipulation. However, some young women were critically aware of the presence of image manipulation in visual texts representing women in media. Casey was critical of the extent of the alterations to some images, explaining *I've seen these ones. I've seen 'before' and 'after' of these celebrities*, and she concluded that *it's just too fake*. Jessica, like Casey, was aware of image manipulation. She explained that she was about 15 years old when she first saw the images with the before and after manipulation next to each other. Before that, she decoded media messages from a dominant decoding position, and experienced *a mix of jealousy, I guess… and adoration*. By observing photos before and after image manipulation, she stopped experiencing these emotions and felt empowered by her new knowledge: *It's just a person. They look like a normal person I see walking down the street. Now I see it's more like their job, the role their editors*

need. For instance, Amanda demonstrated her oppositional decoding position in relation to dominant ideals of beauty, as discussed in the previous chapters. Upon reflecting on her decoding position, Amanda strongly disagreed with more significant image manipulation, such as making the models appear skinnier than in real life, by noting *I don't think that it should be done*. However, during the second interview, although Amanda was aware that the images had been manipulated, she did not criticise alterations of the picture. As long the adjustments were directed towards insignificant improvements and aimed to advertise a product, she considered the use of Photoshop acceptable:

> *I feel like Photoshop is fine if you don't change the person too much. If you only change it a little bit, but not too much. Where you are making a waist smaller. Like, skin, for example. Like here, this one is more glowy – I think that's fine. If you change the lighting of the photo.*

Jessica also noted that her knowledge of manipulation means that she does not mind seeing photoshopped photos:

> *I used to think it's kind of deceiving… but now, I don't really mind, because I know it's photoshopped. I know that there are some people who petitioned to say that all these pictures were altered. I don't really have an opinion about it. If they do, great; if they don't, I am not blaming them for it. Because it's just… it's just what they do.*

During my analysis, I identified the factors that appeared to help the participants to critically evaluate visual texts representing dominant ideals of beauty. As previously mentioned, Charlotte worked as a professional model and mentioned her photography and photo editing skills. Thus, she carried professional knowledge in relation to image manipulation, as well as the skills to identify the possible areas where image manipulation was applied. At the same time, she was familiar with the fashion industry in New Zealand, thus developing both critical

thinking and awareness that visual texts in the media can be altered to meet dominant ideals of beauty. Demonstrating the importance and value of critical media literacy, Charlotte advised that she used to be affected by the representation of beauty in the media (dominant decoding position) until she learned about image manipulation:

> *I used to be, when I was younger. Now, I am quite critical, because I know, I am pretty confident that I know when a photo's been photoshopped… it's been edited, I know this stuff… because I have a background in it.*

Charlotte demonstrated her professional knowledge in relation to the beauty industry and associated visual content production.

Paula, who was also familiar with the presence of image manipulation in the media, explained to me that she learned about manipulation as she was interested in the beauty industry as well, therefore learning about how content is produced. Paula was an active social media user and she followed social media accounts of beauty artists and models to learn about beauty trends and dominant ideals of beauty. Paula demonstrated her understanding of consumerism associated with the beauty industry, and she was able to recognise that image manipulation is practiced in visual texts that represent women in media:

> *First thing that comes to mind is money, that they've altered it to sell. So, whatever their product is advertising, or whatever their product is. And, of course, the celebrities are paid. So, I think although all these celebrities were photoshopped, there's no issue for them. In the end, they've been paid with money…*

Image manipulation: Young women applying a negotiated decoding position

In relation to hegemonic media producers, the negotiated decoding position taken by six young women in this research confirms that the audiences are able to "slip through their grasp" (Cruz & Lewis, 1994, p. 262), producing decodings that are not aligned with preferred readings.

Analysing the presence of image manipulation in visual texts, Rachel pointed out that celebrities and models themselves might be pressured to fit into the dominant ideology of beauty, therefore showing awareness of the power of dominant ideals of beauty: *It's broadcasted all around the world, so they kind of have to… they feel like they have to be perfect.* Just like Rachel, Lina also drew on the fact that she has previously seen the 'before' and 'after' pictures. However, it was still difficult for Lina to be critically aware all the time, and she confirmed that she, too, was prone to *forget about it*. But when she was reminded about image manipulation, Lina was capable of identifying dominant ideals of beauty presented in visual texts, and her opinion that there is no such thing as ideal beauty in real life was reinforced. For her, even the celebrities and models in the media who fit into the dominant ideology of beauty were still normal people with imperfections in their physical appearance:

> *Most of the times, I tend to forget about it. But when I come across the topic, I am reminded again. I just look at it, and I think, oh, that's pretty. I too, sometimes, get carried away with that, and always talk about how these people have really nice skin, like… what are they doing? But I tend to forget about it, that they do have dark circles too, they are all humans.*

Lina explained that the media literacy lectures from volunteers or counsellors at school helped her to build up critical thinking skills and her knowledge of the manipulation of images and taught her an important lesson*: don't get carried away with the media*. Lina suggested that

significant body and face alterations might be caused by the insecurities people experience when they feel like they must follow the dominant ideas of beauty:

> *Don't let it get to you – these people, it's all done up, they go under a knife, they are not happy with themselves, clearly. They just try to keep up with the trend of society. And expectations. And a need to look good everywhere, for everyone.*

Regardless of Lina's understanding that beauty might be a problematic issue even for the trend setters, she admitted that she still feels affected by beauty expectations: *it does get to me*. Candy, however, explained that when she was a teenager, she decoded media's messages about celebrities and models from a dominant position and believed *that's how they looked like*. As she got older, Candy developed more critical thinking skills and admitted that, in relation to 'after' photos, she became *sceptical to believe that's the real photo* [the 'after' photo]. However, the intertextuality and overwhelming circulation of images that represent dominant ideals of beauty in media inhibit Candy's awareness of image manipulation, leading to Candy's decoding from the dominant decoding position: *[I] still fall for that*.

Similar to Candy, Jennifer pointed out that she *knew it happens*, but after seeing the 'before' and 'after' photos together, explained that *I didn't expect that much Photoshop*. Alice demonstrated a critical awareness of the beauty expectations created by hegemonic media producers: *[it's] just unrealistic, it makes you think… it sets different expectations of what natural beauty looks like. But it's just fake*. Alice also discussed the difficulties associated with being able to recognise image manipulation, explaining that it was easier to see the difference when the "before" and "after" photos are placed next to each other, and how *dramatic* the use of image manipulation is. Jay admitted that she does not *really think about it* until she looks at fashion magazines – and when she does that, she questions how such standards of beauty were achieved *'cause it does not look natural…*

Candy demonstrated a negotiated decoding position and admitted that despite her knowledge that images can be subject to manipulation, both she and her friends questioned themselves as to why they couldn't match the dominant ideals of beauty represented in media: *I know a lot of girls, including myself, we see these models have perfect looks, no blemishes at all… You [feel] kind of like – why don't I have that?*

As discussed by Molly, the ideal beauty represented in visual texts could be caused by the desire of companies to advertise and sell their products and affect people's desire to fit into dominant ideals of beauty and look *perfect*:

> *...It's often to sell something, and they [companies] want it to be perfect, to be the ideal standard, rather than, kind of normal – 'cause that won't really sell, 'cause people want to buy something to be perfect or to look perfect... So they are selling something, so if they are just looking kind of normal, they won't do well.*

As pointed out by Hall and Whannel (1964), media hegemonic producers create preferred readings – in the context of this chapter, dominant ideals of beauty circulated in media, which have various degrees of influence on young people's perception of beauty:

> The media provides young people with information and ideas about the society into which they are maturing. They can test few of these descriptions and interpretations against their own experience. At the deeper level, the use of the media to provide imaginative experiences through various forms of art and entertainment… [and] has a modifying impact upon young people's attitudes and values. (p. 20)

I found that exposure to knowledge about image manipulation assisted the young women in their interrogation of visual texts, therefore leading to a change in their decoding positions.

However, as evident during the interviews, there is no guarantee that their knowledge about image manipulation in the media will have a long-term effect on their decoding positions.

I suggest that the young women I discussed in this section demonstrated that in relation to manipulation of images they either: 1. knew about it but tended to forget about it, thus this knowledge does not nesessarily influence their decoding positions; or 2. are not aware of how widespread it is; or 3. are aware, as some were, of how unrealistic the images are.

The next section provides insights into the power of dominant ideals of beauty in media and analyses the answers of young women who decode media messages from a dominant position.

Image manipulation: Young women and the dominant decoding position

As described previously in this chapter, five participants demonstrated a dominant position in decoding images of celebrities in the media. Looking at the photos of 'before' and 'after', Molly explained that she did not expect the photos to be adjusted, but rather would expect to see the work of professional makeup artists and stylists, and the good skin condition of the models: *I wouldn't have thought it was photoshopped. I would have thought that it's just, like, wow, showing her makeup, good skin, that's what makeup does to her skin, her eyebrows.* After observing the difference between the 'before' and 'after', Molly concluded that it is *crazy* but then pointed out the struggle associated with her level of knowledge about image manipulation:

> *How is it possible to identify which pictures were adjusted, and which were not? Now, when you know that photoshop does this thing, you still look and wonder… was it photoshopped? Because they photoshop everything, that's the point. They photoshop everything to be perfect.*

Similarly, April explained that she had never seen the 'before' pictures, and then reflected on what caused her to decode from a dominant position: *I am so used to pictures looking like that. So I actually thought that's actually how she looks like*. April, like Hayley, Bella and Jennifer, who had not previously seen the unedited photos, suggested the reason why the photos of celebrities and models who are already beautiful are subject to adjustment was to make beautiful even more perfect: *That's the reason why they retouch them in Photoshop… to make them more perfect, to get that ideal image of a beautiful woman.* Meg's position in decoding the images was similar to the one described by April and suggested that the hegemonic media producers seek to present an unachievable standard of beauty. In their comments, they implicitly recognised that 'ideal' beauty is just that – the ideal, not reality. Meg looked at a photo of a celebrity, paused, and then said that the woman she was looking at was already beautiful, but her image was *photoshopped so much to make it even better. As we perceive this ['after'] as being so beautiful. And this is fake, so now she's lying … yeah, quite sad.*

I suggest that their lack of media literacy was caused by participants being so accustomed to dominant ideals of beauty. However, the lack of knowledge about media literacy needs to be addressed as "adolescent girls are often found to be particularly vulnerable for being influenced by media images" (Kleemans et al., 2012, p. 2). As Bella explained, she would not question the representations of celebrities and models: *they all look really normal. They make it seem so real that I wouldn't question it. They show you that nothing is real. Everything is fake.*

Four out of five participants (Meg, Bella, Hayley, and Molly) who demonstrated a dominant position in decoding visual texts explained that they actually felt better about themselves after being exposed to the 'before' and 'after' photos of celebrities, which suggests the value of teaching media literacy. Bella explicitly acknowledged her new knowledge of image manipulation made her feel *better* about her own physical appearance. Hayley shared a similar

opinion and explained that knowledge of the images before image manipulation might be beneficial to other young women, reducing the pressure to fit dominant ideals of beauty:

> *That's really good. As you know, looking at these photoshopped ones, people look down at themselves, as they don't realise that these photos are photoshopped. That it's not [the] real them, but when they speak up about it, about Photoshop, that they are against it – it's actually really good, as it allows us, fans, to be themselves, and not to feel… pressured.*

Hayley also suggested that if celebrities and models highlighted the presences of image manipulation in representations of dominant ideals of beauty, this practice could invite the audience to love their own physical appearance: *I think that celebrities have to do it more often. To motivate people to love themselves. By promoting not photoshopped pictures*.

The reactions of the participants support the argument that media literacy and knowledge about image manipulation will benefit young people; according to Buckingham et al. (2005), media literacy can help young people to both "make the most of the positive opportunities that the media can provide" (p. 5) and develop "critical understanding, evaluation and judgment" (p. 59). The participants expressed their positive feelings about the new knowledge about image manipulation not only through words, but also by laughing, speaking louder, and looking happier and more confident after recognising they felt better about themselves. For example, as described by Hayley:

> *Definitely. I feel better… [celebrities] look normal sometimes, not extraordinarily beautiful. Like, look at these! [pointing at the 'after' photos]. Damn it; I can be a supermodel now too [laughing].*

For Molly, the knowledge about image manipulation had a positive impact on her perceptions of beauty:

> *Oh, it makes me feel so much better. Like, so much, really. 'Cause you feel like, look, she is a model, she's paid to look pretty, but they still need to photoshop her. It makes you think it's not so bad.*

Interestingly, Meg demonstrated empathy with celebrities who experience image manipulation required to fit dominant ideals of beauty:

> *I think it kind of makes me feel a little bit better. Because I think that if I was a celebrity, and I had great photos taken, and then they were photoshopped – I think I would feel really depressed about it. So I am very happy I am not a celebrity and I don't have to deal with that, because, I think it would really affect your body image perception.*

Indeed, the decoding positions of the young women influenced their reaction to the images we analysed. For instance, Charlotte, a confident user with critical awareness of image manipulation, demonstrated an oppositional decoding position: her critical awareness of dominant ideals of beauty were caused by her knowledge of the beauty industry, as she previously worked as a professional model. As explained by Charlotte, during her work as a model, she would try to reverse the effects of image manipulation, to bring the edited photos to a more natural representation of her appearance before she shared them with others:

> *Sometimes, I do a photoshoot, and then I look at the photos that've come out, and before I post them on Instagram, I try to edit them back to what I actually look like. So I am doing the opposite. There've been some photos where photographers … make your cheeks look really skinny, or your nose very small – that just looks so bad.*

Molly's experience of looking at the modified images provided an understanding of why it can be so hard to develop a critical awareness and resist decoding media messages from a dominant position:

> *…even if I haven't looked at the 'before' picture, I wouldn't have seen anything. Because you're just desensitised to it now. It's just what every woman in a magazine looks like. That's what cover girls have to look like. But that's just not how they look; they've been photoshopped.*

Similar to the views expressed by other participants discussed in this chapter, Molly explained that she would not be able to identify image manipulation unless she saw the 'before' version of it.

The power and intertextuality of media representations of ideal beauty clearly affects the beauty perceptions of these young women, enforcing their belief that ideal beauty exists. For instance, Molly expressed her opinion that she can *never get there* to achieve the beauty standards of the 'after' photo:

> *It's just… Feel like you are lied to. You look at that, and you are like "wow!" If I buy her bronzer, it's gonna be perfectly pigmented and… it is perfectly blended in. And then you look at another one, and you see how it's actually not perfectly blended in, you see how she has some makeup over here, and her eyebrows aren't like, that colour, and her smoky eyes… don't really look that nice on that picture. But it looks really sleek at the "after" one. After Photoshop. And that's what is crazy. I just want to believe it. And I do…*

Another observation was associated with Meg's point that celebrities are engaged in the formation of dominant ideals of beauty in media, and these ideals force famous celebrities and models to look perfect. Meg pointed out that the popular singer in one photo:

> *... looks quite tired here. Well, she's allowed to. She's in her 40s. That's quite sad, because it gives us this unattainable beauty expectations. Wow. Not even [celebrity's name] looks like that. This is Photoshop.*

The signs to look for: How young women identified image manipulation in visual texts

In this section, I examine particular characteristics of physical appearance that young women identified as possible evidence of image manipulation. The previous discussion of young women's media literacy skills and knowledge identified that some participants struggled to recognise whether pictures of celebrities and models in the media were adjusted. However, the introduction to the visual texts representing image manipulation created a space in which participants could question their original decoding positions after their introduction to media literacy.

After the initial introduction to the images before and after manipulation, I asked the participants whether they could name any particular 'signs' that indicate that the image was subject to manipulation. I did not ask the participants to focus on any particular images, so they were free to choose and comment on any images that we had previously discussed. Here, I present the thematic categorisation of their answers based on the signs of image manipulation identified by the participants. Figure 5 was among the most popular images chosen by the participants for the discussion, as the contrast between the images before and after manipulation was clearly obvious. Figure 5 illustrates such signs of manipulation as skin

blemishes being smoothed out, creating of a more prominent jawline, improvement of makeup (e.g., additional blush) – all together, creating a perfect face without any imperfection:

Fig. 5. Example of image manipulation. Source: L'Oréal

Participants discussed the following areas of possible image manipulation: skin condition, facial features and makeup, eyes, body, symmetry, hair, and the "ageless" appearance of the women discussed.

Skin

The general characteristics of image manipulation included the following descriptions of skin on the 'after' photos: soft, smooth, glowing, flawless skin without any imperfection (acne, black spots), texture is removed, skin looks 'flat', skin looks plastic. For example, Alice said that the skin on the photos after manipulation *looks like plastic. Looks fake, and it looks really different*. Amanda highlighted skin tone in her comment: *Like, her features are still quite the same. They've just made her skin to look more… like, nicer, compared to the first one*. Charlotte described the skin of a model as: *you can say as it's completely flat, they've removed all the*

texture. Jay also referred to texture in her comment: *The skin has no texture… on that one ['after'] she is very smooth*. However, Jay has also pointed out that the skin after manipulation looked *lighter*. Paula drew on the comparison of the skin before and after manipulation, explaining that the image before manipulation *looks really pretty, more flawless than on the other side, where there're flaws, and marks, and… pimples…* As summarized by Candy, the image produces have *smoothed down the edges, all natural [skin] features are completely gone*. All participants noticed skin as a possible site of manipulation, however, they were able to notice different elements.

Makeup and facial features

Another sign of image manipulation was associated with the face and facial features of the models. For example, as described by Paula: *the makeup looks the same on both sides of the face. Like, eyeshadows can get messy. And mascara. I've noticed, that on photoshopped photos, mascara is comb-y [as if combed], eyelashes are straight and long.* Charlotte thought that image manipulation could be used to fix the makeup of the model. The participants also described how they noticed that the facial features were slimmed down or altered. As described by Casey: *It's the cheekbones… I've seen girls who put makeup on, trying to highlight them… And you can see over there – it looks too unnatural. Even with makeup*. Jay discussed the face of the model: *Her face, her jaw, it's skinnier. And her nose is slimmer… Yeah, like, the whole chin is different.* Charlotte also used the word *slimmed*: *They've changed her face, they've slimmed her cheeks… they've left the facial structure, but they've definitely made her chin a lot smaller as well*. Eyes were described as a sign of image manipulation if they looked unnaturally big, or if the colour seemed unrealistic. As pointed out by Casey, *the eyes, look at the colour – it's not realistic*. Meg referred to the brightness of the eyes on the photos before and after manipulation: *her eyes, they are brighter, way more… brighter*. Charlotte's answers

were very detailed, which could be explained by her work as a model and as someone having deep knowledge of image manipulation used in the beauty industry. She provided the following description of the signs of manipulation:

> *[The editor] made her eye shape differently, and darkened her eyebrows. Oh, no, they didn't do it with eyebrows, but they've definitely done something about her eyes, maybe, made them a bit slimmer. Rather than round. [Looking at another photo]. Her eyes are completely different. If you are looking at this photo, it's completely different. They've put eyelashes and opened her eyes up.*

Paula also referred to the perfection observed on the photos after manipulation:

> *On the photoshopped one, it looks like clear skin, the face looks symmetrical, and she just looks perfect to me.*

Body

The body after image manipulation was characterised by the reduced visibility of cellulite, and making the body *thinner* (Meg), which was similar to the previous discussion of facial features. As recognised by Amanda: *I think they made the arms smaller, and breasts and butt as well… And her legs… They've made everything just so much smoother, like a Barbie doll. But we all know, it's all fake.* Molly pointed out the manipulations of waist and breasts: *Look at it again, her waist is slimmer… She's already tiny, but they made her waist slimmer. Her boobs, they've contoured her boots.* Another example was provided by Charlotte who felt sorry for the singer whose image had been manipulated: *Oh yeah, poor [name]. Well, they have obviously taken away her cellulite…*

Hair

The participants associated the manipulations with the appearance of hair that looks *fixed* (Charlotte) or perfectly done-up. As pointed out by Paula: *There're no bits of hair coming out*. Additionally, the manipulations with hair could be identified by adjustments to hair colour or length: *They've thickened up her hair, blonded it up* (Charlotte); *They've actually made her hair look longer, which is crazy to me – like, what's the point of that?* (Molly).

As previously mentioned in Lina's answer, the participants explained that they tend to forget about the presence of image manipulation (Jessica, Rachel), until they see the photo 'before' and 'after' placed together. As Rachel explained:

> *I've seen these photos before, they go around, on social media. And it does make me more aware. But, then I feel like it, sort of, wears off. So it's interesting to see it again, cause, you kind of just forget that it's photoshopped… and you just become so used to see it… that you just forget even to be mindful that it's actually how they look, sort of thing.*

However, recognition of image manipulation appeared to be rather complicated, as even after such 'reminders', young women can forget about image manipulation yet again. Rachel concluded that seeing images before and after manipulation *would change my perceptions for, like, a while, while I still have it fresh in my mind. And then, I tend to forget.*

I argue that the common theme in the participants' discussion of the manipulated images was the significant presence of ideal beauty in visual texts to the extent that such portrayal of female beauty creates the illusion that for some of the young women this is how women look. With such clear visual comparisons of two images, some participants became both sceptical of the dominant ideals of beauty, and felt better about their own appearance. The participants also

identified a variety of factors that characterise the presence of image manipulation. For instance, the women they discussed looked flawless and almost plastic – this artificial 'perfection' can be the first sign of image manipulation. In the next section, I discuss the participants' responses to companies that purport to support alternative ideals of beauty – the beauty of natural appearance that does not include any image manipulation.

Dove: An attempt to represent diverse beauty

In this section, I analyse the polysemic nature of media texts, which can be decoded in multiple ways by different people. During (1999) argues that "because meanings are produced not referentially (by pointing to specific objects in the word) but by one sign's difference from another, that signs are polysemous" (p. 6). Therefore, according to cultural studies, the term polysemy is "a technical word for the way in which a particular signifier always has more than one meaning, because 'meaning' is an effect of differences within a larger system" (During, 1999, p. 6). In addition, the participants' answers demonstrated the ability of some young women to critically interrogate the commercial intentions behind the produced images. During the second interview, I raised the possibility of alternative ways to represent beauty in the media – representations that did not meet dominant ideals of beauty. I asked the participants if they were aware of any campaigns that advertise more diverse representations of beauty. Dove was the most common brand participants spoke about. They also named Missguided, Simple, LUSH, H&M, OLAY, and The Body Shop as brands with similar, but less successful, campaigns. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed how participants decoded messages from media producers whose visual texts reinforced dominant beauty ideologies, including the representation of perfect women, where perfection was often achieved through image manipulation. Here, I examine how participants decoded messages created by Dove. Dove is

an international personal care brand that calls itself *the home of real beauty*. The information on their website reads:

> For over a decade, we've been working to make beauty a source of confidence, not anxiety, and here's where the journey continues. Beauty is not defined by shape, size or colour – it's feeling like the best version of yourself. Authentic. Unique. Real. Which is why we've made sure our site reflects that. Every image you see here features women cast from real life. A real life version of beauty. (Dove, 2021)

Dove positions itself as a brand that advocates for diverse representations of women without focusing on a particular size, skin colour, or age group, and, as described by Novoselova (2016), "is centered on improving the body image of girls and women through advertising that includes both diverse models and empowering messages" (p. 141). In confirming the variety of participants' decoding positions in relation to the representation of beauty, some of the participants' answers suggested that they could more easily relate to the representations of female beauty offered by Dove, as the models in Dove advertisements, while being good-looking, did not precisely fit their understandings of the dominant ideals of beauty [Figure 6].

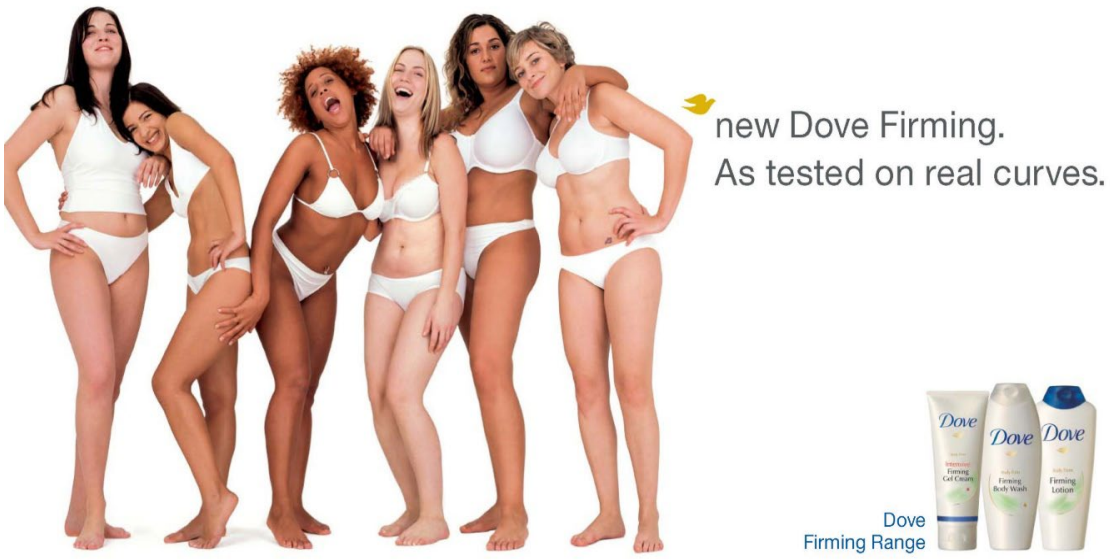

Fig. 6. Example of Dove campaign. Source: Dove

Dominant readings of Dove's advertisements

Bella indicated that she supported Dove's decision to use images of women who were not professional models in the advertisements. She explained that she felt empowered by looking at them as the visual texts represented various types of female beauty, which suggested that *you don't have to look the certain way* and fit into dominant ideals of beauty. April felt positive about the representation of women in Dove campaigns, which she felt demonstrated women who were *comfortable in their own skin*. April admitted that after looking at these images, she also felt more empowered, and that Dove *encourages women to be more comfortable in their own skin*. Lina explained that Dove's representation of women made her feel better about her own physical appearance, and she was positive about the idea that more companies would use images that represent the diversity of female beauty:

> *It makes me happy. It makes me feel very happy inside – I can look like that one day. To hear about these different companies that have these campaigns that include all these women, different size, everything like that.*

Lina highlighted that she would prefer to buy a product advertised by women who do not fit into the dominant ideals of beauty. Lina felt more connected to these diverse representations of women as she could *relate to people like that*. Similarly, Molly believed that the Dove models' appearance was similar to her own:

> *I like it because I can see my own body here. They are not all tiny and skinny. When I saw a Dove campaign using normal people, I was really, like, yeah, that's kind of cool. But there were others… like brand Simple; it's like an organic kind of moisturizer.*

Meg supported the choice of models who represented Dove's products, as the visual texts articulated *the different colours, all the different sizes, different shapes, which is great – because, we all are different. There's no one size which fits all. I think Dove is really good at doing this, actually*. Casey expressed her positive attitude in relation to Dove's empowering message sent by the brand's models, and the confidence articulated by the models who did not fit into the dominant ideals of beauty: *It makes you feel good, I like looking at that. And it's different, not like "Oh my God, I want that body!" – just these women look differently, they have so much confidence in themselves*. Candy supported the representation of diversity portrayed by Dove campaigns. She believed that Dove and other brands with a similar brand message (although, she could not remember the names of any other brands) could make young women feel empowered and that *it makes me feel like there is not just one ideal standard of beauty*. Candy indicated that seeing this diversity reinforced her self esteem. This diversity contrasted with media texts that portray *skinny, tall* women with *blonde hair* as dominant ideals of beauty that used to influence Candy to analyse visual texts from a dominant decoding position.

In addition, Candy discussed her positive response to a popular Dove video [Figure 7] that I showed her, where a photo of a normal woman is photoshopped to look like a super model who fits dominant ideologies of beauty:

> *[The video] sends the message that no one is really perfect, you need stuff to… Actually, no, I take that back – I think that it shows that we are perfect, but we are holding yourself up to the standard that is not attainable, which can only be attained due to technology and changing who you are.*

Fig. 7. Dove campaign, a video that demonstrates the process of image manipulation by professional editors. Source: Dove

Similar to Candy, Rachel also pointed out the importance of this video as visual material that could promote media literacy and educate people about the presence of image manipulation in the media: *Crazy – what you are seeing can be so manipulated, you feel like everything you are seeing is not real*. However, despite her recognition that it was easier to relate to Dove's representation of women, Amanda stated that Dove's campaigns did not affect her purchasing decisions:

> *I think they are so much better in terms of relating to them, but at the end of the day, people just buy whatever they want to buy. Like, these [pictures from Dove's campaigns] don't really affect the products I buy, because they are just 50 seconds long, and I am gonna forget about them after 15 seconds. It's not going to leave that much impact on me, so I just… if a beauty product is working for me, I am going to continue buying it.*

At the same time, Amanda believed that despite her personal purchasing decisions, Dove could appeal more to older women. As discussed previously in this chapter, dominant ideals of beauty

and visual texts that represent them do not include signs of aging when it comes to the portrayal of women. But Amanda pointed out that Dove included the representation of women with visible signs of their age, in particular, *wrinkles*:

> *I think that these campaigns are much better… when they are showing what people actually look like. I think, maybe, older women relate more to these than younger women. As for me, they don't really have an impact. As for older women, when you start having wrinkles, you are like… Oh, she has wrinkles, and I have wrinkles, so I want to use this product.*

Despite the previously discussed positive response in relation to Dove's more diverse representation of female beauty, participants also demonstrated critical awareness that Dove campaigns still focused on a selective and limiting representation of female beauty. Molly demonstrated her interrogation of Dove's representation of women, suggesting that visual texts created by Dove still reflect dominant ideals of beauty. Molly even used the word *manufactured* to point out the similarity between the models in Dove campaigns and models used by other brands:

> *These companies, skin companies, they always advertise for being natural [but] the model they use is the same… like, manufactured… I don't want to say that, but it feels like… they say they are simple, and for everyone, but they are excluding a large bunch of people…*

Molly was convinced that Dove was not the only company that represented a narrow variety of female beauty: *Or Lush… Body Shop… they still use the same, typical models. You think that if they are so organic, they'll use a more organic type of people, but it's not that*. Similarly, Alice was critically aware that despite Dove's company message in relation to representation

of different women, Dove still used photos of beautiful women with flattering lighting and photographed using the best camera angles:

> *It's good that they are trying to use a variety of different women. I can see the different body types and skin tones, that's cool – but it's still the right lighting, and they use the right angles. In some ways, it is still flattering. All of them look beautiful.*

Jessica made a similar point. She felt positive about Dove's campaigns, but for her, the models still did not represent *normal* people:

> *…it is good to represent these people… But when I look at these pictures, they are still not what normal people look like… They pick plus-size models, but they still don't look like normal plus-sized people… They are all reasonably attractive.*

Jessica critically pointed out that despite Dove's attempts to use images of women who did not fit into the dominant ideals of beauty, the models who advertised the products were still the *cream of the cream of mixed population, not a general representation of real life. But it's nice that they are moving towards the right direction*. Jennifer explained that she wrote an essay on beauty standards and Dove's representation of women; she found Dove's campaigns to be empowering but yet not entirely representative of a significant diversity of women and, especially, female body sizes. According to Jennifer, Dove still reinforced the dominant ideal of thinness:

> *I think it's really empowering that they've got all these different women, right? Of different ethnicities… but they are all very slender... It says it's different beauty standards, but they are still… these women would still feel what you'd call beautiful…*

Rachel had a similar vision of Dove's representation of women's body sizes, pointing out that *not everybody's type is covered, nobody is really overweight*. Finally, Jennifer suggested that Dove could improve their content and demonstrate even more diverse beauty standards of women:

> *I think, if you do anything, you need to make money. I think at least here companies do something, instead of just nothing. I think that H&M had campaigned on different beauty standards. But I think it was better than Dove, because they had different kinds of hair, and different clothing styles. Whereas this is still, like, I don't know… They are quite attractive.*

In these responses, the participants demonstrated their critical awareness of the marketing strategies used by Dove, as well as their negotiated decoding positions – a possible reason why Dove attempted to position themselves as a brand that represents the diversity of female beauty. Amanda advised that it could be done to make the brand products *more appealing to the buyers*. Paula argued that even though Dove is trying to represent various images of women, there is *still a person behind the picture trying to sell me something* and that the brand's main objective is *selling the product*; Jay identified this strategy as *make yourself marketable*. Hayley explained it as a *strategy of advertising* and highlighted the importance of critical awareness and interrogation of visual texts:

> *It's not fair, but then, advertising is all about showing off… They create something, you know. They create a bigger picture of what it actually is. That's how they attract. That's the strategy of advertising. I think the use must be vigilant, and you should be intelligent enough to understand that… this is actually not going be that way when we use it.*

As summarised by Meg, the participants identified that a potential reason for Dove's representation of diversity of women was the company's desire to *cash in*.

In relation to Dove campaigns, the participants demonstrated a variety of answers. While some of the young women felt positive about Dove's representations of women who did not meet dominant ideals of beauty, other participants demonstrated a critical attitude towards Dove campaigns. They suggested that Dove might use the diverse representation of women as a form of a marketing strategy. Additionally, they pointed out that despite Dove's brand messages in relation to their focus on diversity, the brand still used beautiful and attractive women in the advertisements. Despite their unconventional physical appearance that did not precisely fit into dominant ideals of beauty, the women in Dove campaign were attractive, and their photos were taken professionally.

Their diverse responses reinforce the polysemic nature of media texts, in which audiences, such as these young women, are able to make their own, diverse, meanings from the same visual texts.

Celebrities speaking back to dominant ideals of beauty

In the previous sections of this chapter, I examined young women's media literacy skills and their level of critical awareness of the altered images of celebrities and models in the media. In this section, I analyse participants' opinions about celebrities who have spoken up about the use of manipulation in their images. I also wanted to know whether the participants knew about any celebrities who had done so. I began this part of the interview by telling the participants about a few celebrities who have spoken up about the fact that their images in the media were photoshopped, sometimes without their consent. For example, I mentioned Kate Winslet [Figure 8] who spoke up about the excessive use of image manipulation on a *GQ* cover in 2003,

where her body was airbrushed to look skinnier than the original photo. In an interview with E!News she pointed out an excessive use of image manipulation in media, and explained that she decided to speak up as she believes “we have a responsibility to the younger generation of women” (Nessif, 2015, para 5). Winslet highlighted the importance of educating younger women about image manipulation and concluded that “we're all responsible for raising strong young women” (Nessif, 2015, para 6).

Fig. 8. Kate Winslet on GQ cover, and her photo before image manipulation.
Source: GQ

Zendaya, another famous Hollywood actress, posted her photos before and after image manipulation on Instagram (2015); in the text that accompanied the images she explained that her original photo was manipulated to fit into “unrealistic ideals of beauty” [Figure 9].

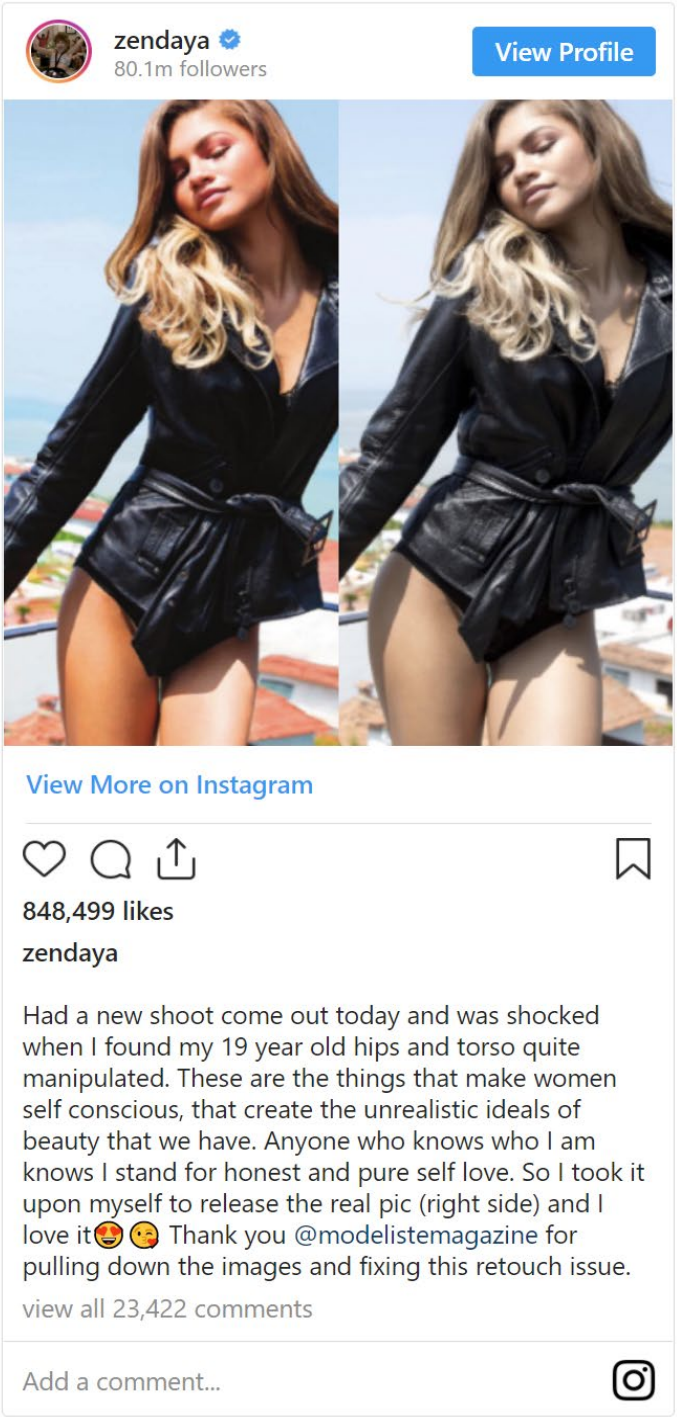

Fig. 9. Zendaya's post on her Instagram feed revealing image manipulation. Source: Instagram

Another example that I showed to the participants were images of Lily Reinhart, a young actress from a popular TV show *Riverdale*, who posted a story on her Instagram account where

she called out *Cosmopolitan* Philippines for narrowing her waist by using image manipulation [Figure 10].

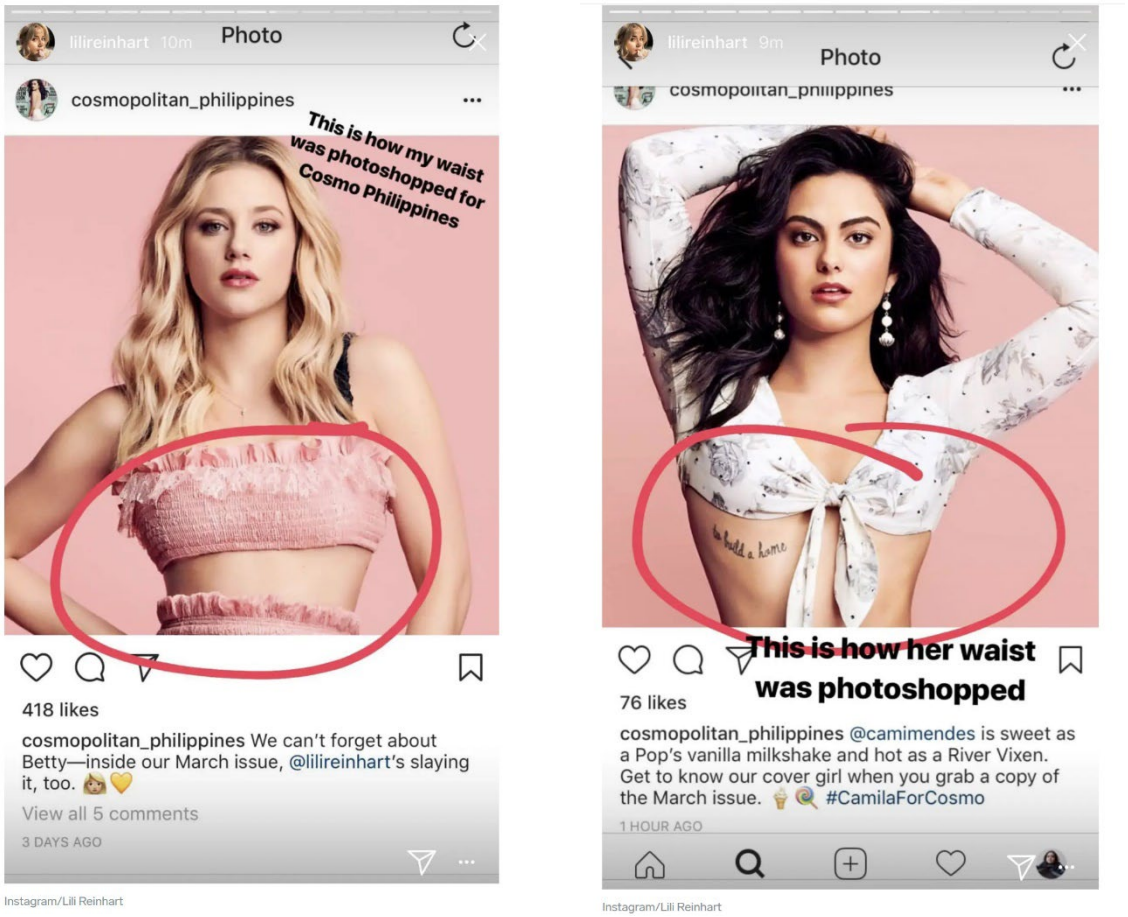

Fig. 10. Lily Reinhart's post on her Instagram feed revealing image manipulation. Source: Instagram

Notably, Meg recalled hearing about the actresses from Riverdale whose bodies were manipulated, and she supported their decision to speak up about it publicly:

> *I know that a few actresses from Riverdale, they were quite mad at the photoshopped photos, and they released the original ones, as they were made to look thinner. And it's like, what's wrong… It's quite good that they are clashing against that. They were really mad, as at the magazine, they were made super thin. But they are not big anyway! That's ridiculous. They were, like, "we don't want it!" They have this message to girls.*

Popular social media platforms, such as Instagram and Twitter, have been used by celebrities to communicate with their audiences. Hollywood actress Lupita Nyongo [Figure 11] shared a post on her personal Instagram page demonstrating her image in *Grazia* UK magazine and the original photo. She explicitly interrogated the image manipulation and pointed out that her hairstyle was "edited out and smoothed to fit their notion of what beautful hair looks like" (Instagram, 2017). As a Kenyan-Mexican actress, her post also identified the dominance of Western ideals of beauty in her statement that she had "grown up thinking light skin and straight, silky hair were the standards of beauty" (Instagram, 2017).

It was interesting to hear that Bella – who was not aware of any celebrities who spoke up about this issue – thought that celebrities and models *should* speak up about it, but assumed they *will not, because that is the part of how they make money*. According to Bella, if the audience knows about image manipulation in the photos of celebrities and models, that will have a negative influence on the careers of public figures famous for their beauty and physical appearance: *[then] everyone could model – they would lose their job*. Alice suggested that there is not enough awareness of the presence of image manipulation and that it is *not spoken about very much*. Casey said that it is a good practice for celebrities to speak up, but she admitted that she would never expect them to do it, as it would ruin their image as ideally beautiful women. However, Casey also considered possible pressures on models and actresses to remain silent about image manipulation, as it could negatively affect their careers and their income. According to the perspectives of the participants, the pressure to meet dominant ideals and power of dominant ideals of beauty is also present in the lives of celebrities and models whose careers depend on their physical appearance and attractiveness.

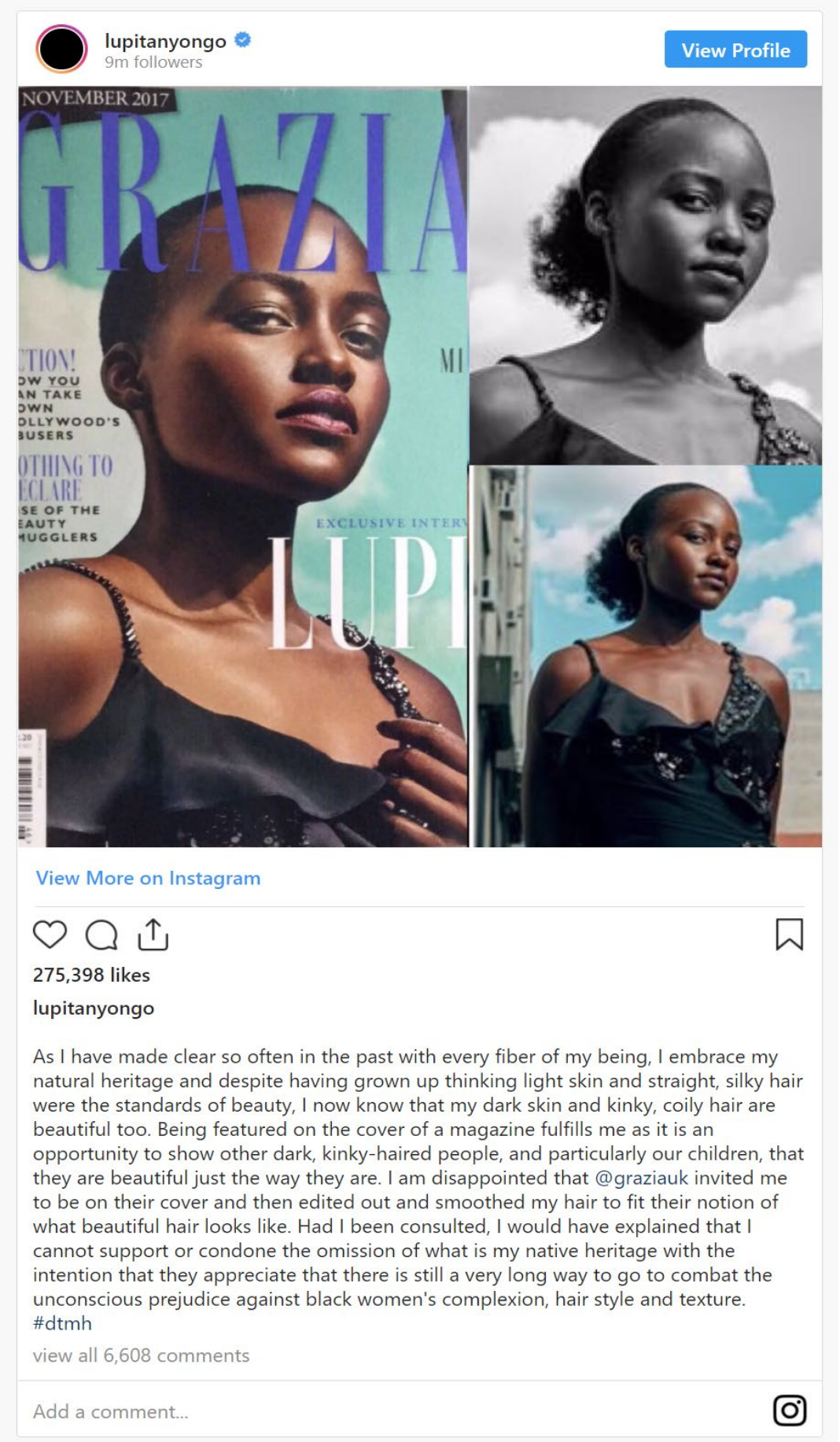

Fig. 11. Lupita Nyongo's post on her Instagram feed revealing image manipulation. Source: Instagram

Meg also pointed out the absurdity of image manipulation, when the bodies of young, fit, beautiful women are still getting airbrushed. Meg recalled a few other examples, mainly related to celebrities who just had children and whose bodies were manipulated to look skinnier and hide postpartum-related imperfections:

> *A few have, but I can't remember. I know a lot of celebrities who've had babies, have done it, like Chrissy Teigen, and Kourtney Kardashian has done it – she was really mad. The OK magazine. They've changed it, and she was actually really mad. She posted an original one on Instagram and said "it's not how I look like. I had a baby."*

Jay also remembered that Kourtney Kardashian discussed the adjustment of her photos. Jay pointed out that when celebrities do that, it gives them power and raises awareness of the audience that the images they observe might be adjusted. Jay discussed the case of Demi Lovato who spoke up about an artist who created an illustration of her as a mermaid, but with a skinnier body that reflected the unachievable ideals of female beauty:

> *I think she has a point, when male artists depict women… They pretty much draw what they want from a lady, and nobody looks like that… You can't, you physically can't have this body naturally.*

Rachel pointed out the example of Meghan Trainor who publicly expressed her disagreement with the decision of producers of her music video who manipulated her body to look slimmer. The irony was that the video was produced for her song that carried an empowering message of self-love.

Rachel also explained her belief that, for celebrities, it can be *embarrassing* if they do not speak up about image manipulation but are rather *caught out* due to the discrepancies between the

images before and after image manipulation. Amanda described the case of Priyanka Chopra who denied the use of Photoshop in her photos, leading the audience to critically express their disagreement and point out that photo manipulations did take place:

> *Priyanka Chopra, she had her photos with her armpits very smooth, really fake. And people called her out saying "We know it's fake, it's not like this in real life." But, she didn't really speak up; she said that it's how armpit really looks like. And we were like, okay, you say whatever you say, but it's not true.*

Hayley had a positive response to the idea that some celebrities can speak up about the image manipulation. She believed that it could contradict dominant ideals of beauty and the pressure to meet dominant ideals of beauty, educating the audience about image manipulation and also encouraging self-love and the audience's ability to resist the media's influence. As discussed earlier in the chapter, Hayley believed *that celebrities have to do it more often. To motivate people to love themselves. By promoting not photoshopped pictures.*

Hayley's comments point to the value of such revelations to enable young women to apply negotiated or even oppositional decodings, by knowing that celebrities in the media are experiencing similar issues:

> *Sometimes people, fans, get really worried if they have even one pimple. They feel like, "oh my Gosh, look at these actresses, they don't have anything... because you see only photoshopped ones, and you think to yourself… but here, you see that they are also humans. It's fine to be not perfect.*

Molly considered the idea of speaking up as empowering and suggested that, by doing so, the myth of perfect beauty would collapse. Molly also suggested that using a note specifying that

a photo in the media was subject to manipulation would be helpful as a lot of people did not recognise the use of image manipulation in visual texts:

> *I think it's cool. Because there must be heaps of celebs who've been photoshopped, and they don't really mind, as it makes them look beautiful and stuff. But this idea of speaking up is really cool. As it makes people think that the celebrities who we think look perfect are actually also photoshopped, and made to look like these unrealistic beauty expectations... Even if there's a disclaimer that this picture was photoshopped… We feel like it's hidden from us, as we don't know what was photoshopped. So, basically, if they had this image, and they'd say "photoshopped," or "has been photoshopped" ... at least we would know that it was photoshopped, and parts of it are unrealistic.*

The use of image manipulation has been gaining attention among researchers (e.g., Schirmer et al., 2018) and is recognised as a problematic issue, as

> … women consumers confront unrealistic images of female attractiveness that might not be readily attributable to digital alterations. This is problematic because the highly glamorized bodies and shapes of models represent an ideal that can most likely not be achieved by the average woman via healthy means. (p. 131)

According to participants' answers, I argue that despite the obvious positive outcome of celebrities speaking up about image manipulation, the power of dominant ideals of beauty is still strong – primarily, based on the absence of the discussion of image manipulation available to the public. Despite the presence of some comments in relation to image manipulation provided by celebrities, the young women were mostly unaware of any examples of celebrities speaking up. It appears that it is more common for celebrities to speak up about image

manipulation on their own social media platforms, like Instagram and Twitter. Jennifer pointed out the examples of Instagram models speaking up about them improving their own photos:

> *I think, not photoshop, but I've seen some Instagram models speaking about editing, or touching up their own photos – so the teeth are whiter, the faces are clearer. And I think it's almost accepted now, like, face tune on pictures.*

Finally, the interviews suggest that the conversations about image manipulation might be more common in non-Western cultures. For example, Jennifer discussed an example from Chinese culture, where young people are using phone apps to improve their photos and are open about it:

> *… when I come back to China, everyone changes their faces. They use the apps so much that it blows my mind, because it's so fake and stuff. I guess they are just so open about it.*

Young women's critical analysis of media messages

Overall, the interviews challenged the belief that young people's engagement with modern technologies and media provides them with deep knowledge of media literacy and in particular, the understanding of content production in media. According to the answers of the majority of the participants (11 out of 16 participants), they struggled to identify whether visual texts they observed in media were subject to image manipulation. However, media literacy is able to inform young women about the production and manipulation of visual texts, thus making them more resilient to media's power to circulate dominant ideals of beauty. For example, Jessica suggested that media is not good for girls in general. Even though Jessica demonstrated critical awareness of photo manipulation in the media, she still believed that she could not escape the influence of the media: *Being aware is good, but there is no way of escaping it. It's the whole*

industry all over the world, and it's already the norm. Her answer reaffirmed intertextuality and consistency in the types of images of ideal beauty being circulated globally via multiple media channels, as people also tend to create a better version of their life on social media platforms, supporting the existing research on the role of Instagram and social media in the lives of young women and girls (e.g., Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015, 2016; Myers & Crowther, 2009). As described by Jessica:

> *For Instagram, especially, people want to present the highlights… and because other people post the highlights of their life, I want to show that my life is also fun... And [being] pretty is included in that… the accepted 'pretty' definition. Easier to photoshop than actually diet.*

Additionally, even companies that position themselves as brands that represent a diverse variety of women in their campaigns can still be subject to a certain level of criticism based on their choice of models. In relation to Dove, the "concession" (McRobbie, 2015, p. 10) of the beauty industry is presented in its ability to adapt to the desires of women to observe a more diverse representation of female beauty in media – for instance, various body shapes, signs of ageing, various ethnicities of the models. For example, former model Charlotte suggested that Dove's campaigns are diverse and inclusive. However, she was able to critically evaluate Dove's campaigns by arguing that brands like Dove tend to choose the most beautiful model to present the diversity desired by the audiences:

> *I know their casting and stuff… I know that they've got the most beautiful women in each subset. So they'll be like "Oh, we need to book a girl of Asian descent, who's a little bit shorter". And then they cast 20 people, and they'll be like, choose the girl who is the most beautiful. Even though technically they should be just able to pick up anyone out of that group. And just make them look good. I also feel like it's a little bit fake... [The campaigns] which show the diversity …. they are sometimes*

used in the way that ticks all the boxes. Like, "Oh, we are gonna have a backlash if we don't use a girl of colour". You know, things like these, you just have to be aware of it.

Candy explained that her knowledge of media literacy came mainly from her mother, but Candy wished that it had been explained to her earlier and maybe at school where *even a seminar would be helpful*. Media literacy and acknowledgement of photo manipulation in the media is crucial, as it is still hard for young women to differentiate themselves from representations of dominant ideals of beauty in the media: *Even if I know it's not natural, it's not gonna stop me from comparing myself to them*. Molly's experiences were similar to ones expressed by Candy. She described that it is hard to associate the messages of beauty in the media with the idea of image manipulation, and if she had known that visual texts were subject to image manipulation at an earlier age, it could have potentially prevented her desire to fit dominant ideals of beauty and feeling insecure about her physical appearance:

Because, growing up as a kid… You are constantly comparing yourself to all these images… and it is knowing that these images are actually fake… people underneath them are still beautiful, but.. to know that it isn't natural, it's almost a relief. But it also makes you feel angry, because I was always striving for that when I was younger. I think… to figure out, like, more and more… I was thinking about something that wasn't real, what wasn't natural – that makes me mad. Because it made me so insecure as a kid.

However, even if young women learn about media literacy, it can be still difficult to apply the knowledge in *real life*. As Jennifer discussed:

I've definitely learnt about it in class, but I think there's a disconnection about what you learn in class and applying it in your life. 'Cause I wouldn't look at magazines

and think, like, "Oh, it's photoshopped!" What I think it has taught me is to be way more knowledgeable of unrealistic beauty standards.

Therefore, I propose that the knowledge about image manipulation should be accessible to audiences, especially young women, as it assists individuals in their critical analysis of dominant ideals of beauty as represented in visual texts in the media. I propose that media literacy should be taught from younger ages, and be present as a regular, repeated aspect of the curriculum.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined how young women navigated and made sense of visual texts observed in media, primarily focusing on the discussion of image manipulation. Eleven out of 16 participants demonstrated limited knowledge of media literacy in relation to image manipulation. Even some participants who knew about image manipulation pointed out that they tended to forget this information and still experience difficulties in relation to resistance to dominant ideals of beauty. However, the participants demonstrated their ability to change their decoding positions throughout the interviews, as we analysed the images before and after image manipulation. However, a one-off discussion of image manipulation in visual texts is not enough to embed this knowledge – primarily as young women constantly observe the circulation of visual texts representing dominant ideals of beauty without the reminders of image manipulation. As mentioned by Molly, a disclaimer that a photo was subject to image manipulation might significantly help in engagement with dominant ideals of beauty.

The participants who had not previously been introduced to media literacy were particularly affected by the representation of dominant ideals of beauty in the media, caused by the unattainable nature of visual texts of female beauty. The power of these manipulated images is

still strongly present in the lives of young women. However, as the participants were introduced to media literacy, most young women admitted that they started feeling better about their own physical appearance and identified that the knowledge about image manipulation helped them to resist the dominant ideals of beauty.

The participants demonstrated a general approval of brands that represent various types of female physical appearance; however, they demonstrated their critical awareness that this diverse representation could be a marketing strategy of the brand. In addition, some pointed out that companies that identify themselves as brands that focus on the diverse representations of women still tend to be limited in their inclusion of diverse types of physical appearance, suggesting that media representations of women still lack diversity.

The young women agreed that celebrities promoting awareness of image manipulation could help other women to resist the pressure to fit into the dominant ideals of beauty. However, as suggested by some participants, celebrities also experience the pressure to meet dominant ideals of beauty, as their careers are dependent on their physical appearance, potentially limiting their discussions of image manipulation in the media.

This chapter challenged the widespread belief that young people have a significant critical awareness of content production in media and their ability to interrogate messages transmitted by media. My findings suggest that media literacy would be an important tool to promote young women's knowledge in relation to how media messages are produced, therefore increasing their ability to resistant images of beauty that are created with the use of image manipulation. I identify the implications in more detail in the Conclusion Chapter.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

I end this thesis by circling back to the reason I began it in the first place. In my late teen years, I believed that in order to be loved, I needed to be beautiful. My own feelings as a teenager are reflected in the words of one of the participants in this study, Alice, which resonated with my feelings:

> *My biggest fear in life would be for a guy to look at me, and not see past my looks. Like, to be objectified because I look hot, or I look sexually appealing - that's my biggest fear. Yeah. And I feel when I am dressed up that way, I have noticed, they look at you, and you are just like a piece of meat. Like, they don't want to know more.*

In my early twenties, I developed a strong interest in media literacy. After I studied the production of visual media texts and image manipulation, I developed more self-acceptance; gaining knowledge about about how images are produced and the politics of this production. However, even though I was more critically aware about the production of media messages, I was still engaged in discussions about weight loss and dieting with my friends. At that time, I was finishing my master's degree, and I realised that I wanted to start a PhD programme. I realised that I wanted to help other girls and young women to be kinder to themselves and help them in their engagement with dominant ideals of beauty. As indicated in the Introduction, this research reflected my deep interest in this topic. It turned out to be a powerfully emotional experience for me, as a researcher, as I discuss in the next section.

Ethics and emotions in researching beauty

I start this conclusion chapter with a personal reflection on the ethics and emotions in researching beauty. Feminist research recognises the importance of emotional component of research (Campbell, 2002), as well as "the importance of the researcher's self" (Letherby, 2003, p. 61). As I focused on the experiences of young women and their engagement with beauty, I need to admit that this research was emotionally consuming. The first reason was associated with the interview topics that related to my personal experiences as a young woman who had an eating disorder in her teen years. The second reason was associated with the experiences shared by the participants – their stories caused feelings of empathy and compassion in me as another young woman. Campbell's (2002) description of her emotional investment in her work was similar to my feelings during some interviews and in particular, during data analysis: "… it often didn't feel great. The intellectual benefits were by no means immediate… It was costly – emotionally expensive – to engage in this work" (pp. 143-144). I would like to point out that the process of transcribing the interviews was more emotionally consuming than the interviews, as it required multiple times when I listened to their stories, and the strongest attention to details. I realised that the emergence in the discussion of dominant ideals of beauty made me more aware and critical about my own appearance. This research has indeed made me question my "place in social and political hierarchies", but it led me to a sense of empowerment, and by "embracing the margins", I could "displace [my] own power" (Fitzpatrick, 2019, p. 1140).

As it became evident that beauty did have an important impact on the lives of the participants – as it had with mine participants – I realised I needed to pay attention to my own emotional state. I did so by focusing on my health, sleep and keeping up with my hobbies. I found it interesting that, after I finished transcribing the interviews, I felt less critical about my

appearance. This finding suggests that engaging in critical research about ideal beauty can be beneficial for both participants and the researcher.

My research could not be fully separated from my experiences as an individual. Despite the fact that I was diagnosed with anorexia in the past, I did not share this with my participants. To avoid potential negative consequences, I made sure that I would be able to see a counselor at the University of Auckland as a PhD student. I did not use this opportunity, but I carefully monitored my emotions. It was helpful for me to know that I was eligible to book free sessions with the university counsellors.

I also carefully analysed the potential interpretations of every research question and possible outcomes of the interviews. After the choice and wording of questions was finalised, the research agenda was approved by the Human Participants Ethics Committee of the University of Auckland.

To summarise this section, I would like to point out the importance for the researcher to recognise and accept the possibility of personal struggles as a result of deep engagement in the research. These struggles should not be ignored by thinking that it does not happen to other researchers – on the contrary, the existing body of feminist research suggests that such negative experiences are a normal part of the research, especially if it involves potentially problematic discussion and painful topics (e.g., Kirsch, 1993). I believe that the acknowledgement of my experiences could be beneficial for other researchers.

Limitations of my research

One limitation was my decision to avoid questions that could trigger negative experiences, and the exclusion of questions related to eating disorders or significant psychological effects. Even

though two young women mentioned eating disorders, I did not pursue this line of inquiry and instead changed the topic. Only one participant mentioned anorexia in her interview. This discussion was not initiated by me, and I did not investigate further by asking whether she had any experiences of this eating disorder. A researcher with an appropriate qualification and professional experience in this area would be able to, potentially, gain a deeper understanding of young women's experiences in relation to the serious negative physical or psychological effects of ideal beauty, such as eating disorders. In this context, I spoke with the participants about the free counselling available for them if they need it and asked them to let me know if they need any support or help.

A second limitation was associated with the place where I recruited my participants, a large university in Auckland, New Zealand, as the participants' demographics were limited by their engagement in university education system. Therefore, my research excluded the experiences of young women in the age group of 19 to 24 who did not pursue a university degree. However, that choice was made to guarantee that my participants would be able to receive free counselling services if the interviews affected their emotional state. An advantage of the study, however, was the diversity of the participants, who came from nine countries of origin, meaning that the findings provided more than a New Zealand perspective.

The voices of young women

Throughout my research, I was deeply committed to the *visibility* of my participants' voices. The stories of these young women had to be heard: the stories about their engagement with the media, the experiences that influenced their perceptions of beauty, and their understandings of the production of visual texts in media. To answer the main research question *In what ways do dominant beauty ideals intersect with young women's lives and identities?* I aimed to identify

representations – a crucial component of cultural studies (Jhally, 2005) – of beauty as understood by young women, in order to "make sense of things… [and create an] exchange of meanings" (p.1). By the end of this research, I gained a deeper understanding of the complexity of beauty in the participants' lives. I consider this study as a contribution to feminist cultural studies research about women, with its focus on media and young women's engagement with dominant ideals of beauty and representation of beauty in media

I realised that, despite the differences in their cultural backgrounds and countries of origin, the young women are aware of the intertextuality and consistency of ideal beauty in media globally. Researchers argue that the media affects individual behaviours and creates ideals associated with physical appearance and beauty (Bordo, 2003; Jhally, 2005; Goodall, 2012; Sawyer, 2003). As this research found, dominant ideals of beauty are still strongly present in the lives of young women. The power and intertextuality of media representations of beauty was evident based on the consistency of attributes the participants associated with dominant ideals of beauty. These included healthy and clear skin, long and healthy hair, large eyes, symmetry of face and body, height, perfect makeup, and either being skinny or skinny-curvy. The participants referred to traditional media, such as TV, movies, and magazines, mainly as they were speaking about their past – childhood and early school years. However, their discussions shifted as they spoke about their high school years and university, therefore demonstrating the growing role of social media platforms in the lives of young people (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Hruska & Maresova, 2020; Statista, 2021).

According to the participants in this study, beauty is *powerful*. The participants discussed both pleasures and pressures associated with the role of beauty in their lives. The non-homogeneous nature of the power of beauty was also illustrated by the fluidity of decoding positions: the participants demonstrated their ability to decode in a range of ways, thus creating an interplay

of dominant, negotiated, and oppositional decoding positions. The decoding positions in relation to beauty were influenced by each participant's context, including their social and cultural backgrounds, personal experiences, and level of knowledge of media literacy.

Additionally, the participants' demonstrated resistance to dominant ideals of beauty was a significant finding of this study as, despite the existing power of dominant ideals of beauty, these 16 young women revealed their ability to decode media messages from negotiated or oppositional positions through their decisions to consciously avoid the use of social media, to take breaks from wearing makeup in order to appreciate their natural beauty, to support their friends and family members and educate them about unhealthy beauty trends, to focus on their well-being and inner beauty, and not to judge people based on their physical appearance.

Based on the analysis of my participants' answers, I identified three main findings associated with young women's engagement with beauty: a shift in ideal beauty and the rise of skinny-curvy female bodies; the influence of sociocultural environments and cultural backgrounds on young women's perceptions of beauty; and the role of media literacy in young women's engagements with media.

From skinny to skinny-curvy: **A new regime of beauty representation**

Despite the significant amount of research focused on the importance of female thinness (e.g., Gentile, 2007; Grabe et al., 2008; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Wood & Vialle, 2015), the participants described a new ideal – "skinny-curvy" - that they felt was currently more popular. Their experiences suggest this trend originated from social media and content produced by Western influencers, like the Kardashian family, and popular celebrities on social media platforms, for example, Nicky Minaj. The "skinny-curvy" body shape was recognised by the participants as an unattainable female body shape. I suggest that skinny-curvy can be

conceptualised as a new "regime of representation" (Hall, 2013, p. 249) that replaces the former dominance of skinny female bodies. The analysis of the interviews revealed a moment of shifting and contestation over what is the most desirable female body, therefore suggesting that a new regime of beauty representation may be emerging.

The young women demonstrated deep understanding of the dominant ideologies of beauty that influence their immediate peer groups and their families. My analysis revealed the identification of a skinny-curvy body type as a preferred meaning associated with ideal beauty on social media and among participants' male peers. Skinny-curvy female bodies emerged as a new preferred meaning of beauty, suggesting that, for these young women, skinny female bodies are no longer as strongly associated with dominant representations of beauty in the media. Whereas half the participants articulated skinniness to beauty, three quarters of the participants' articulated skinny-curvy female bodies to dominant ideals of beauty.

I identified that modern standards of ideal beauty are subject to consistent rearticulation, thus transforming shared meanings related to dominant ideals of beauty. With the growing role of social media and its ability to create trends and influence the audience, the young women appear to be identifying a shift towards the portrayal of even more unrealistic expectations of female bodies evident in the skinny-curvy body. Based on my analysis, beauty is no longer primarily articulated to thinness. Instead, visual texts in media created representations of women according to which women should be not only be *skinny*, but also have developed breasts and buttocks, a flat stomach and a narrow waistline. As the evidence provided earlier indicates, this representation of beauty seems to be harder to achieve. This finding suggests a need for further examination of this unachievable trend, as according to the existing psychological research, an exposure to visual texts containing images of ideal beauty can evoke

negative emotions in women (Etcoff et al., 2004; Dolezal, 2010; Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004).

The role of sociocultural environments and cultural backgrounds

As described by Bordo (1993), "what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body – is a medium of culture" (p. 165), and indeed, the participants' answers revealed that multiple sociocultural factors influenced their perceptions of beauty. One of the important findings is how meaning about ideal beauty is produced in relation to the social environments of the participants. Multiple sociocultural environments influenced young women's perceptions of beauty, with the family environment being identified as the most influential, with a particular focus of the role of mothers. Various interpretive communities (families, friends, schools, and the university), together with social environments associated with their national and ethnic cultures, influenced participants' perceptions of beauty, suggesting that "culture happens in bodies and to bodies" (Ryan, 2010, p. 161). The way that families, and especially mothers, interacted with beauty, affected the future decoding positions of young women and how they negotiated with ideal beauty. It was found that when a family member created an environment of critical awareness of dominant ideologies about beauty, it was easier for the participants to decode messages from either a negotiated or oppositional position; whereas if mothers or other female relatives decoded beauty from a dominant position – for example, ideal beauty represented in traditional media like women's magazines and on social media – the participants were likely to demonstrate a dominant decoding position. Therefore, I indicate the importance of both media texts and family environments in young women's engagements with beauty.

Cultural backgrounds also affected the way young women perceive beauty. Despite the general dominance of Western ideals of beauty and the global circulation of images in relation to dominant ideals of beauty, the participants who were not born in New Zealand or other Western countries named beauty characteristics specific to their ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Thus, the stories of participants resonated with Hesse-Biber's argument (1996) that women's bodies are "cultural artefacts, continually moulded by history and culture" (p. 30). In my research, despite the effects of globalisation, culture still played an important role. The participants who originated from non-Western countries (India, China, Philippines, South Korea, Iran) were also influenced by Western dominant ideals of beauty, supporting Jones' (2011) argument that "homogenization of global beauty ideals" (p. 885) and globalization have affected both our culture and our society. The cultural backgrounds of the participants who were born in non-Western countries were associated with specific beauty practices and varied in some ways from Western dominant ideals of beauty. These included the practice of skin bleaching in India, or the importance of thinness in South Korea and China, or the growing popularity of plastic surgeries in South Korea (Bergeron & Chen, 2009).

As cultural studies scholar Ien Ang (2002) pointed out that "textual meanings do not reside in the texts themselves: a certain text can come to mean different things depending on the interdiscursive context in which viewers interpret it" (p. 180). Family environments and cultural backgrounds were not the only factors that affected young women's perceptions of ideal beauty. Some other social environments were regarded as important interpretive communities: peer groups (girlfriends and male peers), teachers, schools, university and workplaces.

Recommendations for future research

Although the focus of this research is young women, it should be noted that men increasingly experience the influence of beauty trends as well – for example, despite the popularity of both #thinspiration and #fitspiration trends that target women, men have been encouraged to follow the #fitspiration trend only (Langnes & Walseth, 2021). Dworkin and Wachs (2009) point out that the processes applied by corporations and media that problematise women's bodies are increasingly being applied to men's bodies:

> As the body becomes a negotiable commodity for men as well as women, and multinationals seek increasing profits, males are increasingly being sold bodily problematization which can be soothed through continual purchases. (p. 8)

So potential avenues for research include expanding the focus from young women to also include the influence of media representation of dominant ideals of masculine beauty on young men.

I also suggest that future research could focus on how various interpretive communities influence individual's decoding positions. For instance, as indicated by the answers of the participants, families matter in girls' formation of beauty ideas. When the participants were asked to name the most beautiful women they know, they demonstrated a strong articulation of beauty to personal characteristics of a woman and their relationship with this woman, therefore naming their mothers, sisters, grandmothers, friends and girlfriends. As indicated in their answers to other research questions, family members and friends might affect the participants' decoding position in relation to dominant ideals of beauty. Observing mothers being on diets and dissatisfied with their bodies might influence them decoding from a

dominant position, whereas seeing mothers being content with their natural beauty might be an encouraging and empowering factor in girls' future self-perceptions and ability to decode from wither negotiated or oppositional position.

I suggest that the family environment presents a strong contributing factor in the development of children's media literacy. For instance, one of the participants advised that she was not affected by the media in her perceptions of beauty because her parents carefully monitored her media consumption when she was growing up. I imply that based on the previous discussion of the influence of dominant ideals of beauty in media on children, it will be useful to create and embed content aimed at children as a primary audience; content that articulates beauty to a wide diversity of physical characteristics, and where positive personal qualities are not articulated only to the characters who fit dominant ideals of beauty.

Media literacy and interrogation of images

I found that media literacy is important as young women still compare themselves to the images observed in the media. As reflected in the existing research, body dissatisfaction may occur when women compare their bodies with the visual texts representing dominant ideals of beauty in media (e.g., Schooler et al., 2004). Apart from body dissatisfaction described in psychological research (Levine & Murnen, 2009), this comparison between 'real life' and ideal beauty transmitted by the media may negatively influence the self-esteem of female audiences (Gibson, 2014; Osad'an & Hanna, 2015; Saltzberg & Chrisler, 1997). Media clearly has power to influence young women's lives, self-identities, and actions (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2020; Bordo, 2003; Gentile, 2007). According to Potter (2010), "the media constantly influence people in many ways – cognitively, attitudinally, emotionally, physiologically, behaviorally –

both directly as individuals as well as indirectly through other people, institutions, and culture" (p. 681).

To assist critical analysis of images representing dominant ideals of beauty circulated in media, media literacy can be a powerful tool to raise critical awareness among young people (Jones-Jang et al., 2021). As pointed out by Lewis and Jhally (1998) "media literacy should be about helping people to become sophisticated citizens rather than sophisticated consumers" and "teach students to engage media texts" (p. 109).

Indeed, despite the popularity of possibly problematic beauty trends that portray a limited narrative of which bodies should be idealised, there are online movements that seek to advocate for the importance of more diverse representations (Cohen et al., 2020; Leboeuf, 2019). For instance, Stevens and Griffiths (2020) argue that the popular trend of Body Positivity (#BoPo) focuses on the importance of mental health, women's healthy relationships with their bodies (mentally and physically), and appreciation of bodies regardless of their sizes and any other physical attributes:

> BoPo seeks to challenge narrow and restrictive beauty ideas through positive portrayals of diverse body shapes and sizes, with the overarching aim of promoting body appreciation and acceptance… BoPo encourages individuals to broaden their focus beyond the aesthetic qualities of the body to the body's functional capabilities and strengths (i.e., what a body can do rather than what a body looks like). (p. 182)

BoPo can also view beauty as a "a mode of self-expression and a source of community" (Leboeuf, 2019, p. 123). Leboeuf's (2019) argument identifies the importance of individuals' agency and relationships with their bodies that is evident in online communities and also – interestingly – in the ways that Gen Z shape their own narratives of the importance of diversity

and inclusivity in relation to beauty. For instance, as described by HPCi Media Ltd (2021), Gen Z has forced luxury brands to "move away from idealised versions of beauty" and to tap "into new beauty aesthetics" (p. 11). Indeed, other research suggests that Gen Z, with its focus on "self-expression and fun" and "issues that matter" to it, is forcing the beauty industry to embrace the need to change its messages to demonstrate more diverse beauty (Collins, 2019; Jones, 2018; Wwd, 2019). It has been argued that "by leading conversations about self-acceptance and inclusivity, and the positive contribution this can bring to mental health, Gen Z is driving change in the way brands are messaging" (HPCi Media Ltd, 2021, p, 2). As concluded by Smith (2018, p. 23), Gen Z is characterised by its "desire for diversity", that must be acknowledged by brands and beauty industry because of the increased spending power that will be generated by this generation once they "enter adulthood" (p. 23). Jones (2018, p. 45) identified that "in the United States alone, this generation's direct spend is $143 billion, a further $127.6 billion is spent on them and they influence a spend of an additional $333 billion".

Despite the expansion of representation of body types since the 2000s, the young women in this study still felt the power of dominant ideals of beauty. Therefore, educating young women about image manipulation is also important as it may allow them to feel more confident about themselves and provide them with tools to practice resistance against the dominant ideologies of beauty. The majority of participants in this study struggled to recognise that the media images were altered, thus indicating the widespread circulation of images representing the limited portrayal of female beauty. This limited portrayal was characterised by the representation of dominant ideals of beauty, rather than a diverse representation of female appearances. The potential dangers associated with the circulation of dominant ideals of beauty could be overcome by knowledge about the production of visual texts, critical awareness of young people, and their ability to interrogate and critically analyse dominant ideals of beauty in media.

To address the presence of image manipulation in visual texts in media, during the interviews, I asked the young women to look at the images before and after image manipulation, further inviting them to critically analyse these visual texts and point out the differences between the images. Based on the participants' views and the 'clues' they identified as signs of image manipulation, this knowledge could be helpful to educate other young women (and young men who appeared – from the participants' comments – to primarily decode ideal beauty from a dominant position) about the unrealistic nature of ideal beauty, particularly as these clues were identified by young women themselves. The clues included signs of image manipulation such as perfect flawless glowing skin, unnatural colour and size of the eyes, perfect makeup, symmetry, shiny and perfect hair, or ageless appearance without any indications of wrinkles or other signs of aging.

Implications of this study

One of the implications of this study is that the list created by participants could be a useful instrument to recognise image manipulation in visual texts in media. This list can be also used to highlight the unrealistic nature of visual tests that represent dominant ideals of beauty.

I argue that media literacy needs to be regularly present in the lives of young women, as the circulation of unrealistic and manipulated images of beauty in media creates an environment where the audiences tend to forget about the presence of image manipulation in visual texts. Indeed, the importance of teaching young women media literacy emerged as one of the most important findings of this research. The young women who decoded media visual texts that represent ideal beauty from a dominant position, admitted that they felt better and more positive about their own appearance after looking at the examples of image manipulation in media. The findings of this study support the idea that teaching about interrogation of images, media

literacy, and critical awareness could be a valuable tool and help young people to navigate in a media environment filled with manipulated images that reflect dominant and unrealistic ideologies of beauty.

While psychological research demonstrates a valuable focus on the negative effects of the wide circulation of unrealistic images of ideal beauty, I suggest that it would be beneficial to recognise the agency and empowerment of individuals. Researchers in this field might benefit by acknowledging young women's ability to critically engage with dominant ideals of beauty. As indicated by my study, the influence of dominant ideals of beauty is not absolute.

Another implication of my findings is the need to further explore the rise of skinny-curvy and analyse how body-positive concepts of curvy female bodies (Sastre, 2014) and #curvy, that were recently popular on social media and initially associated with empowerment, have been rearticulated to the unrealistic standard of a skinny-curvy female body.

Final words

After examining the answers of the young women in this study, I identified a strong connection between their engagements with beauty and the circulation of power (Jhally, 2005), expressed in the interplay between resistance and incorporation (Storey, 1997). As previously discussed, the recognition of the multidirectional flow of power allows for the production of new discourses (Jhally, 2005). To produce a new kind of knowledge, I framed my research within a feminist cultural studies framework, and focused on how the participants make meaning about beauty in their "practices of everyday life" (Ambjörnsson & Ganetz, 2013, p. 127). After examining the nuanced, contradictory and insightful answers of the young women in this study, I documented a complex discussion of the role of beauty in their lives and the ways they articulate beauty to power. At the same time, the young women's resistance to beauty

ideologies demonstrated a sense of empowerment, as it was evident in the diversity of decoding positions in relation to the participants' engagement with dominant ideologies of beauty.

I am grateful to the young women who participated in my study, as their answers made me believe that true beauty is the beauty of diversity.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS

Researcher: Anna Vasilyeva, PhD Candidate

Supervisor: Professor Toni Bruce, Associate Professor Katie Fitzpatrick

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, and I have understood the nature of the research and why I have been selected. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- My participation is voluntary.
- I understand that I will participate in two one-hour interview sessions.
- Completion of the consent form prior to the interview will indicate informed consent has been given.
- The interviews will take placed in Auckland, New Zealand. I will be able to choose a suitable location where the interviews will be conducted. I will choose from the following options: public places at University of Auckland, such as auditoriums, libraries, or classroom, or other public sites at the University of Auckland at a time suitable for me.
- With my permission, the interview will be audio-recorded. I can request a copy of the interview transcripts for review and approval.
- I can refuse to answer any questions, and may request the recording to be stopped anytime without giving a reason.
- I understand that as a research participant I am entitled to withdraw from the research at any stage without explanation and to withdraw any of my interview data up until 1 month after the interview.

- The researcher will email me a transcripts of my interview. After receipt of the transcript, I understand that I have a month to review it and suggest if I want to change, delete and/or add further information to my script.
- I understand that in order to maintain confidentiality, the hard copy of the interview will be securely stored separately from the Consent Forms in a locked cabinet at the University of Auckland, and only the researcher and the researcher's supervisors will have access to it. Electronic data will be stored for six years on a password protected researcher's computer, backed up on the student's University of Auckland server password protected account. The data will be stored for six years from completion of the research, and it will be completely destroyed after this time. The hard copy of data will be shredded.
- I understand that data gathered will be used for the researcher's PhD thesis, conference presentations, teaching, and academic publications.
- I understand that a summary of key findings will be emailed to me.
- This form will be held for a period of six years.
- I understand that if any eating disorders, body dissatisfaction issues, or traumas related to body image are identified, I will be provided with contact information for appropriate counselling should I wish it. Specifically, I will receive a list of geographically appropriate counsellors and support services.
- I understand that if I choose to participate, I will receive a $20 gift voucher.

I, therefore, give my informed consent to participate in the research project "Negotiating Beauty Norms: Young Women and the Media" as an interviewee.

I wish/do not wish to receive a summary of findings, which can be provided to me at this email/postal address: .

Name:

Signature Date

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on …… for three years. Reference number ……

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Researcher: Anna Vasilyeva, PhD Candidate

Supervisor: Professor Toni Bruce, Associate Professor Katie Fitzpatrick

My name is Anna Vasilyeva, and I am a PhD student in the Faculty of Education and Social Work, at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. As part of my study, I am conducting research on young women's perceptions of themselves and beauty standards in New Zealand, and the role of media in this process.

This Project

The reason I am doing this research is that there is an imagined thing called ideal beauty. As nothing in the world is necessarily ideal by its nature, the notion of ideal beauty promoted by both the media and advertising agencies is an artificial phenomenon.

My research goal is to examine the ways that dominant ideas about ideal beauty intersect with young women's lives, and which dimensions or characteristics young women see as beautiful.

For you, as a participant, this means that you will be asked to describe the role of mass media in shaping your perceptions of beauty. You will be also asked questions aimed at identifying how you engage with and decode media messages related to beauty, and what you think ideal beauty is.

This project will start in September 2017 and the data collection process will continue for 3 months. During this time we will have two one-hour interview sessions. I expect that results from this project will allow participants to express their opinion and personal experiences on the modern barrage of beauty images in the media and the concept of ideal beauty. As a participant, you will be introduced to media literacy.

Invitation to Participate

You are invited to participate in this research because ideal appearance still tends to play a crucial role in the lives of many people. As a participant, you may experience a sense of ownership of the research as you have a potential to express your personal opinion on the topic of ideal beauty and the artificial nature of it in the media.

Your agreeing to participate, and continuing to participate in research, is voluntary. You may decline this invitation to participate without any penalty. You are entitled to withdraw from the

research at any stage without explanation. You can withdraw the data (i.e the interview) at any time until you approve the transcripts for the interviews. Data gathered will be used for the researcher's PhD thesis, conference presentations, teaching, and academic publications.

If you choose to participate, you will receive a $20 gift voucher for each interview

Project Procedures

I am seeking your permission to allow me to invite you for participation in two interview sessions. The expected total time commitment from you for this will be two hours. You will also have chance to check and edit the interview transcript, which will take a further one hour if you choose to do this.

Location: We will decide a suitable location where the interviews will be conducted (for example, public places at University of Auckland, such as auditoriums, libraries, or classroom, or other public sites at the University of Auckland) and a suitable time for you.

First Session

1 hour. Review and sign the consent form. Conduct the interview. State what is required to be prepared for the second interview. A Digital Voice Recorder will be used to record the interview.

Second Session

1 hour. Agenda: Conduct the interview. Discussion of the media literacy: materials will be provided by the interviewer.

Protecting your identity

Your information will be kept confidential. Any identifying information will be kept in a secure location and only the researcher and his supervisors will have access to the data. You will be coded with a random names (or a you can choose a name). In order to maintain participant confidentiality, the hard copy of data will be securely stored separately from the Consent Forms in a locked cabinet at the

University of Auckland, and only the researcher and the researcher's supervisors will have access to it. Electronic data will be stored for six years on a password protected researcher's computer. The data will be stored for six years from completion of the research, and it will be completely destroyed after this time. The hard copy of data will be shredded.

If you are willing to put yourself forward as a participant in this research please contact the researcher using the contact details below. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me, Anna Vasilyeva.

You may also contact the Head of School for Curriculum & Pedagogy: Associate Professor Helen Hedges, Email h.hedges@auckland.ac.nz +64 9 373 7999 ext 48606.

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Appendix 3: Interview questions

Interview Guide for Interview 1

1. [These opening questions focus on their ideas of 'beauty']

    Can you tell me the three people that you think are the most beautiful?

    What makes these people beautiful?

What personal characteristics do you see as beautiful in general?

    What characteristics of physical appearance do you see as important?

    To be attactive, does someone need to meet society's ideals of beauty?

    Are physically beautiful people better off in life?

    Do they get more opportunities or more flexibility?

    Are they better people?

2. [This second group focuses on the concept of ideal beauty]

What do you think is ideal beauty?

    Do you think that this concept can be observed in the media?

    Can you discuss a time when you felt beautiful?

    What do you 'do' to feel beautiful?

        Wear make-up? Buy certain styles of clothes? Straighten or curl your hair?

    What 'beauty' habits do you follow?

3. [These questions focus on the influence of media on perceptions of beauty]

How or where have you learned what our society considers physically beautiful?

How do you engage with media around physical appearance?

What media has an influence on your perceptions of beauty?

    If not, please discuss (e.g., are there kinds of media that you avoid?)

    If yes, which TV, movies, magazines or social media are your favourites?

Do you use any of them for inspiration?

What kind of inspiration do you find in them?

4. [These questions focus on the participant's broader social group]

In your opinion, what dimensions/characteristics do your friends see as beautiful?

Do you always agree with each other?

Are there any major issues on which you disagree? (Can you discuss these?)

Which dimensions or characteristics do they pay the most attention to?

What about you?

Do you think you and your friends are like most people your age on this issue?

5. [These questions look at resistance to media beauty norms]

How/in what ways do you/your friends reject or resist the emphasis on physical beauty?

What do you most dislike about this emphasis?

Can you remember a time when you took action about this?

6. [These questions consider role models]

Who do you look to as female role models or follow on social or other media channels?

Why do you follow these models?

What role does physical beauty play in your preferences?

7. [These questions place the beauty questions into a bigger context]

Outside of physical beauty, who or what social media sites do you follow?

Why do you follow these people or sites?

What is attractive about them?

Are any of these people 'beautiful' to you? In what ways?

Interview Guide for Interview 2

The second interview will be dedicated to media literacy. After initial discussion of the provided images, the researcher will provide the key concepts of media literacy and lead further discussion.

1. [These questions will be asked of each image. These questions explore the level of young women's understandings of the artificial nature of the images promoted by the media]

What is your reaction to this image?

Do you think it has been photoshopped?

Why? Why not?

What 'signs' do you look for?

Then a media literacy discussion will take place about manipulation of beauty images: materials will be provided by the interviewer. The materials are:

1. Examples of photoshopped images of models and celebrities

How do you feel about these images now?

Do you think this knowledge will affect your perceptions of images of beauty/beautiful women or the beauty industry in general?

2. Social media campaigns that try to disrupt the hegemonic white, skinny, Western beauty ideal

[Before showing them any campaigns, ask]

Are you aware of social media campaigns that try to disrupt the hegemonic white, skinny, Western beauty ideal?

Which ones? Can you find them online? Shall we look at them?

Where did you hear about it/them?

What made you decide to have a look?

What is (or is not) appealing about them?

Did you share them? (if not, why not? If so, with whom?)

[After viewing their choices, the researcher will show others]

What is your reaction to these campaigns?

Would you share this kind of material with your friends or other people?

Where would you share it? (in person, on Facebook, social networks, as part of a Uni assignment, etc.)

Who do you think is the target of such a campaign?

Is it effective? Why or why not?

3. [Examples of celebrities' interviews where they speak about photoshopped images and an artificial nature of ideal beauty in the media]

Are you aware of any celebrities who have spoken out about photoshopped images or media alterations of their bodies or looks? [e.g., Lorde]

If so, what do you think about it? (Was it a good idea to do it?)

Why do you think this celebrity did it?

Would you give them a thumbs up or a thumbs down for this decision?

Have you ever altered an image of yourself to post to social media? (which App did you use? Why did you do it? Can you show me the image?)

4. In your opinion, if young women receive media literacy education around the artificial nature of the ideal beauty in the media, how might that influence their perceptions of beauty?

Do you think young men would benefit from this education as well?

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