



**The Role of Social Media on Body Image and Self-Perception Among
Young Sri Lankan Women**

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Abstract

This study examines the role of social media, particularly Instagram, in shaping body image and self-perception among Sri Lankan young women. Drawing on an intersectional feminist lens, the research explores how gender, race, class and cultural context interact to influence women's experiences of beauty standards and gender norms in digital spaces. A qualitative research design was employed, using in-depth interviews and social media content analysis to capture both personal experiences and the broader digital environment. Thematic analysis was used to identify key patterns and themes in the data. The findings reveal that Instagram functions as a complex and contested space. First, it acts as a platform for social comparison, where participants frequently evaluate their appearance against idealized images. Second, the study highlights the persistence of racialized beauty ideals, particularly the privileging of lighter skin tones and Eurocentric features. Third, some participants reported developing greater acceptance of their natural bodies, although it was often shaped by economic and practical constraints. Finally, the study demonstrates the dual role of social media in both reinforcing traditional gender norms and promoting more empowering and egalitarian representations. Contributing to the limited literature on the impact of social media on body image and self-perception in the Sri Lankan context, this study highlights the importance of considering intersecting social factors. Overall, the findings emphasize that social media is not a neutral space but one where body image and self-perception are continuously shaped and negotiated.

Keywords: body image, self-perception, beauty standards, social media, intersectional feminism

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Introduction

“Technology is a useful servant but a dangerous master,” a statement often attributed to Christian Lous Lange in his 1921 Nobel lecture, highlights the dual nature of technology as both beneficial and potentially harmful, particularly when its influence over everyday life, such as through social media, is not critically managed. It is well established that social media, which is not inherently beneficial or harmful (American Psychological Association, n.d.), has become an integral component of human life, fundamentally influencing communication, social interactions and information dissemination.

Indicating the drastic increase in global social media users, Statista (2023) reports that the number of social media users rose from 2.73 billion in 2017 to 4.59 billion worldwide in 2022. By February 2025, there were 5.56 billion internet users globally, accounting for 67.9 percent of the world’s population (Statista, 2024). This level of usage is described as the “supermajority” status of the online users, where two-thirds of the global population is now online (Kemp, 2024). Among them, 5.24 billion individuals were also social media users, representing 63.9 percent of the world’s population (Statista, 2024). It is expected that the number of social media users will reach 5.85 billion in 2027. According to Kemp (2024), over 12 months, more than 250 million new users joined social media platforms, which reflects the rapid growth of social media in the modern world. However, this number may not accurately reflect unique individuals due to duplicate and false accounts. Based on their findings, Facebook ranked as the world’s most used social media platform following YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok. Additionally, Global WebIndex (2023) reports that an individual spends approximately 2 hours and 21 minutes on social media each day, reinforcing Hall et al.’s (2018) claim that social media has become an integral part of users’

everyday routines. Similarly, the findings from Statista (2025) indicate that internet users worldwide use social media an average of 141 minutes per day. Examining the social media user statistics by gender, we can identify that despite increased access to the internet, women continue to be underrepresented online, reflecting persistent gender inequalities in digital participation and visibility. As of April 2024, 46.6 percent of global social media users were female, while males accounted for 53.4 percent (Kemp, 2024). Kepios analysis further supports this claim, reporting that 54.4 percent of social media users around the world are male, whereas women represent only 45.6 percent. Although a similar pattern can be observed in many regions, the gender distribution of social media users varies. In South Asia, women account for 35 percent and men 65 percent of users; in Eastern Africa, the ratio is 39:61; in South Africa, 44:56; and in South America, 49:51. In contrast, women slightly outnumber men in regions such as North America (51:49) and Eastern Europe (53:47) (Kemp, 2025). Such disparities in social media participation highlight the continuing influence of gendered social structures that shape women's access to and experiences within digital environments.

According to Kemp (2024), among social media users, young people are more likely to use social networks, especially the members of Generation Z (Gen Z)—individuals born between 1997 and 2012 (McKinsey & Company, 2024). As observed by Kemp (2024), as the first real “digital natives—the first generation to grow up with the internet,” Gen Z are deeply immersed in online environments. They are known for engaging in key aspects of daily life, such as working, shopping, dating and forming friendships, primarily through digital platforms (McKinsey & Company, 2024). Similarly, Kemp (2024) argues that, unlike all other age categories, 60 percent of young individuals between 16 and 24 years old use social media to connect with their friends and family members, which can be identified as the main reason for them to use the internet.

Furthermore, both Gen Z (16-24 years old) and millennials (25-34 years old) use social media as a major tool for discovery (Global WebIndex, 2023). For instance, they often use social media to discover new products and new brands rather than relying on search engines.

Going beyond its initial functions, such as the creation and exchange of user-generated content, in the contemporary world, social media also plays a significant role in shaping lifestyles and influencing individuals' perceptions. Said differently, social media serves as a lens through which contemporary society perceives the world, particularly younger individuals who spend a significant amount of time on these platforms. As a result of the significant role that social media plays in our lives, the existing literature argues that it has become a leading factor in shaping how individuals perceive themselves and others, particularly in relation to body image. According to Lokumannage (2020), it plays a major role in the perception of an adolescent user's body image and profoundly shapes their perception of what is considered attractive and fashionable. Social media can also be identified as a key factor in creating body dissatisfaction among adolescents, creating a sense of pressure to look a certain way (Lokumannage, 2020). Moreover, social media use among adolescents disrupts the traditional understanding of self, self-presentation strategies and social behaviour. Among the social media platforms, Instagram, with its highly visual content, has become a central space where idealized representations of beauty and femininity are created, circulated and consumed. For young women, continued exposure to curated images and influencer content can contribute to unrealistic body expectations, ultimately influencing their self-perception and body satisfaction (Galante, 2019). Accordingly, social media can be identified as a fire that warms but can also burn, as it is a powerful tool which affects the majority of the population, offering significant opportunities while also posing certain risks.

Even though numerous studies have examined the cognitive, psychological and health-related aspects of social media on body image and self-perception, limited studies have considered its sociological aspects. Examining the issue through a sociological lens can provide valuable insights into how digital environments influence power dynamics, notably gender hierarchies among youth. Furthermore, while some sociological studies on this topic have been conducted in Western contexts, research on South Asian contexts remains limited.

Therefore, this study will explore how digital environments shape societal norms and individual experiences, particularly in contexts where traditional cultural values and modern technological influences intersect. Focusing on Sri Lanka, a country characterized by its rich blend of Buddhist tradition, colonial influences and ethnic diversity, this research explores the experiences of young women participating online, analyzing how social media shapes their self-perception and body image. Thus, this project aims to examine how social media, particularly Instagram, affects young women's perception of body image and explore its role in maintaining or reshaping existing social hierarchies related to gender. Ultimately, I aim to address the broader sociological interplay between digital technology, societal structures such as gender norms, and individual experiences. Although this is not an entirely new topic within academic scholarship, this study explores a comparatively underexplored area by examining the issue through a sociological lens within the Sri Lankan context. Accordingly, this study aims to address the following research questions.

1. How does Instagram usage influence body image perceptions and self-perception among young (18-24 years) Sri Lankan women?

2. In what ways does this social media platform challenge or reinforce existing social hierarchies related to gender among young Sri Lankan women?

The structure of this thesis is organized as follows. Chapter 1 presents the literature review, examining existing research on social media use and its influence on body image, self-perception and gender norms. Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework that guides this study. Chapter 3 describes the methodology used to collect and analyze the data. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, while Chapter 5 discusses them in relation to the existing literature and theoretical perspectives. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by summarizing the main findings and discussing their implications.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

The rapid expansion of digital technologies over the past two decades has transformed the way individuals interact, communicate and perceive themselves (Hoehe & Thibaut, 2020). Central to this digital transformation is the influential role of social media, which extends far beyond merely facilitating communication to actively shaping cultural norms and social hierarchies. In recent years, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to understanding how these platforms affect body image and self-perception, especially among young adults (Galante, 2019; Lokumannage, 2020; Thai et al., 2023). Accordingly, this chapter reviews the existing literature on the concepts of beauty standards, gender norms, colorism and skin tone hierarchies, social media, body image, and self-perception in order to contextualize the examination of how social media shapes body image and self-perception among Sri Lankan young women.

Beauty Standards

The literature on beauty standards provides important insights into how societal expectations shape women's bodies and appearances. Scholars have long argued that beauty ideals are not natural or universal but are socially constructed and are closely linked to gendered expectations of femininity. These standards often define what is considered attractive, acceptable, or desirable for women, and they influence how women perceive and evaluate their own bodies (Paudel et al., 2025). As a result, women are frequently encouraged to conform to particular ideals related to body shape, skin tone, and physical appearance. Understanding how beauty standards are constructed and maintained is, therefore, essential for examining how women perceive and evaluate their own bodies.

According to Paudel et al. (2025), the perception of beauty is a complicated framework influenced by cultural, social and individual factors. It involves how individuals understand and internalize social ideals of physical appearance, which are influenced by media, cultural traditions and social interactions. According to them, based on these ideals, people view themselves and others, developing judgments about appearance that occur at both conscious and unconscious levels. From childhood, adolescent girls and young women are taught that their appearance matters both to themselves and to those who observe them (Clay et al., 2005; Tiggemann, 2005). Supporting this argument, Gattario (2013) argues that during adolescence and early adulthood (ages 16-24), young women and girls often adopt beauty standards promoted by society, many of which are unrealistic and unattainable. As a result, obsession with physical appearance may cause young girls to place less importance on critical development areas like learning or self-reliance (Tiggemann, 2005). Similarly, based on a study on the body image perception among university students from England and Denmark, conducted by Ansari et al. (2010), the internalization of socially constructed beauty norms creates intense pressure on girls, influencing their self-esteem depending on whether they succeed or fail to meet these ideals.

However, according to existing literature, these beauty standards are different based on the cultural context, not universal (Paudel et al., 2025). Historically, in many African countries, women's beauty standards were closely linked to the wealth and status of their husbands or fathers, which is a standard that continues to hold influence today. For instance, in Nigeria, fat women are often regarded as symbols of fertility and well-being (Popenoe, 2012). While research highlights that many traditional societies value fat, larger bodies as indicators of health and prosperity (Popenoe, 2012), studies also show that contemporary societies in Europe, Asia, and North America tend to promote slenderness among young women, a norm reinforced by media Representations

(Tiggemann, 2005; Gattario, 2013). Over time, beauty trends in some cultural contexts have changed due to Westernized views on what it means to be beautiful. For instance, in Uganda, young women have increasingly embraced global beauty ideals that emphasize “being thin and curvy,” and many girls and women engage in extreme practices, such as restrictive dieting and skin bleaching, to align with Westernized media images (Namara, 2016). According to Kumara and Jayawardhana (2018), even those identified as the world’s most beautiful women in beauty pageants frequently embody the defining traits of Western feminine beauty standards, reinforcing an idealized model of femininity historically shaped by the economic and political power of white male elites. However, these shifting trends may heighten the risk of young women developing negative self-perceptions and dissatisfaction with their bodies (Namara, 2016; Kaziga et al., 2021). In the context of contemporary digital culture, Ages (2024) argues that the beauty standard seen on Instagram is closely connected to race. She states that the current beauty ideals often combine features associated with different ethnic groups. Although this aesthetic may include traits perceived as “ethnic” or “exotic,” such as fuller lips, darker skin tones, or certain facial features, it is frequently white women who adopt or imitate these characteristics without experiencing the discrimination historically faced by the racial groups from which these features originate.

In Sri Lanka, over the decades, the conception of beauty has evolved from the thin, “heroin chic” aesthetic of the 1990s to the more voluptuous forms of the 2010s, and more recently, to the growing influence of pharmacological weight-loss interventions like Ozempic (Rodrigo, 2024). However, a study conducted in 2021, examining urban Sri Lankan adolescent girls, found that roughly 40% of girls reported wanting a slimmer body, while 30% reported a preference for a larger body (Liyanage et al., 2021). In the context of skin colour diversity in Sri Lanka, due to Sri Lanka’s proximity to the equator, most Sri Lankans have higher melanin levels and a predominantly darker

complexion (Shaveeniya et al., 2025). Despite the naturally darker complexion of most Sri Lankans, lighter skin is widely preferred, particularly among women, and is often regarded as a key marker of beauty. Contemporary marriage advertisements in newspapers reflect this preference, frequently specifying a desire for partners with “light skin.” In response, individuals with naturally darker skin increasingly turn to a variety of skin-lightening methods. There is a notable demand in Sri Lankan society for skin-lightening products, including creams, pills, injections and other cosmetic treatments (Fonseka & Wijekoon, 2019).

The influence of social media has intensified contemporary beauty standards. For instance, individuals can now easily modify their images in accordance with the mainstream beauty standards through digital tools. In this context, Tolentino (2019) describes the human body as an “unusual sort of Instagram subject” that can be continuously adjusted and improved with sufficient effort. While magazine editors have long altered images of celebrities to conform to unrealistic beauty ideals, similar image-editing practices are now widely accessible to ordinary users, who can modify their own photos with just a few taps on their smartphones.

According to existing research, Instagram influencers play a major role in these contemporary beauty standards and the beauty industry. In recent years, particularly within the beauty industry, the use of social media influencers as a marketing strategy has grown significantly. These influencers can shape how young women perceive their own attractiveness. By using social media platforms, they often promote idealized body images and elevated beauty standards, which may negatively affect the mental health of young women (Jaiswal & Kumar, 2022). According to Ages (2024), although the beauty industry has long thrived within the framework of industrial capitalism, the rise of digital culture and social media influencers has significantly expanded this

consumption. In doing so, it has intensified distorted beauty perceptions and further commodified the human body and natural processes such as ageing. The author further claims that these beauty influencers “sell themselves as the product” (Ages, 2024). Similarly, Tolentino (2019) argues that beauty pressure has always existed, but social media has intensified it by making people constantly display their appearance and by turning the body into a source that can generate profit. Furthermore, according to Ages (2024), beauty influencers often embody the contemporary beauty ideal known as the “Instagram face” and strategically use their appearance to profit from their connection with followers. In addition to explicitly sponsored posts, beauty influencers regularly produce lifestyle content that implicitly promotes consumer spending by demonstrating the products and practices through which audiences may attempt to replicate their appearance. Consequently, social media platforms, especially TikTok and Instagram, function as environments in which content creation, extending beyond formal advertising, remains deeply intertwined with the profit-driven interests of corporate actors within social media consumption. This dynamic is particularly concerning when connected to insecurities related to beauty and femininity (Ages, 2024). A similar argument is made by Kumara and Jayawardhana (2018), who suggest that ideological binaries such as ‘beauty versus ugliness’ and ‘fair versus dark skin’ help drive the global demand for beauty products. Furthermore, according to Jaiswal and Kumar (2022), social media influencers promote idealized and unattainable body ideals, and they highlight the importance of recognizing and addressing the potential negative effects of such influence, while also promoting healthy and positive self-perceptions among young women. They suggest that unfollowing influencers who promote unrealistically high beauty standards could be one possible solution to this issue. Further discussing this issue, Ages (2024) argues that hyper-consumption, in this context, promotes the belief that women must rely on continuous consumption to modify their

appearance in order to achieve fulfilment, potentially leading to adverse effects on young women's mental well-being and patterns of socialization. In her article, she further argues that some beauty influencers who challenge dominant beauty ideals and promote body positivity on social media platforms by encouraging the acceptance of diverse body types also profit from appearance-related content, for example, by selling or promoting products such as oversized clothing (Ages, 2024). Thus, in a context where influencers have a significant impact on the lives of others, Jaiswal and Kumar (2022) underscore the critical responsibility of social media content creators to recognize the potential negative effects of their posts may have on the psychological well-being of young women, while also promoting diversity, authenticity, and body acceptance.

Colorism and Skin Tone Hierarchies

Colorism and skin tone hierarchies represent an important dimension of beauty standards in many societies, particularly in post-colonial contexts. According to Mady et al. (2022), women's self-perception is often influenced by skin colour, a pattern rooted in histories of racial discrimination and power hierarchies, as well as the dominance of light-skinned models in advertising and other forms of media. While the desire for lighter skin is not universal, these beauty ideals have shaped perceptions in many countries that experienced colonial rule by the white population (Mady et al., 2022). In many South Asian contexts, including Sri Lanka, these hierarchies continue to influence perceptions of attractiveness and femininity. Examining the literature on colorism, therefore, provides important insights into how skin tone becomes a key factor in shaping beauty ideals and women's self-perceptions.

Colorism is a system of oppression in which lighter skin is rewarded with social, economic and cultural advantages, where darker skin is devalued (Sharma et al., 2025). According to Dixon and

Telles (2017), around the world, notions of white or light-skin superiority have traditionally been tied to social status and privilege for lighter-skinned individuals, while darker skin tones have frequently been viewed with prejudice. This argument aligns with Monk (2015), who conceptualizes skin colour as a type of “bodily capital.” Similarly, Hunter (2005) argues that “light skin is interpreted as beauty” and that this beauty functions as a form of social capital, which can be leveraged to gain access to resources such as employment, education, social networks, and romantic opportunities. This colour consciousness and white supremacy have become increasingly intertwined, globalized and commodified in recent years, a process reflected in the growth of the multibillion-dollar global market for skin-lightening products (Dixon & Telles, 2017).

Across many Asian societies, fair skin among women has long been associated with elite status as well as culturally constructed ideals of femininity, beauty, and purity. For instance, in Japan, whiteness has historically carried strong symbolic meanings associated with class privilege, spiritual purity, and feminine beauty for many centuries, possibly even more than a millennium. In traditional Japanese art, Japanese individuals were often depicted with lighter complexions than Europeans, who were sometimes illustrated with grayish or fleshy tones. The categorization of Japanese and other East Asians as “yellow” emerged only in the nineteenth century, when the colour yellow became linked to racial classifications associated with the so-called Mongoloid race (Dixon & Telles, 2017; Jablonski, 2012; Keevak, 2011).

In a study conducted by Koththigoda (2025), she reflects on her experience growing up as a Sri Lankan girl, noting that everyone around her commented on her skin tone, either expressing pity when it became darker or offering compliments when it appeared lighter, and discusses the pressure she felt due to the pervasive perception that “fair is better.” For instance, she received

numerous remarks about her appearance, such as “Although you are so dark, your features are still nice.” This example demonstrates the societal preference for lighter skin over darker complexions in Sri Lanka. According to GroundViews (2020), fair skin is often treated as a form of social currency in Sri Lanka, particularly when selecting a suitable wife. Furthermore, the valorization of lighter-skinned women is a common theme in popular Sri Lankan music. Closer proximity to whiteness, achieved through fairer skin, has historically conferred social privilege, giving rise to practices such as skin bleaching, which carry significant physical and psychological risks (GroundViews, 2020). This phenomenon exemplifies anti-blackness, reflecting the deeply entrenched notion that darker skin is inferior. In a study examining social issues related to skin colour in Sri Lanka, the authors assessed participants’ satisfaction with their natural skin tone and their desire to alter it. The findings revealed a pronounced gender difference: men generally reported higher levels of satisfaction than women. Specifically, 60% of male participants expressed contentment with their natural skin colour, compared to only 28% of female participants. Conversely, 68% of women indicated dissatisfaction with their skin tone, whereas 32% of men reported similar dissatisfaction. This discontent was reflected in participants’ desire to modify their skin colour, with 76% of women expressing an intention to change their tone, in contrast to 32% of men, the majority of whom preferred to retain their natural complexion (Shaveeniya et al., 2025). This study further found that a larger majority of participants (72%) recognized that issues related to skin colour are widespread globally, while 70% reported their presence in Sri Lanka. These challenges manifested in various forms, including social rejection, emotional distress, loss of privilege, shame, ridicule, and disruptions in interpersonal relationships. Women are disproportionately affected, reporting higher rates of these experiences compared to men. This gender gap highlights entrenched social biases that place excessive emphasis on women’s

appearance, particularly skin tone, as a standard for beauty and social values (Shaveeniya et al., 2025).

When discussing colorism, the use of skin-lightening filters is also important, as it further reinforces these social and beauty standards through social media platforms. As noted by Hendeniya (2025), the influence of globalization and digital media has intensified these beauty ideals, rendering them more widely accessible and desirable among youth. The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) in digital image processing has significantly transformed the way beauty is constructed and perceived in the digital era. AI-powered beauty filters, which can instantly light skin tone, remove blemishes and modify facial features, have become widely used on social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat (Lakshmi, 2025; Marr, 2023). Although this trend is global, it holds particular significance in countries such as Sri Lanka, where long-standing cultural beauty ideals, especially the preference for fair skin, are already deeply embedded in Society (Hendeniya, 2025). He contends that AI filters on social media reinforce these beauty ideals, as these tools, which lighten skin and eliminate imperfections, both reflect and amplify Sri Lanka's longstanding preference for fair, blemish-free complexions. Overall, these digital beauty tools not only reflect historical colorism in Sri Lanka but also actively shape contemporary beauty standards, setting the stage for an exploration of how social media more broadly influences young women's body image and self-perception.

Gender Norms

While beauty standards dictate women's physical appearance, gender norms regulate how women navigate both public and private spheres. According to Pfau-Effinger (1998), different societies define the roles of women and men in various ways, depending on their economic,

political and social histories. These differences shape distinct gender cultures, systems of norms and values that reflect shared assumptions about what are considered appropriate gender relations and the division of labour between women and men in each society. Lomazzi (2023) emphasizes that the expectations of how women and men should behave are shaped by injunctive gender norms. These can include moral norms, which individuals internalize through socialization, or social norms, such as informal expectations about gender roles within a particular community. In addition, gender norms can be enforced through legal or institutional mechanisms, where the state determines whether opportunities and rights are equally available to women and men. Echoing these perspectives, Target (2023) argues that societal attitudes towards the role of men and women are shaped by complex and evolving social structures. According to him, contemporary gender norms extend beyond a simple male-female distinction and increasingly recognize a broader spectrum of gender identities. As a result, future understanding of gender is likely to be influenced both by historical traditions inherited from earlier societies and by the values and norms that contemporary societies choose to adopt.

According to Tagat (2023), there is a close relationship between gender norms and religion. For example, during the Middle Ages, the Christian church strongly enforced monogamy, which reduced the ability of powerful men to accumulate many wives, and it limited certain forms of male power within family structures. He suggests that these changes indirectly contributed to narrowing gender inequality over time in Europe. The author further argues that in many parts of Asia and Africa, polygyny was more common; therefore, family systems and gender relations developed differently in those regions.

Focusing on gender norms, Saewyc (2017) argues that most societies are deeply organized around gender, and the roles and expectations associated with gender influence nearly all aspects of life from the earliest stages of development. According to Rahim (2020), based on traditional gender roles, men are the breadwinners and leaders, while women are considered caregivers and homemakers. Similarly, Badgett and Folbre (1999) argue that in many cultures, women are closely associated with caregiving responsibilities. They are often expected to uphold higher standards of family duty than men. For example, a daughter who neglects her parents, a wife who leaves her husband, or a mother who abandons her child is generally judged more harshly than a son, husband or father who does the same. Additionally, women who display high levels of independence or ambition, as well as men who appear overly dependent or family-focused, are often perceived as less sexually attractive (Folbre, 1999). These social expectations attached to women significantly shape their daily lives. For instance, Ding (2024) notes that societal pressures may compel women to adhere to traditional roles, such as serving as primary caregivers or maintaining a certain appearance to meet societal standards of acceptability and attractiveness. These expectations establish a framework through which women are evaluated both by others and by themselves, affecting their behavior and self perception.

Discussing regional traditional gender stereotypes, Goedderz and Calanchini (2023) argue that stronger traditional gender stereotypes are often associated with lower levels of female employment. Furthermore, according to existing literature, stronger gender stereotypes within a society are associated with several gender disparities, including lower academic performances of girls compared to boys in science and mathematics, reduced effectiveness of psychotherapy for girls relative to boys, and lower levels of women's participation in the workforce, making women vulnerable (Fortin, 2005; Nosek et al., 2009; Price et al., 2021; Uunk, 2015). Similarly, Ding (2024)

argues that in the contemporary globalized context, women face competing societal expectations that influence their roles, behaviours and self-image. Although these expectations differ across cultures, they frequently impose pressure on women to adhere to prescribed standards, which can contribute to considerable mental health challenges. In contrast, according to Nater et al. (2026), gender norms and stereotypes carry broad consequences for both men and women who are shaped by these expectations, not only for women. In supporting these arguments on the impacts of gender norms, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) highlights that biased gender norms remain a widespread issue globally. Their Gender Social Norms Index measures societal attitudes towards women across four key areas: Political participation, education, economic opportunities and physical integrity. Covering 85 percent of the global population, the index indicates that nearly nine out of ten people, both men and women, hold fundamental biases against women, based on the traditional gender norms. Around half of the global population believes that men are better suited for political leadership, while approximately two in five consider men superior as business executives. These biases are evident in countries across all levels of income and development, demonstrating that existing gender norms and biases are a pervasive global challenge (United Nations Development Programme, 2023).

In relation to the gender norms in Sri Lanka, in comparison with women in other developing countries, Sri Lankan women are often viewed as enjoying considerable privileges. This perception is reinforced within the predominantly Sinhalese-Buddhist culture, where women are considered well treated, with mothers honored both within the family as goddess-like figures and in society at large (Herath, 2015). However, the challenge lies in the fact that traditional Sri Lankan culture tends to view, treat and respect women mainly as mothers and wives. Although there are notable examples that may present Sri Lanka as a country where women enjoy equal treatment, from the

past, a closer examination of their backgrounds reveals that other factors contributed to these occurrences. For instance, a study conducted by Herath (2015) emphasizes the incident where Sirimavo Bandaranaike made history on July 21, 1960, becoming the world's first female prime minister. However, her rise to power occurred after the assassination of her husband, Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, an Oxford-educated and widely popular politician from an aristocratic family and was facilitated by her own elite background. Thirty-five years later, history repeated itself when their daughter became prime minister and was subsequently elevated to the position of executive president of Sri Lanka, largely due to her family's prominence and the sympathy vote following the assassination of her husband, Vijaya Kumaratunga, a popular actor and politician (Herath, 2015). These cases demonstrate that their political success was not the result of widely accessible opportunities for women, but rather a unique combination of wealth, social privilege and public sympathy, allowing them to inherit positions traditionally held by men. Therefore, the author argues that these exceptional cases do not reflect the reality for the majority of Sri Lankan women, whose economic, social and political status remains subordinate to that of men (Herath, 2015).

Many Sri Lankan women, especially those of the older generation, have traditionally interpreted their subordinate social position as a predetermined destiny grounded in religious beliefs. Drawing attention to the importance of women's empowerment to change this mindset, Jayaweera (1995) contends that, "The education process should also be consciously used to empower women to challenge obscurantist practices and rituals that perpetuate the subordination of women in the family through marriage practices and acceptance of patriarchy in household decision making." Many educated Sri Lankan women experience a relatively moderate standard of living and social status, particularly in terms of their participation in socio-economic and cultural spheres. Women

are also well represented in certain highly paid professions, such as doctors and university lecturers, sometimes reaching levels equal to or even exceeding those of men (Herath, 2015). However, the author argues that this seemingly positive picture of economic achievement does not represent the diverse socio-economic realities of women across Sri Lanka. In many contexts, women continue to face limited opportunities and more barriers compared to men. According to Alwis (2002), developments such as women's education, employment beyond the domestic sphere, and claims for political rights have been regarded as challenges to women's "traditional" roles and status in ancient Sri Lankan society. However, contemporary young women in Sri Lanka are increasingly transforming traditional gender roles by asserting greater independence, engaging in paid employment, and embracing elements of modern social life (Attanapola, 2003).

The four figures below (Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 4) represent the front pages of *Lanka Woman*, one of Sri Lanka's oldest and most widely circulated women's magazines, spanning a forty-year period from its first issue in 1984 to 2024. Each cover illustrates an idealized representation of womanhood, reflecting the prevailing cultural and societal perceptions of femininity during the respective time period. According to Maushart (2003), numerous languages employ a single word to denote both "woman" and "wife." Accordingly, the first issue of the article (Figure 1) reflects activities traditionally associated with women in the domestic sphere, portraying the ideals of women as a wife, housewife or a reproducer. Over time, however, these representations shift. Later covers reflect the influence of Westernized beauty standards, emphasizing femininity and physical appearance (Figure 2). This is followed by a notable transition to a female sports champion in 2022 (Figure 3), which departs from traditional feminine ideals. By 2024 (Figure 4), the magazine cover reflects a modern woman, emphasizing her professional identity and career as a managing director. Overall, this progression illustrates the

evolution of perceptions of Sri Lankan women's roles, moving from domestic and dependent identities towards greater visibility in public, professional and independent spheres.



Figure 1: Front Cover of Lanka Woman Magazine (1984), Illustrating Traditional Beauty Ideals & Gender Roles

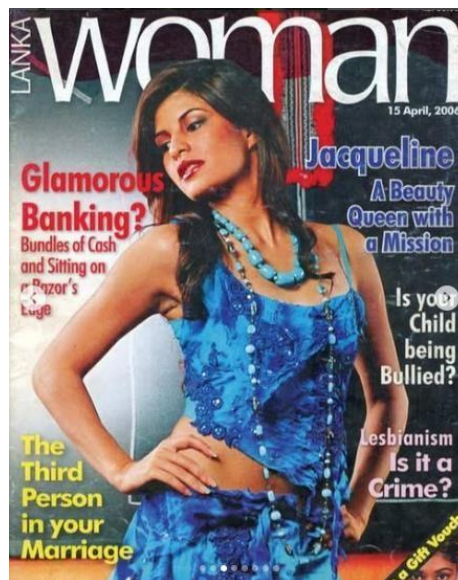


Figure 2: Front Cover of Lanka Woman Magazine (2006), Showing Emerging Westernized Fashion Trends



Figure 3: Front Cover of Lanka Woman Magazine (2022), Featuring a Female Sports Champion, Highlighting Women's Achievements and Inspiring Other Girls



Figure 4: Front Cover of Lanka Woman Magazine (2024), Illustrating Women's Leadership and Challenging Traditional Female Roles

When examining gender norms, the influence of social media cannot be overlooked. The influence of social media on societal norms, especially regarding traditional gender roles, has attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter have often reinforced existing gender stereotypes, yet they also create spaces to challenge and reshape these norms. According to Koester and Marcus (2024), social media can both reinforce existing discriminatory gender norms and provide space for challenging and resisting them. The author also argues that young people interpret and respond to the same social media content in different ways, depending on their preexisting attitudes and individual characteristics. As a result, the impact of identical content can vary across individuals.

Social media influencers, due to their large followings and broad cultural reach, play a key role in both maintaining and contesting conventional gender expectations. While some influencers reinforce traditional roles, others help promote more inclusive and flexible representations of gender (Subramaniam, 2025). According to Pirzada (2025), social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube enable individuals to produce and share content that can challenge traditional gender norms. Influencers, activists, and everyday users have utilized these platforms to question stereotypes, highlight diverse gender identities, and encourage feminist discussions. Similarly, Carstensen (2014) claims that Instagram has created some opportunities to express feminist ideas and has opened up spaces that challenge traditional gender roles.

Although there is extensive research on social media and traditional gender norms, most studies focus on the negative consequences, emphasizing how social media reinforces existing gender norms and stereotypes. Carstensen (2014) argues that social media platforms are often dominated by men, reinforcing gender stereotypes and inequalities. Analyzing the design of social networks reveals fixed gender scripts which support and reinforce the binary gender system. According to

Roberts and Wescott (2024), just as misogyny has been a persistent and widespread problem in schools and other educational settings in the past, the contemporary forms of male dominance are partly shaped by manfluencers on social media. These manfluencers, prominent figures within the manosphere, reinforce unequal gender hierarchies by promoting rigid notions of masculinity and strongly sexist attitudes toward women. They often promote harmful masculine norms, misogyny and questionable guidance on mental health and financial success. Similarly, a study examining the influence of “manfluencers” and social media on the development of sexist attitudes among adolescent boys in Mexico, found that, while misogynistic influencers who explicitly address masculinity do have an impact, a broader range of cultural figures, referred to as “indirect manfluencers,” exert a more widespread influence by promoting harmful ideas about what it means to be a man, even without directly focusing on masculinity. The study also emphasizes the role of offline social contexts, including existing cultural norms, family dynamics and peer relationships, in shaping both the nature of boys’ social media use and the effect of their engagement with these misogynistic influencers (Cala et al., 2025). Therefore, it is evident that social media not only challenge gendered social norms and expectations but can also reinforce them, sometimes in even more harmful ways. In a similar vein, another study found that social media has facilitated the spread of transphobic, homophobic and misogynistic backlash, which can sometimes lead to realworld violence. For instance, platforms such as Reddit and TikTok have circulated “incel” (involuntary celibate) ideology, portraying women’s equality and sexual and gender diversity as challenges to traditional notions of masculinity (Public Affairs, 2025).

Social Media, Body Image and Self-Perception

The term body image was first coined as a mental representation of one’s body that everyone develops (Cash, 2004; Wertheim & Paxton, 2011). According to Slade (1994), body image is a complex concept that extends beyond mere perception. Even when an individual’s

perception of their own body is evaluated, the judgements of that individual are deeply influenced by cognitive, emotional, attitudinal and various other factors. It is influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by the socio-cultural context, such as established societal standards of beauty and media pressure (Cash, 2004; Wertheim & Paxton, 2011). According to a study conducted by Fardouly and Vartanian (2015) on the relationship between social media, particularly focusing on Facebook, and body image among young men and women, social media use is consistently linked to negative body image, and this connection appears to grow stronger over time. Furthermore, they argue that making comparisons about physical appearance plays a significant role in the relationship between social media and body image. However, they emphasize the need for further research, particularly involving more diverse populations and different social media platforms.

Similarly, based on a study conducted by Trajkovic (2022) examining the relationship between social media use and body image, social media platforms exert a substantial influence on users' self-perceptions, often resulting in negative outcomes. Self-perception refers to the process through which individuals become aware of themselves, develop knowledge about their own characteristics and form an understanding of who they are (Morin, 2017). Trajkovic (2022) highlights the negative effects of constant exposure to idealized standards on self-perception, such as Facebook depression and negative body image. Trajkovic states that users frequently engage with highly curated and filtered images distort reality and promote unattainable beauty standards.

Merino et al. (2024), building on this perspective, argue that idealized images and curated content on social media contribute to body dissatisfaction and negative self-perception. These findings align with a study conducted by Thai et al. (2023), which found that reducing social media use

significantly improves body image and overall self-perception, underscoring the adverse effects of extensive social media use.

Expanding on the psychological impacts of the type of content individuals are exposed to on social media, Santoniccolo et al. (2023) argue that exposure to sexualized beauty standards on social media correlates with lower body satisfaction. According to them, such beauty ideals may promote unattainable or narrow standards of appearance, contributing to negative self-perception. In contrast, exposure to a variety of appearance standards, encompassing body diversity and inclusivity, is linked to increased body satisfaction. This positive effect persists regardless of whether the images are sexualized or not, highlighting the significance of representation and diversity. However, Jarman et al. (2021) argue that although most research suggests that higher social media use is linked to negative outcomes, such as lower well-being, some studies also highlight positive effects (Lai et al., 2018, as cited in Jarman et al., 2021), resulting in mixed findings.

According to Jarman et al. (2021), the type of social media engagement—how individuals use social media—plays a key role in determining its impact. For instance, active social media usage, including posting and commenting, is associated with positive outcomes such as improved wellbeing through increased perceived social support. On the other hand, passive use, such as browsing other users' posts without interacting, is linked to negative outcomes, including heightened feelings of loneliness or depressed mood, driven by upward social comparison. This argument suggests that the different outcomes of social media use can lead to contrasting impacts, highlighting the importance of how social media is utilized.

Many scholars argue that women are more vulnerable to negative body perceptions via online participation as they engage more with appearance-related content. In support of this view, Trajković (2022) argues that this particularly affects women, who often experience sexual objectification in the media, resulting in self-objectification and physical appearance dissatisfaction. According to Rose et al. (2012), gender-specific traits play a role in the way men and women try to shape how others see them online. In their study, they examine how people express their gender on social media platforms like Facebook and found that men's photos often highlighted traits including being active, dominant and independent, while women's photos focused more on traits such as being attractive and dependent.

Expanding on these arguments, Muttaqin and Ambarwati (2020) examined the comments on an Instagram account of a popular makeup artist who has been targeted by cyberbullying due to her physical appearance, which some perceive as failing to meet societal beauty standards, to understand cyberbullying against women on Instagram in Indonesia. This research examines how cultural factors contribute to this form of bullying by examining the different types of harmful comments directed at women to discredit them. The findings show that cyberbullying is deeply linked to dominant beauty standards, such as the expectation that women should have a slim, tall, white body and sharp facial features. These ideals put pressure on women and label those who do not meet them as "not ideal." According to the authors, negative stereotypes about women's bodies are reinforced through social media comments, perpetuating these unrealistic standards. This study highlights that social media creates spaces where women who do not conform to these beauty norms often become targets of bullying, showing the harmful impact of societal beauty standards.

However, according to Mahon and Hevey (2021), while both genders are influenced by social media, men are more likely to interpret content—especially related to fitness—as motivational,

whereas women often experience more negative effects on body image. Thus, existing literature raises the question of whether social media inherently harms body image or if its effects depend on individual engagement and interpretation. In particular, these studies raise the question of whether social media creates different pressures for men and women or whether women are disproportionately affected by platform use as a mechanism that reinforces existing social hierarchies.

The commercialization of beauty standards is another important consideration when discussing body image and self-perception, as women's insecurities have become a profit-making strategy in the present world. According to Ages (2024), in an era of late-stage capitalism, profit-oriented social media platforms amplify the commodification of feminine identity and idealized beauty standards more intensively than in previous periods. Similarly, Tennekoon (2022) argues that social media has transformed perceptions of beauty, influencing individuals in both beneficial and harmful ways. In response, the cosmetic industry has increasingly commercialized these ideals, designing marketing strategies that exploit women's appearance-related insecurities. She further argues that society and market forces actively use social media to promote idealized standards, shaping women's perceptions until these ideals become internalized and accepted as normal. The cosmetic brands increasingly align their marketing strategies with current social trends, incorporating feminist ideas into their representations of beauty.

In sum, the existing literature demonstrates that beauty standards and gender norms are deeply embedded in social, cultural and historical contexts, shaping the lived experiences and self-perceptions of women. In Sri Lanka and beyond, ideals such as fair skin, slim body shapes and socially prescribed gender norms continue to influence women's social, economic, and psychological lives. Influencers, digital networks and online communities play a central role in

shaping these beauty and gender norms, highlighting both the opportunities and responsibilities inherent in wielding such platforms. While there is a substantial body of literature on the psychological and health-related effects of social media on body image and self-perception, there has been comparatively little sociological research on this topic, such as mine, particularly focusing on Instagram, which interrogates the interplay between platform use and existing gender hierarchies. Furthermore, although some studies in the broader South Asian context examine the influence of social media on body image and self-perception, there appears to be a notable lack of research specifically focused on young women in Sri Lanka. This presents a significant gap in the literature and highlights the need for further investigation in the Sri Lankan context, particularly focusing on its sociological aspect. Therefore, understanding how social media shapes body image, self-perception, and gendered social hierarchies is particularly important in the Sri Lankan context, where local beauty standards, colorism and traditional gender norms intersect with global digital influences.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Building on the literature discussed in the previous chapter, this research is guided by an intersectional feminist lens to examine how social media shapes body image and self-perception among Sri Lankan young women. Feminist scholarship has long emphasized that women's bodies and appearances are not simply individual or biological matters but are shaped by broader social structures, cultural expectations and power relations. Similarly, beauty standards, gender norms and ideals of femininity are socially constructed and maintained through institutions such as media, markets and everyday social institutions. In such contexts, the intersectional feminist perspective,

rooted in antiracist feminist critiques, highlights that gender alone is insufficient to fully understand women's oppression. Instead, their experiences are shaped by multiple, intersecting systems of power such as race, class, and sexuality (Carastathis, 2014), which leads us to the understanding that women's experiences are not uniform. Said differently, feminist intersectionality highlights how multiple systems of inequality and discrimination operate together to shape the experiences of some women (Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 2020). In contemporary contexts, this lens is applied across academic discourse, women's organizations, social justice movements, and governmental policy frameworks. Applying this framework allows this study to explore how social media representations of beauty intersect with existing gender norms and skin tone hierarchies within the Sri Lankan context, shaping how young women understand and evaluate their own bodies. In this study, this intersectional feminist framework is used as an analytical tool to interpret both participants' narratives and social media content, with particular attention to how overlapping social identities shape body image and selfperception.

Feminist scholars have long argued that women's bodies are not merely biological entities but are shaped and regulated through social and cultural expectations. Women's bodies have historically been subjected to various forms of social regulation, ranging from restrictive dress codes to the control of reproductive rights. Feminists argue that people are more likely to rely on moral reasoning when expressing opinions about women's bodily autonomy compared to men's. Consequently, many body-related behaviours are more often framed as moral issues for women than for men (Morgenroth et al., 2024). Feminist scholars further argue that in patriarchal Western societies, women have historically been categorized into two opposing moral types: those considered pure and chaste, and therefore morally virtuous, and those viewed as sexually promiscuous or seductive, and thus morally deviant. From this perspective, the regulation of

women's bodies is often justified through the idea that women's purity must be protected. As a result, various social policies and practices that restrict women's bodily autonomy are framed as necessary measures to safeguard them from moral corruption. For instance, this view suggests that restrictive dress codes help preserve women's purity and chastity, keeping them aligned with the ideals of the "Madonna," rather than allowing them to be sexualized or perceived as morally transgressive "whores" (Bareket et al., 2018; Morgenroth et al., 2024).

In a similar vein, feminist scholars contend that cultural norms surrounding appearance impose unrealistic standards of beauty. This has led to bodily dissatisfaction becoming so prevalent among women that some scholars refer to it as "normative discontent" (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984). Building on this argument, sociologists and social scientists also argue that feminine beauty is a socially constructed normative ideal that upholds a discourse of women's subordination and male authority (Callaghan, 1994). Scholars argue that cultural expectations around thinness and beauty are major factors in women's ongoing dissatisfaction with their bodies, with the media reinforcing the idea that women must conform to these standards to be socially accepted. Furthermore, both theoretical and empirical work suggests that sociocultural norms regarding ideal appearance play a central role in shaping people's, particularly women's, judgements of their own bodies (Strahan et al., 2006). Feminist analyses of the regulation of women's bodies highlight the mechanisms through which societal expectations are internalized and enforced.

Building on this, an intersectional approach allows for a deeper exploration of how these pressures interact with factors such as skin tone, body shape, and media influence. Accordingly, scholars argue that women's perceptions of their bodies are formed through the interaction of various factors, including age, media representations, cultural norms, social surroundings and individual

experiences (Sadik & Yilmaz, 2025). In a study focused on Asian American women's body image experiences through an intersectional perspective, Brady et al. (2017) argue that some existing research indicates that women across racial and ethnic groups, White, Asian, Hispanic and Black, experience similar levels of body dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, Asian American women tend to report greater dissatisfaction with their particular body parts, including breast size and the appearance of their eyes, compared to white and Hispanic women. On the contrary, some studies suggest that Asian American women endorse thinner body ideals than White women, while others indicate they experience less body dissatisfaction compared to their White counterparts. Thus, they emphasize the need for a deeper understanding of these women's body image and its associated factors, and they suggest adopting an intersectional perspective to examine such issues, commending its capacity to generate innovative responses to enduring problems. According to them, in the body image literature, many studies on Asian American women do not sufficiently explore how race and gender intersect and shape one another, resulting in limited attention to how the experience of one identity, such as gender, is influenced by the contextual dynamics of the other (Brady et al., 2017). Therefore, adopting an intersectional lens is important to better understand how multiple social identities interact to shape women's body image experiences.

According to Crenshaw (1989), the legal scholar who introduced the term intersectional feminism to understand the discrimination experience by black women, the intersectional feminist lens helps to identify the unique issues and discrimination faced by black women, which is not fully captured in the "already established analytical structure" in feminist theory and antiracist politics. She suggests that Black women may face forms of discrimination that overlap with, yet also differ from, those encountered by white women and black men. Black women often face "double discrimination" that stems from both racial and gender biases. She argues that black women are

vulnerable not only because they are women but also because they are people of colour and they are poor. Occasionally, this discrimination is not merely a combination of racial and gender discrimination, but rather a unique form of bias/discrimination directed specifically at them as black women (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw further explains her argument using Black workingclass women as an example, emphasizing that the employment-related discrimination they face is not based solely on sexism or racism, but on the combination of both (Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 2020). Similarly, Collins (2006) contends that black women experience a distinctive social position because they are situated at the intersection of two dominant structures of oppression, race and gender.

Intersectionality, along with the key concepts used to apply it as an analytical framework, is grounded in what can be described as “system thinking.” Instead of focusing on individuals and their interpersonal relationships, systems thinking examines the patterns of connections that individuals and groups have with broader social, economic and political structures. Rather than making generalized claims about people or society, it considers historical conditions, such as colonialism and patriarchy, as foundational influences that shape, though do not determine, the development of behaviours, societal norms and practices over time. Historically, socially and structurally constructed gender, race, class and ability operate as mechanisms that shape and regulate engagement in social, economic and cultural spheres. Systems thinking involves understanding these historical roots, how they inform larger social processes, and how those processes, in turn, affect individuals and groups (Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 2020). Building on this theoretical framework, Darnell (2018) argues that intersectional feminism emphasizes the importance of uplifting women who hold multiple, overlapping identities, such as those related to race, religion, ability, gender identity or expression, sexual

orientation, socioeconomic background, citizenship status or body type. Exploring the crosscultural body image in the United States, she discusses the broader issue of overlapping forms of oppression and what it means to live as someone facing intersectional discrimination. The author employs the metaphor of a 'cage' to describe how a woman can be trapped by multiple forms of oppression at the same time. Each wire reflects an aspect of her identity linked to discrimination. These parts of her identity are not changeable, and she must live with them every day. Together, they create a complex system of barriers that restrict her freedom and opportunities (Darnell, 2018). This reflects the idea of intersectional oppression, where different types of discrimination combine and affect a person in unique ways. Similarly, Cole (2009) argues that intersectionality considers the experiences and significance embedded in multiple social categories of identity, difference and inequality, recognizing that these categories are inseparably linked.

While intersectionality has been widely applied in Western contexts, it is equally important to consider how these dynamics operate within Global South settings such as Sri Lanka. In this context, Sri Lankan women's body image and self-perception are shaped not only by gender but also by historically rooted systems such as colonialism, colorism, social and cultural norms and class hierarchies. For instance, colonial legacies have contributed to the privileging of lighter skin tones, embedding Eurocentric beauty ideals within local cultural norms (Mady et al., 2022). As a result, skin tone hierarchies continue to influence perceptions of attractiveness, social status and desirability among women. Colorism, in particular, operates as a significant axis of inequality, where lighter skin is often associated with beauty, purity, and higher social value, while darker skin is marginalized (Sharma et al., 2025). Those hierarchies intersect with gendered expectations, placing additional pressure on Sri Lankan women to conform to narrow and often unattainable standards of beauty (Koththigoda, 2025). Such expectations are further reinforced through

everyday social interactions, family structures and cultural practices which collectively shape women's embodied experiences.

In contemporary contexts, social media platforms play a critical role in intensifying these dynamics. While offering for self-expression, platforms such as Instagram and TikTok also reproduce and circulate dominant beauty ideals, often privileging fair skin, slim body types and Eurocentric features (Lakshmi, 2025). At the same time, these platforms can create new forms of visibility and resistance, allowing women to challenge and renegotiate dominant beauty norms. Therefore, an intersectional approach is essential to understanding how global and local forces interact to shape body image and self-perception among Sri Lankan women.

Thus, grounded in an intersectional theoretical framework, this research examines how overlapping identities, such as gender, sociocultural background, and age, shape individual experiences related to their social media usage and how it impacts their body image and self-perception. In this study, intersectionality is used as an analytical lens to interpret participants' narratives and social media content. This theoretical framework will explore not only the surfacelevel influence of social media on body ideals but also how these impacts differ and overlap across diverse identities among young Sri Lankan women who belong to diverse ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Rather than treating these influential factors separately, this approach allows for an analysis of how these dimensions intersect in shaping online experiences and self-perception.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how social media, particularly Instagram, shapes body image and self-perception among young Sri Lankan women, and how it may challenge or reinforce existing gender hierarchies. For that purpose, qualitative design is well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena where participants' subjective experiences and interpretations are central to the research objectives. Guided by a social constructivist framework, the study recognizes that reality is shaped through social interactions and shared experiences. Additionally, this study employs a multi-method qualitative approach, combining in-depth interviews and social media content analysis. This combination offers a more comprehensive understanding by capturing both the content young women are exposed to and their personal reflections and responses to this content.

Qualitative research is a methodological approach that aims to explore and develop a comprehensive understanding of real-world phenomena (Moser & Korstjens, 2017) and this research design primarily focuses on open-ended questions, such as "how" and "why," that cannot be easily reduced to numerical data. As a result, qualitative research designs are often non-linear, in contrast to the more structured nature of quantitative approaches (Cleland, 2017). A key strength of qualitative research lies in its capacity to explore and explain complex processes and patterns of human behaviour that are difficult to quantify. Phenomena such as experiences, attitudes and behaviours are often nuanced and cannot be fully captured through numerical measures alone. In this regard, qualitative approaches enable participants to articulate their thoughts, feelings and experiences in their own words, providing deeper insight into how and why they interpret particular situations or events (Tenny et al., 2022).

Given that this study seeks to explore how social media shapes body image and self-perception among Sri Lankan young women, a qualitative research design is particularly appropriate because the research focuses on understanding participants' lived experiences, perceptions and interpretations, which are inherently subjective and context-dependent. Additionally, the study aims to examine how intersecting factors such as gender, culture and social context influence these experiences. Therefore, a qualitative approach allows for a more in-depth and nuanced exploration of these dynamics, making it well-suited to address the research questions of this study.

This study adopts a social constructivist framework to examine how body image and beauty ideals are socially and culturally constructed and experienced by Sri Lankan young women. The concept of social construction, which underpins social constructivist theories, explains how phenomena that appear natural are in fact shaped by social and cultural processes. Such phenomena are often taken for granted and regarded as normative or unquestionable (Trudy, 2024). This perspective is particularly relevant to the present study, as ideals of beauty and body image are not fixed or universal, but are socially produced and reinforced through cultural norms and media representations. These standards influence how individuals, especially young women, perceive and evaluate their own bodies. Although these norms may appear natural, they are products of specific cultural contexts, leading many individuals within a society to share a similar understanding of beauty and self-worth. Over time, these interpretations may shift as new ideas and beliefs emerge and influence cultural institutions (Trudy, 2024), including digital platforms.

In contemporary contexts, social media plays a significant role in both reproducing and reshaping these constrictions by circulating dominant beauty ideals while also providing spaces for alternative representations. In turn, these evolving perspectives may become normalized (Trudy,

2024), further shaping how body image is experienced and understood among Sri Lankan young women.

Additionally, this study employs a multi-method qualitative research design that incorporates both in-depth interviews and social media content analysis. This approach enables the collection of rich, detailed data from multiple sources, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

In-depth interviews are a key method of data collection in qualitative research and have long been widely used by social researchers. For example, the classical ethnographer Malinowski emphasized the importance of engaging directly with individuals in order to understand their perspectives. It is often defined as a form of conversation, and the aim of such is to achieve both a broad understanding of key issues and a detailed exploration of each topic in depth (Legard et al., 2003). Accordingly, in-depth interviews provide insight into participants' lived experiences, perceptions and personal interpretations. In this study, in-depth interviews are particularly valuable for exploring how Sri Lankan young women interpret and experience body image and self-perception in their everyday lives, as well as how these experiences are shaped by prevailing gender norms and social expectations. This approach allows participants to reflect on how cultural ideals of femininity influence their thoughts, feelings and everyday practices related to their bodies.

In addition to in-depth interviews, social media content analysis is an important qualitative research method used for this study to examine how meanings are constructed and communicated within digital spaces. According to Krippendorff, content analysis is “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Drisko & Maschi, 2011). Social media content analysis is a qualitative content analysis method

applied to digital platforms. Thus, this study employs social media content analysis to examine how beauty ideals and gender norms are constructed, represented, and circulated on social media. This approach allows the researcher to analyze patterns, themes and narratives within social media content, providing insight into the broader sociocultural context that shapes women's body image. By analyzing posts, captions, comments and interactions, the study can capture how gender norms influence what is considered desirable or acceptable, as well as how these norms are internalized, reinforced, or contested by users. This method complements the in-depth interviews by offering a view of the collective, culturally embedded messages about bodily image in digital spaces, allowing for a richer understanding of the intersection between individual experiences and societal influences.

Study Location

This study specifically focuses on the Sri Lankan context, a South Asian country with a rich cultural heritage shaped by religion, colonial history and traditional social structures. The majority of the population identifies as Sinhalese and practices Theravada Buddhism, which strongly influences social norms, values and everyday practices. While Buddhism promotes principles such as modesty and detachment from materialism, modern consumer culture, amplified by global media and social media platforms, has introduced new ideas, especially around physical appearance and gender expression. In addition to the Sinhala-Buddhist majority, Sri Lanka is home to minority ethnic groups such as Tamils and Muslims, as well as religious communities including Christians, Catholics, Hindus, and Muslims.

In Sri Lankan culture, regardless of ethnic or religious background, women have traditionally held a central position within the family unit. They are viewed as the 'reproducers' and 'upholders of their traditions,' with primary responsibility for household decision-making, while men typically

provide financial support. Yet, women were not solely limited to roles such as cooking and childrearing, nor were they completely dependent on their husbands. They possessed a certain amount of autonomy and economic independence and were regarded as the central figure who held the family together. However, as a result of British colonial rule, Sri Lankan women were depicted as subordinate to men and seen as individuals who needed to be confined to and protected within the domestic sphere (Vithanage, 2013). In the modern context, even though women have long achieved high educational levels, recent studies highlight that many women and men still accept conventional roles at home. For instance, based on the ‘Women’s Wellbeing Survey-2019,’ approximately half of Sri Lankan women agreed that “a man should show he is the boss” (47.5%) and that “a good wife obeys her husband even if she disagrees” (46.5%). These conservative views persist, especially among older and less educated women, whereas younger and urban segments show more egalitarian attitudes (Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka, 2020).

In recent years, social media has become an increasingly influential space in Sri Lanka. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and TikTok are widely used for self-expression, networking and image sharing. However, these platforms often reproduce global beauty standards, which may conflict with local cultural and religious values and gender norms. For young women, navigating social media can involve negotiating between traditional norms and modern pressures related to appearance, body image and gender roles.

This cultural context makes Sri Lanka a compelling setting for studying the influence of social media on body image and self-perception. The intersection of religious values, traditional gender expectations and the growing impact of global beauty standards through digital media creates a unique environment to explore how young women construct and understand their identities online.

Study Population and Proposed Sample

This study focuses on the young Sri Lankan women who are active users of social media, with particular attention to Instagram, one of the largest and most influential platforms. For the in-depth interviews, the study population consists of young women between the ages of 18 and 24 who reside in Sri Lanka and regularly engage with Instagram. The age category was decided based on the available data on global Instagram users, which indicates that the majority of users fall within this category. According to Statista (2024), by April 2024, nearly 32 percent of Instagram users worldwide were aged 18 to 24. This age group represents a period of life when individuals are particularly sensitive to social comparisons and societal expectations, making it a critical window for examining perceptions of beauty, body image and self-presentation. As one of the largest social networks, Instagram is particularly famous among young women as active users who are highly influenced by online content related to beauty, body maintenance and fashion trends. These users are often exposed to visual and textual content that reflects both global and local beauty standards, influencing how they perceive themselves and others. By focusing on this population, the study aims to capture the ways in which social media engagement interacts with cultural and gender norms to shape body image perceptions among young Sri Lankan women. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of both personal experiences and broader sociocultural influences that are embedded in digital platforms.

The sample for the in-depth interviews consists of ten participants, selected through purposive sampling to ensure that all participants meet the criteria of being Sri Lankan women between 18 and 24 years old who actively use Instagram and engage with content related to beauty and body image. To align with Sri Lanka's ethnic and religious demographics, participants were intended to be selected as follows.

Table 1: Demographic Data of the Sample

Ethnic-Religious Group	Population (%)	No. of Interviews
Sinhala-Buddhist	74.9	07
Muslim-Islamic	9.3	01
Tamil-Hindu	15.2	02
Total	100.0	10

To be eligible, participants must have completed the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE A/L), equivalent to the completion of upper secondary education, and reside within the Colombo District. Given the small sample size of ten participants, further subdividing by additional demographic categories was not feasible, as it could overly disperse the data and reduce analytical clarity.

Recruitment was conducted through snowball sampling via personal referrals, while excluding individuals personally known to the researcher to minimize potential bias. This sampling strategy was appropriate for the study as it enabled the selection of participants with direct experience relevant to the research focus. Initial participants were identified through the researcher's academic contacts in Sri Lanka, including colleagues and fellow researchers, who were contacted to help identify suitable participants. Subsequently, additional participants were recruited through referrals from already selected participants, consistent with the snowball sampling approach. Individuals identified through both personal and participant referrals were then contacted by the researcher, informed about the purpose of the study and invited to participate.

Although the initial plan was to include two Tamil participants, only one could be recruited due to the challenges in accessing this population. To maintain the total sample size of ten, an additional Sinhala participant was included. This limitation is acknowledged, as it may slightly reduce the

representativeness of the Tamil perspective within the study. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of the Interview Participants

Participant's ID	Age	DS Division	Highest Level of Education	Current Status	Ethnicity	Religion	Type of Instagram Account
P1	24	Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte	Bachelors	Employed	Sinhala	Buddhist	Public
P2	24	Seethawaka	Bachelors	Not in Paid Employment	Sinhala	Buddhist	Private
P3	20	Seethawaka	Undergraduate	Student	Sinhala	Buddhist	Private
P4	24	Homagama	Undergraduate	Employed and Student	Sinhala	Buddhist	Private
P5	22	Seethawaka	Undergraduate	Employed and Student	Sinhala	Buddhist	Private
P6	24	Colombo	Undergraduate	Employed and Student	Sinhala	Buddhist	Private
P7	22	Colombo	Higher National Diploma	Student	Muslim	Islam	Private
P8	24	Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte	Bachelors	Employed	Sinhala	Buddhist	Private
P9	23	Kesbewa	Bachelors	Employed	Sinhala	Buddhist	Private
P10	21	Thimbirigasyaya	GCE A/L Examination	Employed	Tamil	Hindu	Private

Data Collection

As mentioned above, this research consists of two key methods: in-depth interviews and social media content analysis.

In-Depth Interviews

The study employs in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method. A semistructured interview guide (see Appendix A) was used to allow for both consistency across participants and flexibility to explore individual experiences in greater depth. The interview questions were organized around several key areas, including their background information, participants' Instagram usage, perception of their Instagram use in relation to body image and selfperception, social hierarchies related to gender and gender norms, and participants' reflections on the platform and its broader impact on individuals.

The interview guide was initially developed in English and subsequently translated into Sinhala, as the interviews were primarily conducted in Sinhala. This was done to ensure participants' comfort and to enable them to express their thoughts and experiences more freely. Participants were given the option to take part in the interview in either Sinhala or English; however, all ten participants chose to conduct the interview in Sinhala.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. Out of ten interviews, seven were conducted virtually via Zoom, while the remaining three were conducted over the phone, based on participants' preferences and convenience. With participants' informed consent, the interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in data collection.

The sample size was determined based on the scope and the feasibility of the study. Data collection was guided by the principle of thematic saturation, and by the final interviews, no substantially new themes were emerging from the data.

Social Media Content Analysis:

For the social media content analysis, only publicly available Instagram content was collected. This approach ensured that the data reflected naturally occurring online interactions without accessing private or restricted material.

This analysis focused on ten hashtags, consisting of five that challenge mainstream beauty standards, body image norms and gender expectations in Sri Lanka, and five that reinforce them. The selection of social media content followed a structured process. First, an initial list of relevant hashtags was generated through exploratory searches using key terms related to Sri Lankan beauty standards, body image and gender norms. For this purpose, the Instagram search tool was used with prompts such as “Sri Lankan girls,” “Sri Lankan women,” and “Sri Lankan beauty standards” to find relevant hashtags. These hashtags were then reviewed and refined based on their relevance to the research topic, frequency of use and their ability to capture contrasting representations, both reinforcing and resisting dominant ideals. These initial hashtags were then used to explore additional hashtags commonly used by users posting under them, allowing the identification of widely used and research-relevant hashtags. To ensure contextual relevance, only content that could be identified as Sri Lankan was included. This was determined through indicators such as language, location tags, captions, cultural references, and user profiles. The hashtags selected through this process are listed in the Table 3 below.

Table 3: Selected Hashtags for Analysis

	Hashtag	Description
Challenging Gender & Beauty Norms	#browngirl	This hashtag highlights and celebrates the natural brown skin tones commonly found among Sri Lankan individuals, which fall between very dark and very fair, challenging the societal preference for fair skin.
	#cinnamongirl	This hashtag celebrates medium-brown skin tones, often referred to as “cinnamon colour,” emphasizing natural beauty and resisting dominant fair-skinned ideals in Sri Lanka. It became a recent trend following a song titled “ <i>Cinnamon Kella</i> ,” which means “a girl with a cinnamon skin tone.”
	#srilankanwomen	This hashtag showcases the diversity and pride of Sri Lankan women, celebrating their identities and natural beauty.
	#slbeauty	This hashtag highlights Sri Lankan beauty in innovative ways, including wearing traditional clothing with modern adaptations and showcasing body-revealing styles, challenging conventional gender and beauty norms in Sri Lanka.
	#selfcare	This hashtag features posts in which Sri Lankan women prioritize their own life, self-worth, personal enjoyment, and relaxation over societal pressure.
Reinforcing	#longhair	This hashtag features posts that emphasize long hair as a key element of feminine beauty, often reinforcing traditional
		beauty standards associated with femininity and attractiveness in the Sri Lankan context.

#osariya	This hashtag highlights the traditional Sri Lankan saree, emphasizing Kandyan pride, cultural identity, modesty, and femininity, often reinforcing traditional beauty and gender norms.
#reddaihattei	This hashtag showcases the traditional Sri Lankan attire <i>redda</i> and <i>hatte</i> , emphasizing Sinhalese cultural heritage, modesty and femininity, often promoting traditional gender norms and beauty ideals.
#kandylamissi	This hashtag is used to indicate belonging to traditional Kandyan culture, symbolizing Kandyan cultural pride, elegance and femininity, while often reinforcing conventional beauty standards and gender expectations in Sri Lanka.
#sltraditional	This hashtag emphasizes Sri Lankan traditional practices, attire, and cultural values, reflecting heritage and continuity while often reinforcing conventional beauty ideals.

For each selected hashtag, five posts were collected, along with the caption and five associated comments per post. This resulted in a total sample of 50 posts, 50 captions and a minimum of 250 comments. The inclusion of posts, captions and comments allowed the study to capture not only the representation of beauty ideals but also audience engagement and responses to such content.

The collected data included visual content (images and a few videos), captions, hashtags, and user comments. These elements were documented and organized systematically to facilitate further analysis of how beauty standards, body image and gender norms are constructed, negotiated and reproduced on social media platforms. No private, restricted or password-protected content was accessed at any stage of the data collection process.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and subsequently translated into English to ensure a comprehensive understanding of participants' responses. Following transcriptions and translations, the data collected from both in-depth interviews and social media content analysis were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes that emerge from the participants' responses and social media content.

The thematic analysis followed a systematic, step-by-step process. First, the transcripts and social media content were read multiple times to achieve familiarity with the data and gain an overall understanding of the content. Next, initial codes were generated by systematically identifying meaningful segments of text across the transcripts and social media content. These codes captured recurring ideas related to body image, self-perception, beauty ideals, and gender norms. These codes were then organized into potential themes by grouping related codes and identifying patterns that reflected broader concepts.

NVivo software was employed to facilitate the coding process and manage the data systematically, ensuring transparency and efficiency in identifying recurring patterns and relationships across the dataset. After the initial coding, the themes were reviewed and refined, checking their alignment with both the coded data and the research objectives. This iterative process ensured that the themes accurately presented the participants' perspectives and the social media content analyzed. The final themes were defined and named, providing a coherent structure for presenting the findings in subsequent chapters. This process ensured a close connection between the raw data, codes and final themes.

Additionally, select AI tools were used only to assist in summarizing content and extracting key points from the literature and were not involved in data coding or analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout this study. Written consent was obtained from all interview participants prior to the interviews. Each participant received a detailed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, potential risks or discomfort, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty or consequences. In addition to written consent, verbal consent was reconfirmed at the beginning of each interview to ensure participants fully understood the research and felt comfortable proceeding. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participants were reminded that they could skip any question or terminate the interview at any time without providing a reason.

To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was removed or anonymized in transcripts and in the final reporting. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and any potentially identifying details were generalized or excluded. Audio recordings were stored securely on passwordprotected devices, with access restricted solely to the researcher.

Data protection measures adhered to institutional and ethical guidelines. All digital files were encrypted, and raw data were securely stored and will be destroyed following the completion of the research project, in accordance with the University of Ottawa's policies.

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board (REB), ensuring that all procedures conformed to the ethical standards for research involving human participants.

Reflexivity and Positionality

As a young Sri Lankan woman, my interest in this topic stems from personal experiences and observations of peers navigating social media's influence on body image and self-perception. These lived experiences enhance my sensitivity to the subject matter and inform my approach to the research. At the same time, I remain critically aware of my positionality and the potential biases it may introduce. Efforts have been made throughout the study to ensure that participants' perspectives are accurately represented and prioritized, allowing their voices to remain central to the analysis. Reflexive practice has guided the research process, helping to balance my insider understanding with a commitment to methodological rigour and ethical responsibility.

Limitations

Although every effort was made to ensure methodological rigour and reliability, this study is subject to some limitations. First, focusing solely on Instagram may overlook the influence of other social media platforms that also shape body image and self-perception. Second, the use of a small, purposively selected sample limits the generalizability of the findings and may not capture the full diversity of experiences among young Sri Lankan women. Third, data collection faced challenges due to a severe environmental hazard in Sri Lanka during the interview period, which made it difficult to contact participants and schedule meetings. Although attempts were made to include two Tamil participants, only one was recruited, potentially limiting the representativeness of the Tamil perspective within the study. Fourth, while Instagram comments were initially captured using NCapture, the platform's dynamic and non-linear structure resulted in formatting inconsistencies; therefore, only analytically relevant comments were manually captured and imported into NVivo for thematic analysis. Finally, participants' responses may be shaped by

personal biases and subjective perceptions, which can affect the consistency and objectivity of the data.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the in-depth interviews and social media content analysis, demonstrating how social media shapes beauty standards, self-perception, and gender norms among young women in Sri Lanka. The findings are organized thematically to provide a clear overview of participants' experiences and the patterns identified in the data. The key themes and subthemes identified through thematic analysis are summarized in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Themes and Subthemes Identified Through Thematic Analysis

Themes	Subthemes	Example Concepts
Theme 1: The construction and negotiation of body image on Instagram	Instagram as a space of constant comparison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-evaluation through others • Aspirational identification • Normalized comparison
	Racialized beauty ideals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White beauty standards & Eurocentric features • Filter whitening effects • Resistance to whitening ideals
	The construction of body image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accepting Instagram beauty standard (internalized beauty ideals) • Body dissatisfaction • Confidence instability • Instagram is not real • Learning to accept natural body (body acceptance narratives)
	Curated digital selfpresentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Filtered self-representation • Fear of judgment and posting anxiety
Theme 2: The reinforcement and contestation of gendered social hierarchies	Reinforcement of gendered hierarchies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional gender norms • Gendered moral surveillance • Sexualization of women • Femininity regulation

	Reproduction of traditional gender roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patriarchal norm reproduction • Male provider ideology • Women as dependent • Domestic femininity ideals
	Challenging gendered hierarchies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equality narratives • Gender role fluidity (shared responsibility) • Female independence representation
Theme 3: The role of influencers and platform power in shaping social norms	Influencer culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencer power • Role model femininity • Commercialized empowerment
	The invisible platform control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belief in free choice • Platform power (algorithm shaping content)
Theme 4: Self-perception transformation in digital contexts	Internalized responsibility for self-perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Depend on how you think” narrative
	Instagram as a source of harm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional harm, insecurity
	Instagram as a source of motivation and selfdevelopment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fitness, confidence, lifestyle motivation, personal growth narratives, self-development through content
	Digital identity formation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity shaped through platform use

Before diving into the thematic findings, it is important to gain an understanding of participants’ general Instagram use. This section outlines how participants engage with the platform, including the frequency and types of content they view and their typical interactions such as liking, commenting or posting content. Understanding these patterns provides context for interpreting the subsequent themes related to beauty standards, body image, self-perception and gender norms.

Among the interview participants, most reported using Instagram for approximately 2-3 hours per day, while some indicated usage of 3-4 hours per day. However, this use was not continuous, as participants accessed the platform whenever they had free time. Nearly all participants reported checking Instagram early in the morning after waking up and/or before going to bed. Additionally, some participants mentioned using the platform during their commute to or from work, as well as during work breaks.

When examining the reasons for using Instagram, all participants reported that they spent more time viewing others' content than sharing their own. Most participants primarily watch reels, stories and posts shared by friends or celebrities, as well as fashion-related content such as makeup tutorials or clothing brands, humorous videos, cooking or food content and browse Instagram shopping content. Some participants indicated that they use Instagram as a memory album, where they can store their favourite photos and videos in one place, and to watch motivational or educational content. Additionally, several participants reported using the platform to enhance their social lives by interacting with friends through messaging, liking, commenting and sharing content.

The Construction and Negotiation of Body Image on Instagram

This theme examines the ways in which body image is constructed and negotiated within Instagram spaces. The findings reveal that participants' perceptions of their bodies are shaped by the content they consume, the accounts they follow, and the interactions they have on the platform.

Instagram as a Space of Constant Comparison

All interview participants reported that they have compared themselves to others on Instagram at some point in their lives, and many continue to do so. Some participants noted that they engaged in such comparison more frequently when they were younger and new to the

platform, but no longer do so. It was evident that these comparisons most often occur when participants encounter individuals they perceive as more attractive. The findings indicate that participants primarily compare aspects of their physical appearance, including skin colour, hair, height, and body shape.

Self-Evaluation Through Others

Participants' accounts indicate that Instagram serves as a key space where self-evaluation is shaped through comparison with others. All interview participants appeared to assess themselves in relation to others on the platform, forming both positive and negative perceptions of their own appearance. For many, exposure to idealized images contributed to feelings of dissatisfaction, as they often perceived themselves as less attractive when compared to others.

Several participants described how such comparison negatively influenced their self-image. One participant explained:

When I see others on Instagram wearing nice hairstyles, either loose hair or hair buns, I feel that my hair is ugly. Also, I am not comfortable with my smile because I don't like my teeth. When I see people posting smiling photos, I feel miserable. (P2, personal communication, January 13, 2026).

The same participant, a young mother who had recently given birth, further reflected on how comparison affected her perceptions of her post-pregnancy body:

My friend also got pregnant at the same time as me. But when I look at her posts now, she looks so beautiful, just like she was before. But I have changed a lot. I can't even wear a crop top now because the stretch marks on my belly are ugly. I have gained weight, and

my breasts are bigger now, which I don't like. So, when I see my friend on Instagram, I feel that they are still beautiful, but I've become ugly. (P2, personal communication, January 13, 2026).

However, not all comparisons resulted in negative feelings. Some participants reported experiencing a sense of satisfaction when comparing themselves to others they perceived as attractive. In such instances, comparison functioned as a way of affirming their own appearance.

Interestingly, participants' comparisons with celebrities produced contrasting responses. One participant compared her body to that of Piumi Hansamali and expressed satisfaction with her own appearance, stating that while the celebrity's body was achieved through artificial means, her own body was natural. In this case, the comparison functioned as a source of confidence and selfvalidation. In contrast, another participant referenced the same celebrity but reported feelings of dissatisfaction, describing Piumi Hansamali as more beautiful in comparison to herself. This illustrates how engagement with the same figure can lead to different forms of self-evaluation, resulting in either positive or negative perceptions of one's own body.

Additionally, a few participants stated that they do not actively compare themselves to others. Instead, they reported appreciating content by recognizing it as aesthetically pleasing without relating it to their own appearance or engaging in self-evaluation.

Aspirational Identification

The findings of the interviews indicate that Instagram also functions as a space of aspirational identification, where individuals develop a desire to resemble or emulate others they encounter on the platform. Many participants reported wanting to look or live similar lifestyles to individuals they follow, including both celebrities and ordinary users. These aspirations were

reflected in attempts to replicate specific aspects such as posing styles, clothing choices, physical appearance, and overall lifestyle. Participants described a desire for features such as a model-like body, flawless skin, and changes in hairstyles or hair colour, as well as modifications to body shape or specific body parts.

Some participants also highlighted how these aspirations extend beyond their own experiences to those within their social circles. For instance, one participant described a friend who, influenced by celebrity culture on social media, actively attempted to emulate such lifestyles by dressing like celebrities, visiting similar locations, and adopting beauty practices such as lip fillers, eyelash extensions, and artificial nails, which are not widely practiced among Sri Lankan women in everyday contexts.

In other cases, participants noted that young women may imitate influencers' styles even when these do not align with their own body types. Despite this mismatch, individuals may still adopt similar clothing or fashion choices due to the influence of influencers. Several participants also reported making clothing purchases after seeing items worn by celebrities or influencers, believing that these styles would enhance their own appearance.

At the same time, some participants framed this process more positively, describing it as a source of motivation for self-improvement. One participant noted that exposure to certain content inspired her to consider changes in her own appearance.

Participants also reflected on the gendered nature of these aspirations. One participant suggested that this desire to resemble others is more prevalent among women than men, explaining:

Women tend to overthink more than men. They try to improve themselves by comparing themselves with others. So, they feel more pressure to look perfect. When we see something beautiful online, we want to look like them, buy the same things, and try the same things. I don't think men experience this pressure in the same way. (P8, personal communication, January 30, 2026).

Normalized Comparison

The term 'normalized comparison' referred to the way in which comparing oneself to others on Instagram is perceived as a natural and routine practice. Findings from the interviews suggest that such comparisons are not always intentional or conscious but rather occur automatically as part of everyday engagement with the platform.

Approximately half of the participants reported that they were often unaware of the reason behind their comparisons, describing them as spontaneous and habitual. These comparisons were not necessarily deliberate acts of evaluation but instead emerged as an almost automatic response to viewing content on Instagram. Participants indicated that scrolling through images and videos of others, particularly those perceived as more attractive, often triggered immediate self-assessment without prior intention.

One participant explained that comparison occurs "naturally," emphasizing that it is a common experience shared by many users. This perception suggests that comparison has become normalized within social media use, where evaluating oneself in relation to others is embedded in routine online interactions. As a result, participants often engaged in comparison without active questioning or reflecting on the behaviour, reinforcing its taken-for-granted nature in their everyday use of Instagram.

Racialized Beauty Ideals

This subtheme explores how racialized beauty ideals are reflected and negotiated through Instagram use. Participants' accounts indicate the presence of dominant beauty standards that privilege lighter skin tones and Eurocentric features, often reinforced through platform-specific practices such as the use of filters. At the same time, the findings also reveal instances where participants question and resist these ideals, highlighting the complex ways in which such standards are both reproduced and challenged in everyday social media engagement.

White Beauty Standards & Eurocentric Features

Participants' accounts indicate that Instagram plays a significant role in promoting white beauty standards and Eurocentric features. Many participants noted that both platform content and Instagram filters contribute to ideals that privilege lighter, smoother skin and altered facial features, reinforcing the perception of fair skin as a marker of beauty. These representations often emphasize a "perfect" appearance characterized by clear skin and refined features.

One participant highlighted how filters and makeup trends contribute to these ideals, stating:

Now, many filters give a modern makeup look. These filters create an artificial beauty and a modern appearance. I think Instagram promotes modern, western-style makeup, such as artificial eyelashes, blush, and eye shadow. So, I think it promotes westernized makeup rather than natural beauty. (P8, personal communication, January 30, 2026).

Several participants reported actively using skin-lightening filters to enhance their appearance, describing how these filters make their skin tone appear lighter, brighter and more aesthetically pleasing. In addition to altering skin tone, such filters were perceived to improve features such as

eyelashes, makeup, lipstick and eyebrows, creating an overall “perfect look.” Some participants viewed these filters positively, despite acknowledging that they promote white beauty standards. For instance, one participant explained that she saves images featuring appealing filters for later use and prefers “white skin tone filters,” noting that she does not use filters that darken her skin. Similarly, another participant reported using such filters when she is not satisfied with her appearance in photographs.

Participants also emphasized the role of influencers in reinforcing these ideals. One participant observed: “Most influencers are fair-skinned. Dark-skinned influencers exist, but the majority are fair, especially in Sri Lanka. So, everyone tries to post pictures that look beautiful, like models, with or without edits” (P1, personal communication, October 25, 2025). Similarly, another participant noted that the popularity of such filters is often driven by their use among influencers, rather than their suitability or authenticity. She further explained that in the Sri Lankan context, fair skin is widely associated with beauty, and that societal expectations continue to position lighter skin as more desirable, particularly for women.

At the same time, some participants reflected on changes in their own practices over time. While they reported using skin-lightening filters when they were younger or new to Instagram, they indicated that they no longer rely on such filters, having developed greater acceptance of their natural skin tone. Earlier experiences, however, were often associated with feelings of having darker or less “perfect” skin compared to others on the platform. One participant described how exposure to idealized images contributed to feelings of dissatisfaction, even though she was aware that some of the images had been filtered:

When I first started using Instagram, I felt bad about myself a lot. For example, I have dark spots on my face. On Instagram, every girl looks perfect with clear skin, even though they use filters. So, when I saw them, I felt bad about myself and wished I had such skin. (P7, personal communication, January 30, 2025).

Some participants also highlighted the role of filters in promoting and commercializing beauty products. One participant noted that filters are increasingly used for business purposes, particularly in advertising skin-whitening products, stating that “now people also use them for business purposes. Many people use these filters and take pictures to promote skin-whitening creams because people who use such filters appear whiter and more beautiful” (P3, personal communication, January 20, 2025). This suggests that filters not only shape individual self-perception but are also embedded within commercial practices that reinforce ideals of lighter skin as desirable. Participants also raised concerns about the broader impacts of these beauty standards. Some noted that the normalization of lighter skin ideals has contributed to the use of harmful skinwhitening creams and skin bleaching products among young women, highlighting the potential negative consequences of these practices.

Resistance to Whitening Ideals

Despite the prevalence of such standards, instances of resistance were also evident. Some expressed resistance to the promotion of white beauty standards on Instagram, particularly in relation to the use of filters. One participant reflected on her changing practices, stating: “I have used those filters before, but now I try to avoid them because I feel they create fake standards and unrealistic beauty” (P10, personal communication, February 02, 2026). She further explicitly rejected these ideals, emphasizing the need for more authentic representations, arguing that

Instagram should promote real bodies, real skin, and real lives more, and it should not promote unrealistic beauty standards. Participants noted that modifying images to appear more “beautiful” would result in a representation that does not reflect their real selves.

In addition, participants described shifts in their attitude towards skin tone over time. One participant expressed a sense of confidence and acceptance after moving away from the desire for fairer skin, stating:

In Sri Lanka, there is an idea that women should have fair skin and that men prefer women with fair skin. But in European countries, girls with dark skin tones are appreciated and valued just as much as girls with fair skin, and sometimes even more. Many models in Western countries are Black women or women with darker skin tones. If we think about shows like Victoria’s Secret, many of the highest-paid models have dark skin tones. So, my point is, if I have such unique...skin, why should I feel sad about myself? After seeing these facts on Instagram, I feel proud of myself, not sad. (P9, personal communication, January 31, 2026).

These responses highlight how some participants actively challenge dominant beauty norms and develop alternative understandings of beauty that value diversity and authenticity.

Similarly, social media content analysis showed that some Instagram users resisted dominant white beauty standards by using hashtags such as #browngirl and #cinnamongirl. Through captions like “Embracing my Sri Lankan grace,” they actively celebrated their natural skin tone and appearance, challenging Eurocentric beauty ideals and promoting alternative standards of beauty.

In particular, exposure to different representations of beauty on Instagram enabled participants to reassess previously internalized ideals. As a result, some participants shifted from feelings of dissatisfaction to a sense of pride and self-acceptance, demonstrating how engagement with diverse content can reshape perceptions of beauty and the self.

Findings from the social media content analysis further support this perspective, showing that natural skin tones are sometimes positively recognized (Figure 5). For example, comments on posts by a Sri Lankan actress and influencer expressed appreciation for maintaining a brown skin tone rather than conforming to lighter skin ideals, suggesting the presence of alternative discourses that challenge dominant beauty norms.

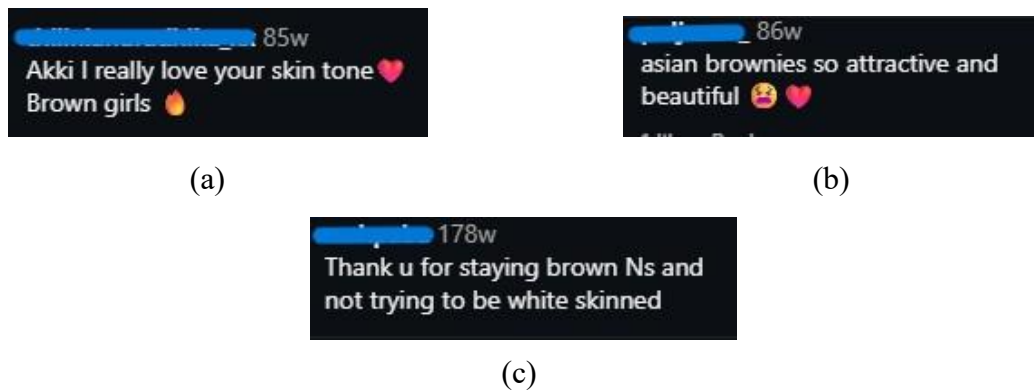


Figure 5: Instagram comments appreciating brown skin

The Construction of Body Image

This subtheme explores how body image is contrasted through participants' engagement with Instagram. Participants' accounts reveal that their perceptions of their bodies are shaped by a range of experiences, including the acceptance of Instagram beauty standards, feelings of body dissatisfaction, and fluctuations in confidence. At the same time, participants also recognized the unrealistic nature of content on the platform and described processes of learning to accept their

natural bodies. Together, these findings illustrate the complex and dynamic ways in which body image is continuously shaped and negotiated within Instagram spaces.

Accepting Instagram Beauty Standard

Findings indicate that Instagram plays a significant role in shaping and normalizing beauty standards, which are often internalized in their everyday practices. Many participants reported that they actively follow beauty tips, fashion trends and styling practices they encounter on the platform. For instance, after viewing makeup tutorials or aesthetically appealing content, participants described attempting to replicate similar looks in their own appearance.

These influences extended to various aspects of self-presentation, including makeup, hairstyle, hair colour, clothing styles, and nail aesthetics. Some participants noted observable changes not only in their own practices but also among their peers. One participant, for example, described a friend whose appearance and overall personality had significantly changed after engaging with fashion-related content on Instagram.

In addition, participants highlighted how such exposure could motivate efforts towards achieving certain beauty ideals. One participant explained that the content she encounters on Instagram encourages her to maintain a “beautiful body” through practices such as exercise and dieting. However, this motivation was often accompanied by a sense of pressure. As one participant stated:

I feel pressure to be slim, to have clear skin, to dress in a certain way, and to look stylish. Sometimes I feel like I need to change myself to fit those beauty standards. (P10, personal communication, February 02, 2026).

Consistent with earlier findings, several participants also expressed a desire to achieve lighter and more “perfect” skin after engaging with Instagram content. Additionally, some participants reported learning how to coordinate outfits and select clothing styles based on what they observe on the platform, further illustrating how these beauty standards are adopted and incorporated into everyday practices.

Body Dissatisfaction

Exposure to idealized images on Instagram often contributed to feelings of body dissatisfaction among participants. Many described experiencing negative emotions when they encountered individuals they perceived as more attractive. Viewing “perfect” bodies and appearances frequently led them to compare themselves with others, resulting in feelings of sadness and self-doubt. Common words used to describe these experiences included “sad,” “bad,” “miserable” and “insecure.”

One participant explained her experience, stating, “Some people feel miserable because they compare themselves with what they see online. The best example is me. I feel that now I can’t wear beautiful clothes, and my body is not beautiful” (P2, personal communication, January 13, 2026). In addition, some participants reported questioning their own appearance after viewing such content. This influence was also observed in participants’ accounts of others. For example, one participant described her sister’s experience: “My sister thinks she is ugly based on the photos and videos she sees on social media. After watching them, she becomes very sure that she is ugly and feels sad about it” (P6, personal communication, January 29, 2026).

While not all participants described feeling deeply dissatisfied, some noted that even in the absence of strong negative emotions, they still felt that it would be “better” if they looked like those they

saw on Instagram. Overall, these findings suggest that exposure to idealized representations of Instagram plays a significant role in shaping feelings of body dissatisfaction, influencing how individuals perceive and evaluate their own appearance.

Confidence Instability

Feelings of body dissatisfaction were often accompanied by fluctuations in self-confidence among participants. Many described how repeated exposure to idealized images and ongoing comparison with others contributed to lower self-esteem, leading to feelings of insecurity and a sense of not being “good enough” or attractive in comparison to others.

One participant reflected on how her perception of Instagram’s impact had changed over time, noting that although she initially believed the platform did not affect her self-confidence, she later realized that it played a significant role in shaping her behaviour, particularly her reluctance to post content. Another participant emphasized the connection between comparison and self-confidence, suggesting that individuals compare themselves to others due to underlying insecurities, using comparison as a way to evaluate whether others are more attractive or successful, which ultimately affects self-confidence.

Consistent with this, most participants indicated that exposure to idealized content negatively affects their self-confidence and self-esteem. For instance, one participant discussed the influence of Shanudri Priyasad, a young Sri Lankan actress, on young women in Sri Lanka, stating:

Think about Shanudri Priyasad. Most of her followers are not boys or men, but women and girls. Girls follow her lifestyle. Girls who follow her feel that she is beautiful no matter what and feel sad about themselves. For example, when Shanudri wears an old-fashioned

long skirt, she still looks beautiful. But when we wear the same skirt, we feel like we look unattractive. We even talk with our friends and compare ourselves with Shanudri, wondering why we look ugly. I think the reason behind this is that no matter what she wears, she wears it with confidence, so she looks beautiful. What we do instead is lose our confidence by comparing ourselves with her. Girls also compare their lives with hers. She is very young, just like us, but she is far ahead of us in many aspects of life. She has her own vehicle and is building her own home, while many other girls in Sri Lanka do not have such a luxurious life. So, girls constantly compare themselves with her. Because of this, I believe that what we see on social media platforms negatively impacts our self-confidence and self-esteem. (P8, personal communication, January 30, 2026).

A similar concern was raised by another participant, who highlighted the impact of continuous exposure to influencer content, stating,

From my perspective, if you don't follow them, you are independent, and you don't have garbage in your head. If you don't follow them, you don't see hundreds of posts every morning with "good morning world" captions and perfect looks. I feel that when you see them and compare yourself with them, it negatively impacts your self-esteem and selfconfidence. (P9, personal communication, January 31, 2026).

In contrast, a few participants noted that while Instagram had previously affected their selfconfidence, its influence had diminished over time. One participant explained that although she no longer feels negatively about herself when viewing attractive individuals online, she still experiences a desire to resemble them, suggesting that comparison may persist even in the absence of reduced self-esteem.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that Instagram contributes to fluctuating levels of selfconfidence, where users' self-esteem is shaped by ongoing comparisons and exposure to idealized representations, but may also evolve over time.

Instagram is Not Real

Although the findings highlight the influence of Instagram content on participants, many also demonstrated an awareness that not everything presented on the platform reflects reality. Participants emphasized the importance of recognizing that people, their posts, and their online presentations are often curated, edited and filtered rather than authentic representations of everyday life.

At the same time, participants noted that distinguishing between real and edited content can be challenging. One participant suggested that platforms should introduce clearer indicators or labels for edited or filtered images, enabling users to better differentiate between authentic and altered content.

Despite this awareness, participants describe varied emotional responses. For instance, one participant explained that understanding of the artificial nature of Instagram content sometimes led to more positive self-perceptions:

Most of the time, we see actresses with perfect bodies and skin on social media. But in reality, their skin is worse than ours, with lots of scars, pimples, and dark spots. In those moments, I feel happy about myself because I don't do skincare treatments every day like they do, but still, my skin looks healthier and better than theirs. (P8, personal communication, January 30, 2026).

However, participants also acknowledged that even when content is recognized as unrealistic, it can still have a strong psychological impact. As one participant noted, “Even though it is fake, it plays with your mind and creates an image of a perfect life. Instagram allows content to be presented attractively through music, filters, and editing, which makes the impact even stronger” (P9, personal communication, January 31, 2026).

Overall, these findings suggested that while participants are not entirely passive consumers and are aware of the constructed nature of Instagram content, this awareness does not fully protect them from its influence.

Learning to Accept Natural Body

Some participants describe a shift over time from comparison and dissatisfaction toward greater acceptance of their natural bodies. While many had previously engaged in frequent comparison with others on Instagram, some reported that they had gradually learned to appreciate their natural appearance. Several participants expressed that they now feel more comfortable and confident in their own bodies and no longer feel the need to conform to ideals such as having fairer skin.

One participant expressed a strong sense of self-acceptance and confidence, stating:

I feel really happy, proud, and good about my body. It doesn't mean that the content or pictures I see online are ugly. They are good too, but I have confidence in myself. ...For me, as long as you are healthy, that's what matters. It doesn't matter if you are beautiful but fake. If your facial features, body, or other parts are artificial, that is not the true meaning of beauty. Be natural. Be healthy. ...[O]nly 11% of people in the world have

naturally curly hair like mine. Now I feel happy about that because I feel unique. ...[N]ow I understand its value. (P9, personal communication, January 31, 2026).

At the same time, some participants indicated that their acceptance was shaped by practical limitations. For instance, they noted that certain aspects of appearance, such as height, cannot be easily changed. As a result, they reported adopting a more accepting attitude toward their bodies, expressing that they no longer place as much importance on meeting conventional standards of attractiveness. Similarly, some reported that, although they wanted to change their appearance, they could not afford it due to low earnings, leading them to accept their natural bodies.

Curated Digital Self-Presentation

This subtheme explores how participants selectively construct and present their identities on Instagram through curated content. The findings indicate that their self-presentation on the platform is often carefully managed, with participants choosing specific images, angles, filters and captions to create a desired impression. Such practices reflect an ongoing effort to align one's online presence with socially valued beauty standards and lifestyles, while also managing how others perceive them. At the same time, this curation highlights the distinction between online representations and offline realities, emphasizing the performative nature of identity on Instagram.

Filtered Self-Representation

Participants describe Instagram as a space where self-representation is carefully filtered and selectively constructed. While some noted that their profiles reflect certain aspects of their true selves, such as their interests, preferences and personality, many emphasized that this representation is only partial. Several participants estimated that Instagram reflects “about 50%” of who they are, as they tend to share more positive, attractive and socially desirable aspects of

their lives while excluding experiences related to sadness, stress, or personal struggles. This highlights a tendency towards selective self-representation, where individuals feel expected to appear happy, confident and visually appealing online. This selective representation was also evident in the types of content participants chose to share. Most reported posting about places they visit, special food they consume, clothing, and other lifestyle-related content, suggesting a focus on aesthetically pleasing and socially valued experiences.

In addition, many participants described engaging in various forms of image enhancement before posting. These practices included the use of Instagram or iPhone filters, editing to improve brightness and clarity, and applying makeup prior to taking photos. One participant detailed her process as follows:

I use Instagram filters and edit the pictures I take with my phone camera a bit. I don't post pictures on the same day I take them. I take a few days to edit my pictures and make them look beautiful...and enhance their quality. I try different filters to see which one makes me look more beautiful, and I use those filters when I take pictures. They make me look good and...change the background and facial features and adjust makeup. Somehow, they make me look better than my actual appearance. (P5, personal communication, January 27, 2026).

One participant reported seeking her friends' opinions before posting by sharing multiple edited photos and asking them to choose the best one.

However, not all participants engaged in editing practices. A few noted that rather than modifying images, they simply chose not to post photos they considered unattractive, further reinforcing the idea of selective presentation. Participants also demonstrated an awareness of audience

engagement when curating their posts. Some considered factors, such as reach and feedback, before sharing content. For example, one participant explained, stating, “Natural photos usually get more reach. From my experience, if we edit too much and lose the natural look, we don’t get many views. So, I edit a little, but not heavily” (P1, personal communication, October 25, 2025).

Moreover, several participants acknowledged a clear distinction between their online and offline selves. They describe their Instagram identity as, at times, inauthentic or constructed. For instance, one participant explained how she deliberately presents a version of herself that differs from her real-life experiences:

I don’t want to share my personal life with everyone, especially on social media. So, based on the things I post...my followers get fooled by me. I usually change the background, location, colours, and use filters. ...[S]ometimes, while I am at a family party, I post on Instagram pretending to be in a nightclub. I also sometimes post liquor bottles and glasses, pretending that I am drinking at the moment. But in reality, it’s my father who drinks at home, not me. That way, I sometimes fake things so people who don’t know me think differently about me. I do it just for fun. (P1, personal communication, October 25, 2025)

Similarly, another participant noted that she intentionally avoids revealing her “true self” on Instagram as a way of maintaining privacy and protecting herself. Overall, these findings illustrate that self-representation on Instagram is not a direct reflection of reality but rather a curated and managed process shaped by personal preferences, social expectations and audience considerations.

Posting Anxiety

Some participants reported editing their photos before posting due to insecurity about sharing unedited images online. They note that they rarely find a picture they consider “good enough” to post, which contributes to hesitation and self-doubt. As a result, despite being active on Instagram in other ways, such as viewing and interacting with content, they often refrain from posting altogether. Some participants further emphasized that they attend to even minor details before posting, as they perceive that women are more likely to be judged, especially when their bodies are even minimally exposed.

The Reinforcement and Contestation of Gendered Social Hierarchies

Building on the discussion of body image construction, the findings further reveal how Instagram functions as a site where broader gendered social hierarchies are both reinforced and contested. While the platform shapes individual perceptions of appearance, it also reflects and reproduces wider social norms related to gender roles, expectations and power relations. Participants’ experiences illustrate how these dynamics operate in multiple ways: through the reinforcement of existing gender hierarchies, the reproduction of traditional gender roles and in some cases, the active challenging of these structures. Together, these findings highlight the complex and often contradictory role of Instagram in shaping and negotiating gendered social relations.

Reinforcement of Gendered Hierarchies

This subtheme examines how Instagram contributed to the reinforcement of existing gendered hierarchies within the Sri Lankan context. Participants’ experiences indicate that the platform often reproduces traditional gender norms and expectations, shaping how women are

expected to behave, present themselves, and be perceived by others. These dynamics are reflected in various forms, including the persistence of traditional gender norms, the presence of gendered moral surveillance, the sexualization of women's bodies and the regulation of femininity. Together, these findings demonstrate how social media platforms can sustain and normalize unequal gender relations in everyday digital interactions.

Traditional Gender Norms

Although participants noted that the influence of traditional gender norms has declined compared to the past, some emphasized that such norms continue to persist on Instagram. These norms were particularly evident in the social media content analysis, where gender-biased comments directed at women were frequently observed.

The findings highlighted that women's appearances are often interpreted through traditional expectations related to femininity, marriage and domestic roles. For example, women who posted wearing a saree are sometimes associated with being suitable for marriage, with comments emphasizing their "marriageability" based on their appearance. This reflects the continuous association between women's physical presentation and their perceived roles within the private sphere. One such example was observed in a comment (Figure 6) made on a graduation post, where a woman was celebrating her academic achievement while wearing a saree. Instead of acknowledging her accomplishment, the comment focused on traditional gender expectations.

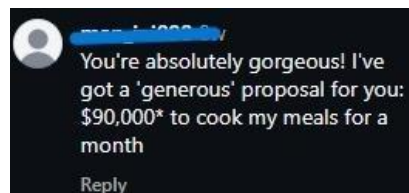


Figure 6: Example Comment Reinforcing Traditional Gender Norms

This example illustrates how women's achievements can be overshadowed by gendered

expectations that reduce them to domestic roles.

Additionally, women using hashtags such as #reddaihattei and #osariya actively used their captions and their pictures to emphasize tradition. For example, some captions describe the *osariya* as a “traditional Sri Lankan garment for women” (Figure 7) and state that wearing it “feels like a real Kandy girl,” highlighting its cultural origins and distinctive Kandyan draping style. Such captions explicitly frame the attire as a symbol of cultural identity, modesty and femininity, thereby reinforcing traditional beauty standards and gender norms.



Figure 7: Caption Illustrating a Traditional Sri Lankan Woman's Garment

Overall, these findings suggest that Instagram can serve as a space where traditional gender norms are reproduced and normalized.

Gendered Moral Surveillance

Participants highlighted that Instagram is a space where women are continuously monitored and judged. Many noted that, similar to offline contexts, women's behaviour, appearance and self-presentation are subjected to heightened scrutiny on social media, often to a greater extent than men.

They emphasized that this judgement is frequently directed at women's physical appearance, clothing choices and overall behaviour, sometimes resulting in criticism, harassment or negative

commentary. They observed that even a minimal exposure of the body can attract judgment, reinforcing expectations around modesty and “appropriate” femininity. One participant described this dynamic as follows:

Women face more pressure. Women are judged by their looks, clothes, bodies, and behaviour. Men are not judged in the same way. Women face pressure to be beautiful, modest, perfect, and successful at the same time. For example, if a woman posts a photo, people comment on her body and appearance. Men don't face that level of judgment. (P10, personal communication, February 02, 2026).

As a result of this constant scrutiny, many participants reported being highly cautious about what they post. They described carefully considering their content before sharing, anticipating potential criticism even for minor details. Despite such efforts, participants noted that negative judgments can still occur, reinforcing a sense of vulnerability in online spaces.

It was also evident that this environment of surveillance was linked to broader moral expectations placed on women. Some participants explained that when women deviate even slightly from these expectations, they risk being labelled negatively as characterless.

Overall, participants agreed that such judgment creates significant pressure and disproportionately affects women compared to men. As one participant summarized, “Social media reinforces this judgmental culture, making women experience more pressure than men” (P9, personal communication, January 31, 2026). These findings illustrate how Instagram reinforces gendered moral surveillance, where women's bodies and behaviours are closely regulated through ongoing observation and evaluation.

Sexualization of Women

The sexualization of women emerged as a prominent concern, with almost all participants referring to it in their accounts. Participants described Instagram as a space where women are frequently objectified and targeted for sexual attention by a wide range of users, including schoolboys, adult men and even individuals in positions of social or religious authority. These experiences highlight how women's bodies are often positioned as objects of desire within digital spaces.

Several participants shared personal experiences of receiving sexualized comments and messages from strangers. One participant described the extent of this issue as follows:

If a girl posts a picture showing even a little bit of her body, people take screenshots and share them across different social media platforms, insulting her. I have faced this problem several times. Once, a page admin shared pictures I had posted on Instagram on their Facebook page and commented on my body parts. (P1, personal communication, October 25, 2025).

Findings from the social media content analysis further support these accounts, revealing that women frequently receive sexualized comments (Figure 9, Figure 9) ranging from remarks about specific body parts to explicit demands for sexual interaction. These comments were observed from both local and international users, indicating the widespread nature of the issue.

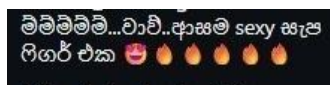


Figure 8: Sexualized Comment from a Local Man

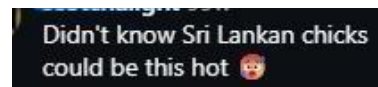


Figure 9: Sexualized Comment from a Foreign Man

(English translation: my favourite sexy and attractive/pleasing figure.)

Participants also highlighted how the sexualization of women can be exploited for profit. Some noted that individuals collect and repost women's images to create memes or viral content, increasing page engagement and eventually monetizing these platforms. At the same time, a participant pointed out that some women themselves may post revealing images to gain visibility, reach or online recognition, reflecting the complex dynamics of participation within these systems.

Importantly, participants emphasized that this form of sexualization is highly gendered. Many noted that women are disproportionately targeted while men rarely experience similar treatment. As one participant observed, non-consensual sharing of intimate or revealing images appears to affect women far more frequently, and sexualized commentary directed at men is comparatively rare.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that Instagram functions as a space where the sexualization of women is normalized and perpetuated, reinforcing gendered power imbalance and contributing to unequal experiences of online engagement.

Femininity Regulation

Participants indicated that social media continues to reflect and reinforce societal expectations that regulate women's behaviour, although they noted that such pressures are less rigid than in the past. These expectations were described as extending into digital spaces, where women are still expected to conform to socially accepted norms of femininity.

One participant explained that prevailing social ideologies, where men are afforded greater freedom while women face consequences for deviating from expectations, are similarly reflected

in Instagram. Participants provided examples of how women, particularly mothers and pregnant women, are subjected to judgment and advice regarding what is considered “appropriate” behaviour online. Comments often directed them on how to dress, act or present themselves, reinforcing normative expectations tied to their social roles.

In addition, participants highlighted that women are expected to conform to specific standards of feminine beauty and behaviour on the platform. Some observed that content circulating on Instagram promotes the idea that women should behave and present themselves in particular ways. This was further evident in the content analysis, where comments frequently praised traditionally feminine traits, such as having a beautiful smile, a slim figure, long hair and a “traditional” appearance, while criticizing women who posted more “modern” content, such as wearing strap dresses. Such responses often framed these expressions as inappropriate, suggesting that women should adhere to more conservative standards. Overall, these findings illustrate how Instagram functions as a space where femininity is continuously monitored and regulated, reinforcing expectations about how women should look, behave and present themselves.

Reproduction of Traditional Gender Roles

This subtheme examines how Instagram contributes to the reproduction of traditional gender roles within everyday digital interactions. Participants’ experiences suggest that the platform often reinforces expectations about women’s roles in relation to family, appearance, and social behaviour. These roles are reflected in both the content shared and the way in which women are perceived and evaluated by others. As a result, Instagram not only mirrors existing societal norms but also plays an active role in sustaining and normalizing traditional gender expectations.

Male Provider Ideology and Women as Dependent

Findings from the interviews suggested that Instagram contributes to the reproduction of traditional gender roles, particularly through the portrayal of men as providers and women as dependent recipients. Participants observed that content shared on the platform often reinforces these roles by depicting women in domestic and caregiving positions, while men are represented as financial providers.

One participant explained this dynamic as follows:

I have seen many female celebrities share how they manage their households, whether they are working or not, how they carefully spend their husbands' salaries on household expenses, and how they prepare nice meals for the family and present them attractively. They also share moments when their partners bring them flowers or kiss them as a form of appreciation. All of this reflects men as providers and women as receivers. (P6, personal communication, January 29, 2026).

These representations highlight how everyday content on Instagram normalizes and reinforces the idea of male economic responsibility and female dependency within relationships.

Domestic Femininity Ideals

Participants explained that Instagram often reinforce women's domestic roles. They stated that many women prefer to post about their family life or relationships as a mother, wife or partners managing household tasks, caring for children or balancing work and family life. Participants also noted that certain posts emphasize women's role in ensuring the happiness of their family members. For example, some content suggests that a man's wealth or success can be measured by the beauty,

happiness, or appearance of his partner, while women are encouraged to prioritize family over themselves.

One participant referenced Sri Lankan actress Dinakshi Priyasad, noting that:

People make hateful comments on her posts, scolding her for dressing in short clothes even after having a child who is going to school now. People argue that those actions are not appropriate for a mother on social media platforms, just as the majority of society argues. (P2, personal communication, January 13, 2026).

These observations indicate that Instagram not only mirrors traditional societal expectations but also amplifies scrutiny of women's domestic and maternal roles, reinforcing gendered roles and pressures.

Challenging Gendered Hierarchies

While Instagram often reinforces traditional gender roles, participants also described ways in which it can challenge these norms. Some users and influencers promote diverse representations of women, celebrate non-traditional roles, and question societal expectations around appearance, behaviour, and domestic responsibilities. These practices allow young women to resist restrictive gender norms and explore alternative ways of expressing identity and agency online.

Promoting Equality and Shared Responsibilities

Some participants noted that Instagram can challenge traditional gender norms by promoting equality and shared responsibility. For instance, young Sri Lankan men living abroad share experiences of cooking, cleaning and managing their household independently, defying traditional gender roles. Influencer couples also showcase equitable arrangements where both

partners earn income and share household chores. Furthermore, both men and women increasingly post content that questions why women should not have the same opportunities as men.

Emphasizing this context, one participant explained:

I think men no longer expect everything from women. Responsibilities are not divided as “men’s work” and “women’s work.” Both partners earn, both do household chores, and both enjoy their lives together. People share these aspects of their lives on social media, especially on Instagram, through their life updates. (P8, personal communication, January 30, 2026).

Such content, according to participants, influences viewers’ perspectives and encourages more equitable gender expectations.

Female Independence Representation

Participants reported that seeing Instagram content featuring women living independently, managing their children without a partner, pursuing careers or enjoying life motivates young women to embrace independence. Many posts highlight women’s education, leadership, empowerment and personal achievements, offering role models for others. Instagram allows viewers to learn from these examples, challenging the traditional expectation that women should only stay at home. Participants note that exposure to such content encourages girls to seek freedom, independence and career opportunities, although they also feel pressure to maintain the image of the “perfect woman.” Influencers play a particularly important role as visible role models inspiring others to explore life and achieve personal goals.

One participant explained:

On Instagram, they promote the idea of living one's own life without depending on anyone, which is different from traditional ideas in society. This challenges the stereotype that women belong in the kitchen or at home. I have seen many women posting life updates about opening clothing brands or other businesses, which breaks gender stereotypes. (P3, personal communication, January 20, 2025).

Overall, the findings suggest that Instagram provides a space where traditional gender norms can be questioned and challenged. Through posts highlighting equality in responsibilities, female independence and empowerment, young women are exposed to alternative ways of living that challenge societal expectations. Such content demonstrates that gender roles are not fixed and encourages viewers to pursue autonomy, shared responsibility and personal growth.

The Role of Influencers and Platform Power in Shaping Social Norms

This theme examines the role of influencers and the structural power of Instagram in shaping body image, self-perception and broader gender norms. Participants highlighted how influencers function as key agents in defining and reinforcing dominant beauty standards, often presenting idealized and curated representations of femininity. At the same time, Instagram as a platform amplifies certain types of content through its algorithms, increasing the visibility of specific body ideals while marginalizing others. These dynamics not only shape how young women perceive their bodies but also influence expectations around gender roles, behaviour, and femininity, contributing to the normalization of certain gendered norms while constraining alternative expressions.

Influencer Culture

Influencer culture plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of beauty, lifestyles and femininity on Instagram. Participants described how influencers share curated and often idealized content that presents specific standards of appearance, behaviour, and success. This content is widely consumed and frequently imitated by young women. As a result, influencers not only promote particular body ideals but also reinforce gendered expectations about how women should look, act, and present themselves in both public and private spaces.

Influencer Power

Influencers were widely perceived as powerful actors in shaping preferences, behaviours, and life choices. Many participants reported that they follow influencers they admire and often try to imitate their lifestyles and advice. In some cases, influencers were described as having a strong impact on decision-making, with one participant noting that people tend to view what influencers promote as the “correct” or “best” way.

Several participants highlighted how influencers contribute to reinforcing traditional gender roles. For example, some influencers share content centred on domestic responsibilities, such as cooking for their families and caring for their husbands and children. Exposure to such content led some participants to imagine adopting similar roles in the future. At the same time, participants also emphasized the intensity of this influence, with one noting that some people worship influencers, suggesting a deep level of admiration and imitation.

This influence was particularly evident in shaping body image and self-perception. One participant reflected that during a period of insecurity, she followed influencers who promoted “perfect looks and perfect lifestyles,” which made her aspire to unattainable beauty standards. However, she noted

that unfollowing such accounts improved her well-being (P9, personal communication, January 31, 2026), highlighting the powerful role influencers play in both reinforcing and alleviating insecurities.

At the same time, some participants noted that influencers challenge traditional gender norms. They described how influencers promote independence by sharing content about living alone, working, travelling and enjoying life freely. These representations were seen as empowering, encouraging women to pursue careers, financial independence and personal freedom. One participant noted that influencers today move away from traditional expectations and instead promote more autonomous lifestyles. The influence of celebrities was also reflected in everyday practices. For instance, participants describe how followers replicate behaviours such as solo dining or fashion choices after seeing influencers present them as symbols of freedom and happiness. Such examples illustrate how influencer content shapes not only attitudes but also daily actions.

Commercialized Empowerment

While influencers were often seen as role models, some participants questioned the authenticity of their content. Several argued that influencer activity on Instagram is largely driven by commercial interests, where everyday posts, opinions and lifestyles are used as marketing strategies to promote products and increase visibility. Participants noted that influencers often align their content with popular trends, including feminism, social issues and LGBTQ+ rights, not necessarily out of genuine belief but to gain attention, followers and engagement. This trend-driven behaviour led some participants to view influencer-led empowerment as superficial or profit-oriented. While certain influencers were seen as challenging gender stereotypes, others were

perceived as doing so primarily for popularity rather than meaningful change. Participants also highlighted how companies use influencers to market products using their popularity and attractiveness, which can shape followers' behaviours and even affect their sense of identity. Explaining the severity of this lack of genuineness, one participant stated:

I recently saw a page of an influencer who sells whitening cream. Now her skin and organs are being damaged because of the chemicals in the cream. She has been selling it for years and has many customers; most of them are young girls who want to have fair skin like hers. When you look at her, you can see how strong those chemicals are. She is not just fair; she looks unnaturally white and unhealthy. She looks like a walking dead person with pale skin. Now she is taking treatments for her own skin, but she still promotes the product even though it is harmful. (P9, personal communication, January 31, 2026).

Overall, participants viewed much of influencer-driven empowerment as commercialized and, at times, non-genuine, driven more by profit and popularity than by authentic commitment to social change, even though many participants still continue to follow and engage with these influencers.

The Invisible Platform Control

This sub-theme highlights how Instagram's algorithms and design subtly shape what users see, interact with, and value. Participants noted that the platform amplifies certain content, such as beauty ideals, lifestyles and trends, while hiding or minimizing others. This algorithmic curation subtly guides users' perceptions and behaviour, often without them being consciously aware of its influence.

Belief in Free Choice

Some participants emphasized that the impact of social media depends largely on how users engage with it. They argued that Instagram does not force anyone to follow trends, and individuals can choose whether to adopt or ignore the content they see. According to the perceptions of the participants, using social media within limits allows users to benefit from it while minimizing potential negative effects.

One participant explained that even responses to content are shaped by personal choice:

If we want, we can feel sad about ourselves after seeing a post of a girl with a nice figure and a beautiful appearance. Or else, we can motivate ourselves to become better by exercising or controlling our meals, which will make us happy. So, it depends on the situation and the way we think. (P5, personal communication, January 27, 2026).

Emphasizing the negative side of the “free choice,” another participant highlighted that young women, particularly in contexts like Sri Lanka where freedom is often limited until adulthood, face challenges in navigating the multitude of opinions and trends on Instagram. Exposure to constant comparisons and diverse lifestyles can confuse them about their own preference and identity, leading some to prioritize social approval over personal choice.

Platform Power (Algorithm Shaping Content)

Most participants were aware of how Instagram’s algorithm shapes the content they see. They explained that when someone interacts with a particular post, the platform automatically suggests similar videos, tailoring content to users’ interests. Many participants reported that they often watch what Instagram suggests and scroll for more content if something captures their

attention. For example, when a user wants to change her hair colour, she may be shown numerous hair transformation videos, reinforcing her interest through repeated exposure.

This algorithmic curation can lead users to perceive frequently suggested content as normal, real or correct. One participant illustrated this with a practical example:

Imagine there are two women. One believes money is the key to success, while the other believes happiness is the key. The woman who believes happiness is the key to success spends more time watching content related to happiness, which creates an algorithm that suggests more videos related to that belief. When she continues to see such videos, it confirms her idea that happiness is the key to success. I know one such woman, who is my friend. She resigned from her job because it did not make her happy, no matter what, and she spent all her earnings travelling to different countries. On the other hand, the same thing happens to the woman who believes money is the key to success. (P6, personal communication, January 29, 2026).

This example highlights how the algorithm reinforces existing beliefs and interests, subtly shaping users' perceptions and actions without overt intervention.

Self-Perception Transformation in Digital Contexts

This theme explores how engagement with Instagram influences young women's self-perception, including understanding of their bodies, identities and social roles. Participants reported that repeated exposure to curated images, influencer lifestyles and trending content shaped how they evaluate themselves, both positively and negatively. While some content motivated them to adopt healthier habits or pursue personal goals, other posts reinforce insecurities or unrealistic

standards. This theme highlights how digital environments act as spaces where self-perception is continuously negotiated and reconstructed.

Instagram as a Source of Motivation and Self-Development

Participants highlighted Instagram as a source of motivation and self-development, particularly in relation to fitness, confidence, and personal growth. Many explained that exposure to content related to exercise, healthy lifestyles and self-improvement encouraged them to take better care of themselves and develop a more positive self-image. Some participants noted that Instagram allows them to learn new things and draw inspiration from others, which can positively influence their self-perception when content is interpreted in a constructive way.

In addition, participants emphasized the role of women in supporting other women on the platform. Content promoting independence, confidence and balanced lifestyles was seen as empowering, encouraging women to pursue personal goals without being restricted by traditional social expectations. Several participants acknowledged that such content helped them grow as individuals and become more confident in themselves.

For instance, one participant stated:

After seeing quotes on Instagram that promote natural beauty, I realized that I was making myself uncomfortable instead of being proud of what I have. That changed my mindset positively. Now I don't compare myself, not even a little bit. I am happy being myself. (P9, personal communication, January 31, 2026).

She further explained that exposure to positive and mind-opening influencers changed how she viewed her life, helping her to value her own perspectives, appreciate her natural appearance and reject unrealistic standards.

Findings from the social media content analysis also supported this perspective. Many posts, particularly those related to self-love, personal growth and natural beauty, received positive and encouraging comments, especially from women. These supportive interactions contribute to shaping a more affirming digital environment, reinforcing positive self-perception and encouraging individuals to embrace their identities.

Instagram as a Source of Harm

Participants also highlighted the harmful effects of Instagram on body image and self-perception. Several explained that negative comments on their posts, particularly criticisms and inappropriate remarks, affected them deeply, leading some to stop posting for extended periods. This pattern was also evident in the social media content analysis, where many posts received hate and sexualized comments, often from men (Figure 10). Participants noted that such negative interactions tend to impact women more than men.

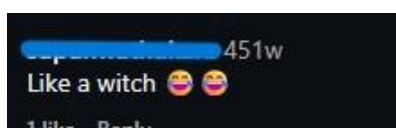


Figure 10: Example of a Derogatory Comment Directed at a Woman's Instagram Post

Many participants reported that Instagram increased their insecurities, making them more conscious of their appearance and more focused on meeting perceived beauty standards. Furthermore, constant comparison with others often led to feelings of inadequacy and reduced self-confidence. Body shaming was described as common, with women being particularly affected by such comments, sometimes resulting in emotional distress.

Additionally, some participants pointed out that users often do not critically filter the content they consume, which increases their exposure to harmful material. The easy access to highly curated and idealized images and lifestyles was seen as intensifying these negative effects, reinforcing unrealistic standards and shaping self-perception in detrimental ways.

Overall, participants' experiences show that self-perception is continuously shaped through interactions with influencers, algorithms and peer feedback, as well as through exposure to both supportive and harmful content. At the same time, many participants emphasized individual responsibility, highlighting that the impact of Instagram depends on how users engage with and interpret what they see. Thus, self-perception transformation in digital contexts emerges as a dynamic process shaped by both platform structures and individual agency.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study examined the role of social media, particularly Instagram, in shaping body image and self-perception among Sri Lankan young women. Using an intersectional feminist lens, the research aimed to explore how beauty ideals, gender norms, and social hierarchies are constructed, reinforced, and challenged within digital spaces, to examine their role in shaping body image and self-perception. The findings reveal several important patterns that highlight the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of social media's influence.

First, Instagram emerged as a space of constant comparison, where participants evaluated their appearance in relation to idealized images. Second, the findings demonstrated the persistence of racialized beauty ideals, particularly the privileging of lighter skin tones and Eurocentric features. At the same time, some forms of resistance were observed, as users engaged with content that

celebrated brown skin and local identities. Third, body image construction was shaped not only by social and cultural expectations but also by economic factors, as some participants reported accepting their natural bodies due to limited financial resources. Finally, the findings illustrated both the reinforcement and the challenge of traditional gender norms. While some content promoted women's independence and empowerment, other interactions, such as sexualized comments and content that promotes gendered roles, continued to reproduce patriarchal expectations.

This chapter builds on these findings by interpreting their broader meanings and situating them with existing literature and theoretical debates. Drawing on an intersectional feminist framework, the discussion explores how gender intersects with race, class and cultural context to shape women's experiences on Instagram. It also critically examines the dual role of social media as both a site of empowerment and a space where inequalities are reproduced. Through this analysis, the chapter aims to provide a deeper understanding of how digital platforms influence body image and gender norms among Sri Lankan young women.

Instagram as a Space of Comparison

The findings indicated that participants frequently engaged in comparisons with others on Instagram, evaluating their appearance, body shape and overall attractiveness in relation to images of peers, influencers and public figures. Many participants reported feeling pressure to match certain beauty standards and frequently measured themselves against the idealized portrayal of women on the platform. Several participants also noted that exposure to influencer content, featuring highly curated or filtered images, amplifies these feelings of inadequacy, while removing such influencers from their accounts had a positive effect on their self-perception and confidence. Notably, participants' responses to influencers varied, with one admired as "beautiful" and

aspirational, and another calling her “fake beauty,” highlighting the subjective nature of social comparison.

This pattern suggests that Instagram functions as a space of constant comparison, where self-perception is influenced not only by personal preference but also by the curated and often highly filtered representations of others. Such comparisons appeared to shape participants' body image and self-esteem, as some women expressed dissatisfaction when they felt they did not meet perceived beauty ideals. Conversely, participants who consciously unfollowed influencers promoting unrealistic beauty standards reported feeling less pressured and more accepting of their own bodies, highlighting the potential for selective engagement on social media to mitigate negative effects. At the same time, exposure to aspirational content occasionally motivated participants to engage in self-improvement or adopt practices aligned with social norms of attractiveness.

These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating the role of social media in promoting body-related social comparison. Studies have shown that upwards comparison, in particular, can negatively affect body satisfaction and increase the internalization of beauty ideals (Jarman et al., 2021; Fardouly and Vartanian, 2015). Furthermore, recent research on the impact of influencers and usage patterns suggests that reducing exposure to idealized social media content, such as unfollowing influencers, can improve body image and self-perception (Jaiswal & Kumar, 2022; Thai et al., 2023).

Applying an intersectional feminist lens, it becomes clear that these comparisons are shaped not only by gender but also by other social and cultural factors, including race and local cultural expectations. Due to these expectations, women are disproportionately targeted by social pressures

related to appearance. Social comparison on Instagram operates within a patriarchal framework, where women's value is often tied to meeting socially constructed beauty norms. At the same time, participants' active decisions to unfollow or reduce exposure to certain content demonstrate that users are not passive recipients of these pressures but actively navigate and negotiate their self-perception within the platform.

Critically, while Instagram promotes comparison that can negatively affect body image, it also allows for selective engagement and self-regulation, suggesting that the platform functions as a contested space rather than a purely harmful one. This highlights the nuanced and dynamic ways in which young women interact with social media, balancing exposure to idealized content with strategies to protect their self-esteem.

Racialized Beauty Ideals and Eurocentric Influence

The findings indicate that Instagram plays a significant role in promoting racialized beauty ideals, particularly through its content and filters that privilege lighter skin tones and Eurocentric features. Participants noted that filters often produce smoother, lighter skin, reinforcing the perception of fair skin as a marker of beauty. This reflects long-standing patterns of colorism, where lighter skin has historically been associated with social status and privilege, while darker skin tones are devalued (Dixon & Telles, 2017). Such perceptions align with Monk's (2015) concept of skin colour as a form of "body capital," as well as Hunter's (2005) argument that light skin is widely interpreted as a marker of beauty. In the Sri Lankan context, this preference remains deeply embedded; despite the naturally darker complexion of most Sri Lankans, lighter skin is widely preferred, particularly among women (Fonseka & Wijekoon, 2019). As reflected in participants' accounts, many expressed dissatisfaction with their natural skin tone and reported feeling inadequate when comparing themselves to idealized images on Instagram. These

experiences also resonate with Koththigoda's (2025) reflections on the everyday reinforcement of the belief that "fair is better." In this way, Instagram not only reflects existing racialized beauty hierarchies but also intensifies them by continuously circulating and normalizing these ideals in digital spaces. In Sri Lanka, this creates a layered pressure, as young women navigate both traditional expectations of femininity and modesty alongside globalized beauty norms that emphasize fairness, slimness and Eurocentric features.

From an intersectional feminist perspective, these findings reflect how beauty standards are shaped by the interaction of gender, race and cultural context. The privileging of lighter skin tones and Eurocentric features on Instagram reflects not only gendered expectations placed on women's appearance but also deeply rooted racial hierarchies that associate fairness with beauty and social values. Participants' dissatisfaction with their natural skin tone illustrates how these intersecting forces operate simultaneously, influencing how women evaluate themselves within digital spaces. In the Sri Lankan context, this process is further shaped by cultural norms that already place significant emphasis on women's appearance, thereby intensifying the pressure to conform to both local and global beauty standards. As a result, women's experiences on Instagram are not uniform; rather, they are structured by multiple, overlapping systems of inequality that position certain appearances as more desirable than others. This demonstrated that body image concerns cannot be understood through gender alone but must be examined through the combined effects of race, culture and social expectations, as emphasized by intersectional feminist theory.

While Instagram contributes to the reinforcement of racialized beauty ideals, it also exposes the constructed nature of these standards. Participants' awareness of these filters and edited images suggests that some users recognize the artificiality of these representations, even if they are still affected by them. This highlights the complex and contradictory role of social media, where users

are simultaneously influenced by and critical of dominant beauty norms. Ultimately, these findings demonstrate that racialized beauty ideals on Instagram are not simply adopted but are actively negotiated, shaped by both structural inequalities and individual agency.

Acceptance of the Natural Body

The findings indicate that, although many participants initially engaged in frequent comparison on Instagram, some gradually developed a greater appreciation for their natural appearance. Several participants emphasized that being “beautiful” is less important if it involves being unhealthy or presenting a “fake” version of oneself. At the same time, acceptance was not always purely attitudinal. Some participants noted that certain aspects of appearance, such as height, cannot be changed, while others reported that financial limitations prevented them from altering their appearance. As a result, they expressed a shift toward accepting their natural bodies and placing less importance on meeting conventional beauty standards.

This suggests that body acceptance is shaped by both personal reflection and structural constraints. For some participants, rejecting “fake beauty” indicates a conscious critique of unrealistic standards promoted on Instagram, reflecting a shift in values toward authenticity and well-being. However, for others, acceptance appears to be influenced by practical realities, such as the inability to change certain physical features or the lack of financial resources to engage in beauty practices. This highlights that body acceptance is not a uniform or purely empowering process but can emerge from a combination of agency and limitations.

In contrast to much of the literature, which often emphasizes the negative impact of social media on body image, some participants reported that Instagram also contributed positively to their acceptance of their natural bodies. Exposure to body positivity pages and certain influencers

encouraged participants to value natural appearance and reject unrealistic standards. This suggests that Instagram can also function as a space for alternative narratives that challenge dominant beauty ideals, extending existing literature by highlighting the platform's potential to promote body acceptance alongside dissatisfaction.

Applying an intersectional feminist lens, these findings demonstrate how body acceptance is shaped by the intersection of gender and class. Women are subjected to strong societal expectations regarding appearance, yet their ability to conform to these standards is unevenly distributed. Participants with limited financial resources describe accepting their natural bodies not only as a personal choice but also as a necessity, revealing how economic constraints shape body image in meaningful ways. In this sense, body acceptance cannot be understood solely as empowerment; rather, it is influenced by structural inequalities that limit access to beauty practices and appearance-related modifications.

Critically, while the discourse of "accepting the natural body" may appear empowering, it is important to recognize its complexity. For some participants, this acceptance reflects genuine resistance to unrealistic and harmful beauty standards. For others, however, it may present an adaptation to circumstances where change is not possible. This duality highlights the nuanced nature of body acceptance, demonstrating that it can function both as a form of empowerment and as a response to constraints. Ultimately, these findings suggest that Instagram is not only a site of comparison and pressure but also a space where meanings of beauty and self-worth are actively negotiated.

The Dual Role of Social Media in Challenging and Reinforcing Gender Norms

The findings indicate that Instagram plays a dual role in both reinforcing and challenging gendered hierarchies. On the one hand, participants observed the persistence of traditional gender norms, including expectations that women should be modest, dependent and primarily responsible for domestic roles. They also reported experiences of being monitored and judged online, as well as exposure to sexualized comments that objectify women's bodies. These patterns reflected the persistence of patriarchal ideals, such as the male provider ideology and the positioning of women as caregivers. On the other hand, participants also identified content that challenged these norms, including representation of women's independence, shared responsibilities within households, and the promotion of gender equality.

This suggests that Instagram operates as a contested space where gender norms are both reproduced and redefined. The coexistence of traditional and progressive representations indicates that users are exposed to competing narratives about femininity and women's roles. While some content reinforces expectations of domestic femininity and dependence, other content encourages women to pursue careers, leadership roles and autonomy. As a result, participants navigate a complex digital environment where gender identities and expectations are continuously negotiated rather than fixed.

These findings reflect broader scholarship on gender roles, which has long established that men are traditionally positioned as breadwinners and leaders, while women are expected to fulfill caregiving and domestic roles (Badgett & Folbre, 1999; Ding, 2024; Rahim, 2020). Importantly, the Instagram algorithm and influencer culture play a key role in shaping these dynamics. Participants' exposure to content is not random but curated by algorithms that prioritize engagement, often amplifying content that aligns with dominant or sensational norms, including

sexualized and stereotypical portrayals of women. Influencers act as key mediators of gender norms, either reinforcing traditional expectations or promoting alternative representations, a pattern also noted by Subramaniam (2025), who argues that while some influencers reproduce traditional gender roles, others promote more inclusive and flexible representations of gender. This highlights how platform structures and digital actors influence not only what users see but also how gender norms are constructed and circulated. The current findings extend the literature by showing how these contrasting representations coexist within the same platform, shaping users' perceptions in complex ways.

Applying an intersectional feminist lens, these findings highlight how gender norms are not only maintained through patriarchal structures but are also mediated by digital technologies and social context in Sri Lanka. Women are disproportionately subjected to surveillance, judgment and sexualization online, reflecting the continued regulation of women's bodies and behaviour. At the same time, access to empowering content is not equally experienced by all users as visibility, engagement and influence are often shaped by broader social hierarchies. This demonstrates that while social media provides opportunities for challenging traditional norms, it also reproduces inequalities through its structure and content.

Critically, the dual role of Instagram demonstrates that social media cannot be understood as either purely empowering or entirely oppressive. Instead, it functions as a space where both resistance and reinforcement occur simultaneously. Participants are not passive consumers; rather, they actively interpret, accept or resist different forms of content. This dynamic has important implications for body image and self-perception, as exposure to both empowering and restrictive representations can shape how women view their bodies and sense of self in complex ways. While some content may promote confidence and self-acceptance, other content, such as sexualized

portrayals and traditional expectations, can contribute to self-surveillance and pressure to conform to idealized standards. This complexity underscores the need to understand social media as a contested space, where gender norms, body image and self-perception are continuously shaped through the interaction between users, content and platform structures.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Overview of the Study

This study examined the role of social media, particularly Instagram, in shaping body image and self-perception among Sri Lankan young women. Drawing on an intersectional feminist lens, the research aimed to explore how gender, race, class, and cultural context interact to shape how women experience and respond to beauty standards and gender norms in digital spaces. Using a qualitative research design, the study collected data through in-depth interviews and social media content analysis. This approach allowed for a detailed understanding of both participants' personal experiences and the broader digital environment in which these experiences are shaped. The study analyzed participants' experiences and perceptions, alongside content from Instagram, focusing on how the platform contributes to both the construction and negotiation of body image and self-perception.

Summary of Key Findings

Overall, the findings reveal that Instagram is a complex and dynamic space that simultaneously reinforces and challenges dominant social norms related to gender. Rather than functioning as a unidirectional influence, the platform operates as a site where multiple and often contradictory messages about beauty, femininity and self-worth coexist. This highlights the

importance of examining social media not only as a source of pressure but also as a space of negotiation and agency.

The study identified four key themes that illustrate the multifaceted role of Instagram in shaping body image and self-perception.

First, Instagram was found to function as a space of social comparison, where participants frequently evaluated their appearance in relation to others, particularly influencers and peers. Those comparisons often contributed to body dissatisfaction and self-consciousness, especially when participants engaged in upward comparisons with idealized images. At the same time, some participants actively managed their exposure by unfollowing certain accounts, demonstrating a level of agency in navigating these pressures.

Second, the findings highlighted the persistence of racialized beauty ideas and Eurocentric influence. Participants reported that Instagram content and filters often promote lighter skin tones and westernized features, reinforcing the perception of fairness as a key marker of beauty. This reflects broader patterns of colorism and globalized beauty standards, which continue to shape body image and self-perception among Sri Lankan women.

Third, the study found that some participants developed a greater acceptance of their natural bodies over time. This acceptance was influenced by both personal reflection and structural constraints. While some participants rejected unrealistic beauty standards and valued authenticity, others noted that their acceptance was shaped by practical limitations, such as financial constraints or the inability to change certain physical features. This highlights the complex relationship between empowerment and constraint in shaping body image.

Finally, the findings demonstrated the dual role of social media in both reinforcing and challenging gender norms. While some content reproduced traditional expectations, such as women's role as caregivers and the objectification of female bodies, other content promoted women's independence, equality and alternative representations of femininity. This duality underscores the contested nature of social media as a space where gender norms are continuously negotiated.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to existing literature by applying an intersectional feminist lens to the analysis of the impact of social media on body image and self-perception. The findings demonstrate that women's experiences on Instagram cannot be understood through gender alone but must be examined in relation to the intersections of race, class and cultural context. The findings also contribute to intersectional feminist scholarship by illustrating how structural inequities shaped access to beauty practices and influence self-perception. For example, the role of economic constraints in shaping body acceptance underscores the importance of class as a key dimension of analysis.

Importantly, the study contributes to the limited body of literature on social media and body image within the Sri Lankan context, where local cultural norms intersect with globalized beauty standards in unique ways. By situating these experiences within Sri Lanka, the research highlights how racialized beauty ideals, gender expectations and socio-economic factors operate in a nonWestern setting. Furthermore, the study contributes to the growing body of research on digital media by demonstrating that social media platforms are not neutral spaces but are shaped by algorithms, influencers and user interactions. These functions influence the visibility and circulation of certain types of content, thereby shaping the norms and values that users are exposed to.

Practical and Social Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for both the individual and society. At the individual level, the study highlights the need for greater awareness of the impact of social media on body image and self-perception. Encouraging users to critically engage with content and to manage their exposure may help mitigate negative effects.

At the societal level, the study underscores the importance of promoting more inclusive and diverse representations of beauty. Challenging racialized beauty ideals and gender stereotypes requires collective efforts from content creators, influencers and media platforms. Social media companies also have a role to play in addressing the way in which algorithms may amplify harmful or unrealistic content.

In the Sri Lankan context, these findings are particularly relevant, as they highlight the ongoing influence of both traditional norms and globalized media in shaping women's experiences.

Addressing these issues requires a nuanced understanding of how local and global factors intersect.

Limitations of the Study

While the study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. First, the study sample focuses on a small group of Sri Lankan young women, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the research concentrated primarily on Instagram and, therefore, does not capture the influence of other social media platforms. Third, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be influenced by participants' perceptions and interpretations.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a rich and in-depth understanding of the experiences of Sri Lankan young women and provides a strong foundation for future research.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could expand on this study by exploring the experiences of a more diverse group of participants, including women from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

Comparative studies across different countries or regions could also provide valuable insights into how cultural context shapes the impact of social media. Additionally, further research could examine the role of specific platform features, such as algorithms and filters, in shaping user experiences. Longitudinal studies may also be useful in understanding how body image and self-perception evolve over time in relation to social media use.

Concluding Remarks

In Conclusion, this study demonstrates that Instagram plays a significant and multifaceted role in shaping body image and self-perception among Sri Lankan young women. The platform functions as a space of comparison, a site for the reproduction of racialized beauty ideals, a context for both acceptance and constraint, and a contested arena where gender norms are both reinforced and challenged.

By applying an intersectional feminist lens, this study highlights the importance of understanding these experiences as shaped by multiple and overlapping systems of inequality. Ultimately, social media is not simply a source of pressure or empowerment but a complex space where individuals actively negotiate their identities, values and self-perceptions.

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Appendix A – Interview Guide

Semi-Structured Questionnaire

1 Background information:

1.1 Can you tell me a little about yourself?

- a. Your age
- b. Where you live (District Secretariat Division)
- c. Your highest level of education
- d. Your current status (whether you are currently studying, working, or both)
- e. Your ethnic background
- f. Your religion or belief system

2 Instagram usage:

2.1 Is your Instagram account public or private?

- Number of followers
- How long have you been using Instagram

2.2 How often do you use Instagram?

- a. How much time do you usually spend on Instagram each day or week?
- b. What time/s of day do you usually check Instagram?

2.3 Why do you use Instagram?

- a. What kind of content do you usually engage with (e.g., posts, stories, reels, etc.)?)
- b. Do you use it more for posting your own content or looking at others' posts?

2.4 Are there certain types of content (e.g., fashion, fitness, memes, friends' updates) you tend to look at more?

- Were there any specific images on Instagram that had a strong impact on you? If yes, why? (posted by someone else)

2.5 Do you follow any influencers or celebrities? If so, why those particular accounts?

2.6 After 45 minutes of Instagram, what kind of actions do you intend to take (watch makeup tutorial, etc.)?

3 Instagram and body image:

- 3.1 When you see photos or videos of people on Instagram, how does it make you feel about your own body?
- 3.2 Do you ever compare yourself to others on Instagram?
 - If so, why?
 - How does that affect your self-esteem or self-confidence?
- 3.3 Have you ever felt pressure to look a certain way because of what you see on Instagram? Please elaborate on your answer.
- 3.4 Have you ever seen something on Instagram that made you feel good or bad about your appearance? If so, can you describe that experience?
- 3.5 Have you ever edited or filtered your photos before posting them? Why or why not? Please elaborate on your answer.
- 3.6 Do you think the filters used on Instagram promote “white” beauty standards (e.g., lighter skin or Eurocentric features)? If yes, how? Do you personally use these types of filters? Why or why not?

4 Instagram and self-perception:

- 4.1 Do you think your Instagram activity reflects who you are? Please elaborate on your answer.
- 4.2 Do you feel like you present your true self on Instagram?
 - If yes, why? What makes you feel that the version of yourself you show online is authentic?
 - If not, how do you present yourself differently? In what ways do you change or adjust how you present yourself, and why do you feel the need to do that?
- 4.3 Has using Instagram changed the way you think about yourself?
 - If so, in what ways?

5 Social hierarchies and gender norms:

- 5.1 What kinds of female representations do you usually see on Instagram (e.g., beauty standards, fashion, roles such as wives or mothers)?

5.2 Do you think Instagram promotes traditional gender roles? If so, how does it promote them?

Can you give some examples?

5.3 Do you think Instagram challenges traditional gender roles (social expectations for women)? If so, how does it challenge them? Can you give some examples?

5.4 Do you think that Instagram affects how young women in Sri Lanka view success, beauty, and gender roles? If so, how?

5.5 In your opinion, do influencers or celebrities on Instagram help to reinforce or break gender stereotypes? Please elaborate on your answer. Do you think it's genuine?

6 Reflection:

6.1 Based on your understanding and personal experiences, do you think social media inherently harms body image? If not, do you think that its effects depend on individual engagement and interpretation? Can you please explain your answer with a/some example/s?

6.2 Compared to other social media platforms like Facebook or TikTok, do you think Instagram has a greater or lesser impact on women's body image or self-perception? Why?

6.3 Overall, do you think Instagram has had a positive or negative effect on your body image and self-perception? Please elaborate on your answer.

6.4 Do you think social media creates different kinds of pressures for men and women?

- Do you feel that women are more affected by these pressures, especially in ways that reflect or reinforce unequal treatment in society, such as existing gender hierarchies?
- Can you please explain your answer with some examples?

6.5 Do you think any changes could be made to Instagram to make it a healthier space for young women? If so, what changes would you like to see on Instagram to make it a healthier space for young women? What would you suggest?

Appendix B – Participant Information Sheet

Letter of Information

Title of the Study

The Role of social media on body image and self-perception among young Sri Lankan women

Purpose of the Study

You are invited to take part in a research study conducted by Chamathi Serasinghe to fulfill the requirements of her master's degree in Sociology at the University of Ottawa, examining how social media influences body image and self-perception among young Sri Lankan women. It also explores whether social media reinforces or challenges existing social hierarchies and gender roles.

This study will explore how digital environments shape societal norms and individual experiences, particularly in contexts where traditional cultural values and modern technological influences intersect. Focusing on Sri Lanka—a country characterized by its rich blend of Buddhist tradition, colonial influences and ethnic diversity—this research explores the experiences of young women participating online, analyzing how social media shapes their self-perception and body image. Thus, this project aims to examine how social media, particularly Instagram, affects young women's perception of body image and explore its role in maintaining or reshaping existing social hierarchies related to gender. Ultimately, this study addresses the broader sociological interplay between digital technology, societal structures such as gender norms, and individual experiences.

Interview Participation Criteria

This study is open to young Sri Lankan women between the ages of 18 and 24 who actively use Instagram and engage with content related to beauty and body image. To be eligible, participants must reside in the Colombo District and have completed the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE A/L). Ten participants will be selected purposively to reflect Sri Lanka's ethnic and religious demographics.

Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will take part in an online interview lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. The interview will be conducted via Zoom or Microsoft Teams at a time convenient to you, in Sinhala or English, ensuring comfort and enabling you to express yourself more freely. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question and may withdraw from the study without penalty. If you decide to withdraw, you should make the request within three months after the interview, and your data will be deleted and not used in the analysis. You won't be able to withdraw your data three months after the interview, given that all identifiable information will be destroyed past this point, and the researcher won't be able to link your identity with your data.

Risks and Benefits

There are no anticipated risks greater than those encountered in daily life. While you may not directly benefit from participating, your input will contribute to a better understanding of how social media shapes body image and gender perceptions among Sri Lankan women.

Confidentiality

All information you provide will remain confidential. Your name will not appear in any report or publication; pseudonyms will be used instead. Audio recordings and transcripts will be retained securely for a period of five years following the completion of data collection. After this period, all data will be permanently deleted or destroyed to ensure participant confidentiality and privacy.

Questions or Concerns

If you have any questions about the study, please contact the researcher or supervisor. For questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board at ethics@uottawa.ca.

Thank you,

Chamathi Serasinghe,

Master's Student,

Department of Sociology,

University of Ottawa

Appendix C – Consent Form

Consent Form

Title of the study: The Role of Social Media on Body Image and Self-Perception Among Young Sri Lankan Women

Name of Principal Investigator: Chamathi Serasinghe

Affiliation: School of Sociological and Anthropological Studies, University of Ottawa

Name of Supervisor: Dr. Efe Peker

Affiliation: Professor, School of Sociological and Anthropological Studies, University of Ottawa

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Chamathi Serasinghe for her master's thesis, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree, under the supervision of Professor Efe Peker.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore how social media affects the way young women perceive and behave in Sri Lanka. It focuses on how social media, particularly Instagram, affects young women's perception of body image and how it might support or challenge traditional ideas about gender. The goal is to better understand how digital technology, gender roles, and personal experiences are connected from a sociological perspective.

Participation: My participation will consist of participating in one interview of 60-90 minutes during which a series of questions will be asked based on the impact of social media on young Sri Lankan women. The online interview will be scheduled on a date and time that is convenient for me. The interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in data collection.

Additionally, the researcher may contact me after the interview if clarification is required. For this purpose, a follow-up meeting may be requested, which is expected to last approximately 15–30 minutes and will be conducted online (via Zoom/Teams) or by phone, depending on my preference.

Risks: This is a minimal risk study. My participation in this study may entail that I volunteer personal information, and this may cause me to feel uncomfortable. I have received assurance from the researchers that every effort will be made to minimize these risks. My participation is entirely voluntary and anonymous, and I may choose to skip any questions or stop the interview at any time without any consequences.

Benefits: My participation in this study will provide an excellent opportunity for the researcher to gain valuable insights for her master's thesis. By sharing my experiences and perspectives, I will help enrich the chosen research topic and contribute to the learning and academic development of the researcher.

Confidentiality and Privacy: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for academic purposes. Anonymity will be protected, and any identifiable information will be removed from the data. The results of this study may be published or presented at academic conferences, but my identity will not be disclosed. In order to minimize the risk of security breaches and to help ensure my confidentiality, it is recommended that I use standard safety measures.

Conservation of Data: All interview recordings, transcripts, consent forms and other data will be securely stored. Audio recordings will be transferred to a password-protected digital storage system immediately after the interview and deleted from the recording device. Any video file automatically recorded during the interview will be destroyed immediately after the interview is completed, and only the audio file will be kept.

Transcripts will be anonymized by removing any personally identifiable information and stored on a secure, encrypted server. Only the researcher will have access to the data. All identifying information linking the participant's ID to their data will be destroyed three months after obtaining consent from participants to protect participants' privacy. Data will be kept by the researcher for five years following the allocation of the final submission of the thesis, after which it will be permanently deleted.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate, and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences.

If I decide to withdraw, I should make the request within three months after the interview for all the data I provided to be removed and destroyed. I understand that I won't be able to withdraw my data three months after the interview, given that all identifiable information will be destroyed past this point and the researcher won't be able to link my identity with my data.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or their supervisor. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity via email (ethics@uottawa.ca) or telephone (613-562-5800 ext. 5387).

It is recommended that I save a copy of this consent form for my records.

I consent to being contacted after the interview should any clarification be required.

Yes

No

Acceptance: By signing below, I agree to participate in this research study.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix F – Codebook

Codebook for Thematic Analysis

Name	Description	Files	References
Body Image	1. How does Instagram usage influence body image perceptions and self-perception among young (18-24 years) Sri Lankan women?	15	182
1. Instagram as a space of constant comparison		10	59
(+) Comparison		7	14
1. Self-Evaluation Through Others	Measuring self-worth through others' images	8	17
2. Wanting to look or live like influencers or others	Aspirational Identification	8	23
3. Normalized Comparison	Comparison seen as natural and com	5	5

2. Racialized Beauty Ideals		15	46
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Name	Description	Files	References
1. White Beauty Standards & Eurocentric Features	Fair skin as ideal, skin tone hierarchy	15	27
Skin tone (SMCA)		7	9
2. Filter Whitening Effects	Skin lightening filters	8	13
3. Resistance to Whitening Ideals		3	6
3. Body image construction		10	55
1. Accepting the Instagram beauty standard	Internalized Beauty Ideals	7	11

2. Body Dissatisfaction	Feeling unhappy with body/appearance	6	15
3. Confidence Instability	Fluctuating self-esteem	9	14
4. Instagram is not real		7	7

Name	Description	Files	References
5. Body Acceptance Narratives	Learning to accept natural body	4	8
4. Digital Self-Presentation		9	22
1. Filtered Self-Representation	Editing images, selective posting, managing what others see, and presenting an idealized self	9	20
2. Posting Anxiety	Fear of judgement	2	2

Impact on Gendered Social Hierarchies	2. In what ways does this social media platform challenge or reinforce existing social hierarchies related to gender among young Sri Lankan women?	51	135
1. Reinforcement of Gender Hierarchies		50	89
1. Traditional gender norms (SMCA)		9	11

Name	Description	Files	References
2. Monitoring and judging women's behavior	Monitoring and judging women (gendered moral surveillance)	7	11
3. Sexualization of Women	Sexual comments/messages	31	43
Sexualized comments (SMCA)		28	35

4. How women should behave or look	Femininity regulation	20	24
Traditional body ideals (SMCA)		15	19
2. Reinforcement of Traditional Gender Roles		7	16
(+) Patriarchal Norm Reproduction	Traditional roles	2	2

Name	Description	Files	References
1.1. Male Provider Ideology		1	2
1.2. Women as dependents	Dependent narratives	1	2
2. Mother, wife Roles	Domestic femininity ideals	6	10

3. Challenging Gender Hierarchies		9	30
1. Equality narratives		3	4
2. Shared responsibility	Gender role fluidity	3	4
3. Female Independence Representation	Working women, solo living, travel, women prioritizing careers	9	20
Influencers & Platform power		10	53
1. Influencers		9	41
1. Influencer Power	Influencers as role models, shaping norms,	7	20
2. Role Model Femininity	Influential independent women	6	10

Name	Description	Files	References
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3. Commercialized Empowerment by Influencers	Feminism for profit, trend-driven activism, non-genuine empowerment	4	9
2. Unseen platform control		4	12
1. Belief in free choice		3	5
2. Platform Power	Algorithm shaping content	3	7
Self-perception		109	277
(+) Self-Perception Transformation		1	2
1. Depend on how you think narrative	Mindset discourse: “depends on how you think” narrative	10	17
2. Instagram as a Harm Source	Emotional harm, insecurity	11	15
Hate comments		6	7

Name	Description	Files	References
3. Instagram as a Motivation Tool	Fitness, confidence, lifestyle motivation, personal growth narratives, self-development through content	107	233
Positive comments		98	218
4. Digital Identity Formation	Identity shaped through platform use	6	10
Instagram Usage		10	40
How much time		10	10
When		10	11
Why		10	19