

# COVER GIRLS: SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S VULNERABILITY TO BODY DISSATISFACTION, ARISING FROM CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN WESTERN APPEARANCE- BASED MEDIA

IMAAN KHASRU

B.A. Candidate in Psychology and South Asian Studies  
*Princeton University, Class of 2023*

## Background and Motive

Access and exposure to media are faster and easier than ever, with leaps in technology that increasingly import media and its psychological impacts into niches of everyday life. In parallel, there's been increasing research into the negative impact of visual appearance-based media on self-objectification amongst female viewers. Studies find that exposure to *appearance-based media* (e.g., adverts, television, cinema, and magazines) featuring women in scarce clothing<sup>1</sup> or suggestive positions<sup>2</sup> primes women to feel self-conscious, access the appearance-based aspects of their self-image,<sup>3</sup> and at least partially believe their value to arise from their bodies.<sup>4</sup> Individual factors can make a woman more vulnerable to body dissatisfaction following exposure to appearance-based media. Inman et al.<sup>5</sup> found that these factors include (1) increased exposure to social comparison, (2) believing one's value to come from appearance, and (3) suffering from generally low body esteem. These three preconditions prime female participants to feel threatened and predict an even bigger drop in self-esteem following exposure to media images of thin female models.

Interestingly, these three factors are common amongst South Asian American women, who often experience social comparison,<sup>6</sup> appearance-based teasing and

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Stevens Aubrey et al., "A Picture Is Worth Twenty Words (about the Self): Testing the Priming Influence of Visual Sexual Objectification on Women's Self-Objectification," *Communication Research Reports* 26, no. 4 (2009): pp. 271-284, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824090903293551>.

<sup>2</sup> R. M. Calogero, S. Tantleff-Dunn, and J. K. Thompson, "Objectification Theory: An Introduction.," *Self-Objectification in Women: Causes, Consequences, and Counteractions.*, 2011, pp. 3-21, <https://doi.org/10.1037/12304-001>.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Stevens Aubrey et al., "A Picture Is Worth...".

<sup>4</sup> K.Y. Kawamura, "Body Image among Asian Americans," *Encyclopedia of Body Image and Human Appearance*, 2012, pp. 95-102, <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-384925-0.00039-0>.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Inman, Anna Snyder, and Kelvin Peprah, "Religious-Body Affirmations Protect Body Esteem for Women Who Base Self-Worth on Appearance or Others' Approval," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 19, no. 1 (February 2016): pp. 98-111, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2015.1124634>.

<sup>6</sup> K.Y. Kawamura, "Body Image...".

commentary,<sup>7</sup> and objectification.<sup>8</sup> These findings suggest that South Asian Americans constitute a subgroup of women with high vulnerability to low esteem and body dissatisfaction following exposure to appearance-based media. For this paper, the term “South Asian” is used to refer to the culture and peoples associated with countries in the Indian Subcontinent (e.g., Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka). While this group is heterogeneous,<sup>9</sup> it still bears shared cultural norms arising from a collective past as shared territory under the same governance.<sup>10</sup>

Mumford et al. (1991) found that traditional (i.e., culture-conforming in attire and practice) South Asian girls living in white-majority UK neighborhoods had higher rates of maladaptive eating attitudes than non-traditional South Asian British peers, but similar rates compared to peers living in Pakistan.<sup>11</sup> This finding suggests that Pakistani (South Asian) culture had a greater negative impact on the participants’ body esteem than did British culture from a white-majority neighborhood. Therefore, cultural aspects of South Asian identity and lifestyle may predispose women to low body esteem even outside of their exposure to appearance-based media. The intersection between consequences of South Asian cultural practices and exposure to Western media may compound to put South Asian American women at heightened vulnerability compared to their white peers.

Throughout this paper, I will be looking at cultural aspects and experiences that make American appearance-based media an example of a Western cultural phenomenon with a greater negative impact on the psychological state of South Asian American women than on their white American peers. The consequences of this heightened effect include low body esteem, self-objectification, and maladaptive eating habits.<sup>12</sup> In general, while Asian Americans make up the fastest-growing ethnic group

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew Hodes, Cheryl Jones, and Hugh Davies, “Cross-Cultural Differences in Maternal Evaluation of Children’s Body Shapes,” *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 19, no. 3 (1996): pp. 257-263, [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(sici\)1098-108x\(199604\)19:3<257::aid-eat4>3.0.co;2-l](https://doi.org/10.1002/(sici)1098-108x(199604)19:3<257::aid-eat4>3.0.co;2-l).

<sup>8</sup> Henrike Donner, “One’s Own Marriage’: Love Marriages in a Calcutta Neighbourhood,” *South Asia Research* 22, no. 1 (2002): pp. 79-94, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026272800202200104>.

<sup>9</sup> M. A Kennedy et al., “Asian Body Image Satisfaction: Ethnic and Gender Differences across Chinese, Indo-Asian, and European-Descent Students,” *Eating Disorders* 12, no. 4 (2004): pp. 321-336, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10640260490521415>.

<sup>10</sup> Maninder Sangar and Julia Howe, “How Discourses of Sharam (Shame) and Mental Health Influence the Help-Seeking Behaviours of British Born Girls of South Asian Heritage,” *Educational Psychology in Practice* 37, no. 4 (2021): pp. 343-361, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2021.1951676>.

<sup>11</sup> David Mumford, Andrew Whitehouse, and Margaret Platts, “Sociocultural Correlates of Eating Disorders among Asian Schoolgirls in Bradford,” *British Journal of Psychiatry* 158, no. 2 (1991): 222-28. doi: 10.1192/bjp.158.2.222.

<sup>12</sup> Eileen L. Zurbriggen et al., “Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls,” American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2007), <https://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report>; Jennifer Stevens Aubrey et al., “A Picture Is Worth...”; Amy Slater and Marika Tiggemann, “Media Exposure, Extracurricular Activities, and Appearance-Related Comments as Predictors of Female Adolescents’ Self-Objectification,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2014): pp. 375-389, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684314554606>; Leah Boepple and J. Kevin Thompson, “A Content Analytic Study of Appearance Standards for Women of Color in Magazines,” *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 7, no. 3 (2018): pp. 264-273, <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000136>.

in America,<sup>13</sup> they are still vastly overlooked in psychological research,<sup>14</sup> especially in research about women's psychological health and body esteem, which tends to emphasize or use majority-white participants.<sup>15</sup> By investigating how the objectifying effect of appearance-based media on women (and the subsequent psychological consequences that follow as a result) varies across races, I will demonstrate the need for increased research into the body esteem and psychological health of South Asian women. This is crucial because South Asian women tend to display below-average help-seeking behavior and need more support than their white peers.<sup>16</sup>

### **Media and Women's Body Esteem**

To understand the psychological damage that appearance-based media can inflict on women, one needs to understand Objectification Theory, defined by Calogero et al. as the viewing of women's bodies as objects that exist for others, to be controlled, defined, and used by others for their own needs.<sup>17</sup> Objectification is induced and proliferated by stimuli like interpersonal encounters and visual media. By definition, objectification considers women as instruments for the gain of others—often for the pleasure and service of men. Over time, repeated experiences of being objectified can socialize women to see their value stored in appearance or in the function they serve to others, which lowers self-esteem.

American women often repeatedly experience objectification through real-life, appearance-based media. Using a qualitative study of print media in America, Stankiewicz & Rosselli found that on average, around 52% of advertisements featuring women portray them as sexual objects.<sup>18</sup> This statistic rises to 76% when only considering advertisements in men's magazines. Aubrey et al. found that after looking at real magazine pictures of models in provocative clothing, women had more appearance-based comments, but fewer positive comments to make about themselves.<sup>19</sup> The magazines had an objectifying effect on participants and socialized them to internalize outsiders' perspectives of themselves as objects, i.e., it encouraged participants to *self-objectify*.<sup>20</sup> Repeated experiences of objectification socialize females

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<sup>13</sup> Abby Budiman and Neil G. Ruiz, "Key facts about Asian origin groups in the U.S.," Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center, April 29, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/29/key-facts-about-asian-origin-groups-in-the-u-s/>.

<sup>14</sup> K.Y. Kawamura, "Body Image...".

<sup>15</sup> Kayoko Yokoyama, "The Double Binds of Our Bodies," *Women & Therapy* 30, no. 3-4 (2007): pp. 177-192, [https://doi.org/10.1300/j015v30n03\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1300/j015v30n03_13).

<sup>16</sup> Sangar and Howe, "How Discourses...".

<sup>17</sup> Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn, and Thompson, "Objectification Theory...".

<sup>18</sup> Julie M. Stankiewicz and Francine Rosselli, "Women as Sex Objects and Victims in Print Advertisements," *Sex Roles* 58, no. 7-8 (2008): pp. 579-589, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-007-9359-1>.

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Stevens Aubrey et al., "A Picture Is Worth...".

<sup>20</sup> Amy Slater and Marika Tiggemann, "Media Exposure, Extracurricular Activities, and Appearance-Related Comments as Predictors of Female Adolescents' Self-Objectification," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2014): pp. 375-389, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684314554606>.

over time to value women based on appearance and usefulness to others.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, women who repeatedly self-objectify may come to see their bodies as “*objects of others’ desires*,” instead of modes for their expression and autonomy.<sup>22</sup>

Continuing their in-depth study of objectification in women, Calogero et al. argue that the wider consequences of pronounced objectification are twofold.<sup>23</sup> Firstly, it fragments the subject’s identity into a collection of traits subject to evaluation—a divide-and-conquer tactic that makes the subject increasingly vulnerable to psychological distress and anticipative of external evaluation. Secondly, it underemphasizes the subject’s intentions, ambitions, and concerns, while putting greater emphasis on the desires and opinions of others. This indirectly frames the subject as an instrument beholden to the whims of *others* and lowers self-esteem. Thus, objectification is a powerful tool for sociocultural control over women’s actions, ambitions, and intentions. Psychological consequences of this lack of control include maladaptive eating attitudes, poor self-image, and appearance-anxiety.<sup>24</sup>

The effect of appearance-based media on women’s body esteem and self-image is subject to variation in an individual’s personality and environment. In particular, a 2016 observational study found that two groups of women are most negatively influenced by appearance-based media: (1) those who already show body dissatisfaction before exposure, and (2) those who measure their value based on appearance and others’ approval.<sup>25</sup> Through cultural practices and experiences, South Asian women regularly experience appearance-based commentary, are subject to social comparison, and are more vulnerable to appearance-based media. In this paper, we will take a closer look at South Asian American experiences and practices that heighten psychological vulnerability to appearance-based media, including (1) social comparison, (2) cultural conflict with western beauty ideals, and (3) prevalent objectification of South Asian women. Through this examination, I will argue that South Asian American women are at an above-average risk of low esteem and self-objectification, which has negative consequences for psychological health.

### *Asian Women in American Media*

Appearance-based media also differs in the representation of women from different racial groups; Asian American women are under-represented or represented with different stereotypes than peers from other races are. Boepple & Thompson analyzed the visual representation (i.e., photographs) of women in popular, American, women’s fashion magazines.<sup>26</sup> They found that amongst women presented, only 0.2% were dark-skinned Asians (judged to all be South Asian)—far below the population of

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<sup>21</sup> Amy Slater and Marika Tiggemann, “Media Exposure...”.

<sup>22</sup> Zurbriggen et al., “Report of the APA...”, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn, and Thompson, “Objectification Theory...”.

<sup>24</sup> Amy Slater and Marika Tiggemann, “Media Exposure...”.

<sup>25</sup> Inman, Snyder, and Peprah, “Religious-Body Affirmations...”.

<sup>26</sup> Boepple and Thompson, “A Content Analytic Study...”.

South Asians in America. A total of 2.4% of women photographed overall were Asian, though a whopping 85% of them were light-skinned, 100% had facial features smaller than the average for Asians, and 100% had long straight hair. This homogeneity suggests stricter standards for the appearance of Asian women compared to peers from other races. Furthermore, the physical traits that were more frequent were interpreted as more conforming to white beauty standards, such as fair skin, small features, and straight hair. Lastly, most appearances of Asian women were related to advertisements and editorials emphasizing clothing and make-up, which leads Boepple & Thompson to theorize that there's a higher emphasis on the appearance and styling of Asian women, especially compared to white peers.

Furthermore, American television tends to portray women of color infrequently, and as "exotic, passive, or sexual objects."<sup>27</sup> Therefore, appearance-based media bears different messages for and can have different effects on women depending on race. Overall, this limited and skewed representation can exacerbate both racial teasing and internal conflict with western beauty ideals amongst South Asian American women.

### **South Asian American Practices and Experiences**

#### *Social Comparison through Racial Teasing*

Women who determine their value through appearance and the approval of others are more vulnerable to low body esteem following exposure to appearance-based media of thin models.<sup>28</sup> Slater and Tiggemann affirm this theory by arguing that self-objectification is largely exacerbated during puberty because it's a time when women are increasingly "looked at, commented on, and evaluated by others."<sup>29</sup> In other words, appearance-based commentary and social comparison can increase women's vulnerability to poor self-esteem following exposure to appearance-based media. These conditions can stem from interpersonal interactions that emphasize appearance or objectify women.

Appearance-based comments of any kind (even positive) prime women to feel self-conscious and objectified because they frame themselves as an object to be looked at and evaluated.<sup>30</sup> However, negative comments and teasing are more strongly associated with body dissatisfaction, maladaptive eating practices, and psychological distress, amongst adults and adolescents alike.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> K.Y. Kawamura, "Body Image...", 99.

<sup>28</sup> Kathy Wilcox and James D. Laird, "The Impact of Media Images of Super-Slender Women on Women's Self-Esteem: Identification, Social Comparison, and Self-Perception," *Journal of Research in Personality* 34, no. 2 (2000): pp. 278-286, <https://doi.org/10.1006/jrpe.1999.2281>; Inman, Snyder, and Peprah, "Religious-Body Affirmations..."

<sup>29</sup> Amy Slater and Marika Tiggemann, "Media Exposure..."

<sup>30</sup> Zurbriggen et al., "Report of the APA..."

<sup>31</sup> Amy Slater and Marika Tiggemann, "Media Exposure...", 377.

Compared to other cultures, Asian culture tends to emphasize teasing and appearance-based commentary as a means by which to control and discipline young children.<sup>32</sup> This is one factor that predisposes women to high psychological vulnerability following exposure to appearance-based media. Like other collectivist cultures, Asian culture generally deemphasizes the individual self in an attempt to prioritize overall societal harmony. In a report studying body image amongst Asian Americans, Kawamura explains that Asian culture traditionally views the female body as an extension of the family's outward-facing reputation. As a result, Asian American women are under more pressure (compared to white American women or men in general) to maintain a "perfect" appearance that will attract respectable suitors.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Asian American parents often resort to shame, criticism, and disapproval to pressure their daughters into changing and maintaining a certain physical appearance.

Unlike their white American peers, South Asians in America experience appearance-based comments about physical features that are ethnically distinct from the dominant group (i.e., the white beauty ideal).<sup>34</sup> This phenomenon is called *racial teasing* and results in negative affect and psychological turmoil that increases vulnerability to psychological challenges like self-objectification. Racial teasing makes its subjects increasingly aware of, sensitive about, and perhaps even ashamed of their appearance— framing it as a source of trauma and pain. A 1997 survey amongst college-aged women found that compared to white peers, South Asian Canadian women all wanted lighter skin. Darker women had an even stronger desire to be fairer.<sup>35</sup> Reddy & Crowther argue that these findings highlight the internalization of western beauty standards, which prime self-consciousness and body dissatisfaction amongst women of color contrast this ideal.<sup>36</sup> This body dissatisfaction is exacerbated by the aforementioned infrequent and fair-skewed representation of South Asian women in American magazines.<sup>37</sup> The relationship between internalizing white beauty standards and feeling dissatisfied with ethnically distinct physical traits could explain why racial teasing is correlated with maladaptive eating attitudes (exacerbated by exposure to appearance-based media).

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<sup>32</sup> K.Y. Kawamura, "Body Image...".

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>34</sup> Sheethal D. Reddy and Janis H. Crowther, "Teasing, Acculturation, and Cultural Conflict: Psychosocial Correlates of Body Image and Eating Attitudes among South Asian Women.," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 13, no. 1 (2007): pp. 45-53, <https://doi.org/10.1037/1099-9809.13.1.45>.

<sup>35</sup> S. Sahay and N. Piran, "Skin-color preferences and body satisfaction among South Asian-Canadian and European-Canadian female university students," *J Soc Psychol* 137, no. 2 (1997): pp. 161 – 171, <https://doi:10.1080/00224549709595427>.

<sup>36</sup> Reddy and Crowther, "Teasing, Acculturation...".

<sup>37</sup> Boepple and Thompson, "A Content Analytic Study...".

*Cultural Conflict with Western Beauty Standards*

Studies disagree on whether or not internalizing a thin-ideal standard produces low body esteem and maladaptive eating habits amongst women. On one hand, many studies *only* look at the effect that the media of *thin* women has on female viewers' body esteem.<sup>38</sup> A controlled experiment by Roberts & Good found that looking at media of heavier women can even increase women's self-esteem, by making them feel thinner and therefore closer to the western ideal.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, a multivariate analysis of a survey conducted by Reddy and Crowther found that internalizing the thin-ideal beauty standard isn't significantly related to body esteem or eating habits, but that *cultural conflict* with this western ideal *does* correlate with both low body esteem and maladaptive eating.<sup>40</sup> Cultural conflict is the tension between two diverse cultures—in this case, the tension between individualist, American dominant culture, versus the collectivist culture of South Asia. This definition is borrowed from the work of Reddy & Crowther, who find that cultural conflict leads to cognitive dissonance, psychological distress, and negative affect.<sup>41</sup>

We have already discussed how western beauty ideals are unrealistic or elusive for women of color who have distinct, ethnically-defined physical features. This is one source of cultural conflict between the standard of beauty within racially distinct cultures like South Asian culture, versus that of western cultures (propagated in western appearance-based media). Another factor arises in a 1996 field study conducted by Hodes et al., which found that 6 in 19 South Asian mothers were worried about their children's body shape—far more than mothers of other races.<sup>42</sup> Mothers were more openly concerned about the appearance of their daughters than that of their sons. The mothers surveyed had relatively similar distributions of weights and body types within each racial group, suggesting that their differences in evaluation didn't come from differences in their own bodies, but from a difference in their cultural values and practices. Interestingly, South Asian mothers preferred for their children to have a heavier weight and larger frame than did white or black mothers surveyed, suggesting a conflict in body preferences that falls under the larger umbrella of cultural conflict.

Parental preference and attitude have a sizable impact on children's development. Mothers directly influence their children's appearances via feeding practices, health-based interventions (e.g., diets, clinic visits, medication, etc.), and direct communication (including teasing).<sup>43</sup> Therefore, this maternal involvement in

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<sup>38</sup> Wilcox and J.Laird, "The Impact of Media Images..."; Inman, Snyder, and Peprah, "Religious-Body Affirmations...".

<sup>39</sup> Alan Roberts and Emily Good, "Media Images and Female Body Dissatisfaction: The Moderating Effects of the Five-Factor Traits," *Eating Behaviors* 11, no. 4 (2010): pp. 211-216, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eatbeh.2010.04.002>.

<sup>40</sup> Reddy and Crowther, "Teasing, Acculturation...".

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Hodes, Jones, and Davies, "Cross-Cultural Differences...".

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

South Asian children's appearances can prime daughters to self-objectify before they even consume visual media, and contribute to cultural conflict about appearance and beauty standards— i.e., a conflict between whether to prioritize the Western-favoured thin ideal or the larger-body preference held by South Asian parents. Kawamura finds that intergenerational conflict is a common symptom of cultural conflict, which heightens Asian Americans' vulnerability to psychological distress, including body dissatisfaction.<sup>44</sup> This finding affirms Reddy & Crowther's theory that South Asian women suffer body dissatisfaction as a result of cultural conflict and opposing appearance-based pressures from distinct societies.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the body dissatisfaction arising from this cultural conflict also increases South Asian American women's vulnerability to negative psychological consequences following exposure to Western appearance-based media.

*Objectification of Female Body and Sexuality*

South Asian cultures tend to emphasize values of “reputation, dignity, respect, {and} social standing,” and even have unique words to sum up such values.<sup>46</sup> One such socially-prescribed way to achieve such values is through the “*policing*” of women's appearances and sexual behaviors, indirectly framing female relatives as “*objects of control*.”<sup>47</sup> This social practice normalizes the use of female bodies as instruments for the evaluation and gain of others— i.e. our operative definition of objectification. Therefore, there is a link between South Asian cultural values and low female body esteem (via objectification). This account furthermore suggests that South Asian women tend to base self-worth on appearance and the evaluation of others, which Inman et al. find increases the risk of low esteem following exposure to appearance-based media.<sup>48</sup>

Historically, South Asian cultures have publicly framed women as instruments with which to improve family reputation via favorable marriages.<sup>49</sup> Sociological studies find that traditional South Asian families believe interpersonal relationships between their daughters and men could “damage their reputation” as a family.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, South Asian women deeply embedded in traditional cultural beliefs and practices may be socialized with high awareness of and pressure on their visual presentation, especially to men. In other words, South Asian cultural practices tend to emphasize a woman's value coming from her appearance, and use negative pressures like shame to closely maintain South Asian women's appearances.<sup>51</sup> These factors increase South

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<sup>44</sup> K.Y. Kawamura, “Body Image...”.

<sup>45</sup> Reddy and Crowther, “Teasing, Acculturation...”.

<sup>46</sup> Sangar and Howe, “How Discourses...”.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 3-9.

<sup>48</sup> Inman, Snyder, and Peprah, “Religious-Body Affirmations...”.

<sup>49</sup> Donner, “One's Own Marriage'...”.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>51</sup> Sangar and Howe, “How Discourses...”.



Asian American women's vulnerability to the negative psychological impact of appearance-based Western media, resulting in high rates of psychological distress, body dissatisfaction, and maladaptive eating.

### **Consequences to Mental Health**

Objectification increases psychological distress by fragmenting women into individual traits and physical features subject to evaluation.<sup>52</sup> In doing so, it reduces the humanity of women and deemphasizes female autonomy and desire. South Asian American women are objectified by a myriad of cultural influences that hinder their body esteem and psychological health. As shown above, South Asian culturally prevalent practices and values include appearance-based commentary,<sup>53</sup> social comparison, and framing female bodies as instruments for family gain.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, living in America involves new challenges to body esteem, including cultural conflict, racial teasing, and unrealistic western beauty standards that are more difficult for South Asian women to aspire to, due to ethnically-distinct physical features that contrast the western ideal.<sup>55</sup> Some of these challenges extend to other American women, too (e.g., internalizing an unrealistic western beauty standard or facing appearance-based pressure from family), but South Asian women are still at higher psychological risk due to below-average help-seeking tendencies.<sup>56</sup>

Sangar & Howe find that South Asian culture uniquely constructs shame as a mechanism through which to protect reputation by discouraging norm-breaking behavior.<sup>57</sup> As a consequence, South Asian women are sexually overpoliced and pressured to not seek mental healthcare or support, which could publicize familial problems. Kawamura explains that Asian cultures tend to value emotional restraint as a means by which to preserve group harmony.<sup>58</sup> Compared to white Americans, South Asian American women have above-average rates of suicide, self-harm, depression, and eating disorders, but still receive a below-average rate of medical treatment.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, it is both challenging and urgent to increase research and resources for low body esteem and mental health amongst South Asian American women.

### **Conclusion**

Western appearance-based media lowers women's low body esteem by propagating unrealistic ideals for female beauty and framing female bodies as entities for evaluation and use by others.<sup>60</sup> South Asian American women in particular suffer

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<sup>52</sup> Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn, and Thompson, "Objectification Theory...".

<sup>53</sup> K.Y. Kawamura, "Body Image...".

<sup>54</sup> Donner, "One's Own Marriage'...".

<sup>55</sup> Reddy and Crowther, "Teasing, Acculturation...".

<sup>56</sup> Sangar and Howe, "How Discourses...".

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> K.Y. Kawamura, "Body Image...".

<sup>59</sup> Sangar and Howe, "How Discourses..."; K.Y. Kawamura, "Body Image...".

<sup>60</sup> Stankiewicz and Rosselli, "Women as Sex Objects...".

from this effect more than their white American peers do, because of pre-existing high rates of body dissatisfaction, which according to Inman et al. increase vulnerability to the negative influence of appearance-based media.<sup>61</sup> This pre-existing low body esteem arises from cultural values and practices (e.g., cultural prevalence of social comparison, appearance-based commentary, familial pressure on appearance) and in part from cultural conflict (e.g., between western and South Asian beauty ideals, or internal conflict stemming from racial teasing). In particular, Fitzsimmons-Craft et al. find that high levels of social comparison and body surveillance can be the difference between whether media just affects women's thoughts, or whether it also affects their behavior and actions.<sup>62</sup> Put another way, familial involvement in and objectification of South Asian daughters' physical appearance can mean that these women suffer both the typical mental symptoms like self-objectification *and* additional, more extreme behavioral symptoms like starving oneself. Furthermore, these repeated experiences of objectification through exposure to appearance-based media or appearance-based commentary may cause South Asian American women to self-objectify more than their white peers by basing their self-worth based on appearance and usefulness to others.

Exposure to appearance-based media that internalizes the western beauty ideal is *only one* example of an experience that challenges the body esteem of South Asian American women more than their white American peers. In general, South Asian women tend to be underrepresented in studies of body image and body esteem, which leaves their vulnerabilities and challenges more undiscovered and undiscussed compared to those of their white peers. It's disputed whether South Asian women tend to experience equal<sup>63</sup> or above-average<sup>64</sup> rates of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders compared to peers from other races. However, at an intersection between South Asian culture and American culture, South Asian American women suffer doubly from appearance-based pressures in both societies. This is especially dangerous given that South Asian women express below-average rates of help-seeking behavior,<sup>65</sup> and are discouraged from expressing mental health concerns, for the sake of preserving harmony in collectivist culture.<sup>66</sup> Increased support from research and mental health resources are needed to help South Asian women break through this barrier of silence and overcome these extreme challenges to body esteem.

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<sup>61</sup> Inman, Snyder, and Peprah, "Religious-Body Affirmations...".

<sup>62</sup> Ellen E. Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., "Examining Social Physique Anxiety and Disordered Eating in College Women. the Roles of Social Comparison and Body Surveillance," *Appetite* 59, no. 3 (2012): pp. 796-805, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2012.08.019>.

<sup>63</sup> Boepple and Thompson, "A Content Analytic Study...".

<sup>64</sup> Kennedy et al., "Asian Body Image Satisfaction..."; Reddy and Crowther, "Teasing, Acculturation...".

<sup>65</sup> Sangar and Howe, "How Discourses...".

<sup>66</sup> K.Y. Kawamura, "Body Image...".

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