

Research Article

Exploring Self-Esteem and Body Dissatisfaction Among Jamaican Youths: Unraveling Influential Factors and Promoting Positive Self-Image

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Abstract: This qualitative study explores body image and self-esteem perceptions among Jamaican youths aged 9-15, framed within a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach. PAR, grounded in critical theory and social constructivism, emphasizes collaborative inquiry, cyclical reflection, and action to address social issues relevant to the participants' lived experiences. This methodology is particularly suited for youth-centred, culturally situated research, as it empowers participants to identify problems and co-create solutions. The central research question guiding this PAR study is: How do Jamaican youths perceive and experience body image and self-esteem, and what community-driven strategies can promote positive self-image among this group? Following a 3-day Self-Esteem and Image Enhancement Workshop designed to foster positive self-perception, 37 participants (23 females and 14 males) engaged in focus group discussions. Data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify key themes related to beauty perceptions and self-esteem within the specific context of Jamaican youth culture. Thematic analysis revealed that participants defined beauty as a blend of physical and non-physical attributes, emphasizing self-assurance alongside conventional features. While many expressed pride in their cultural heritage, they also acknowledged the significant influence of Eurocentric beauty standards, often feeling inadequate compared to lighter-skinned models in media. Participants reported societal pressures regarding weight and grooming that negatively impacted their self-esteem. Coping strategies included self-affirmations and strategic media consumption. Family support, particularly from siblings, emerged as crucial. Participants expressed a desire for community initiatives promoting body positivity, such as mentorship programs featuring local influencers. This research highlights the need for targeted interventions addressing the complexities of beauty perceptions among Jamaican youths. By fostering an environment that values diversity and promotes self-acceptance, stakeholders can mitigate the negative impacts of societal pressures on self-esteem. The findings contribute valuable insights for enhancing future workshops aimed at empowering youth through positive body image initiatives.

Keywords: Self-Esteem, Body Image, Eurocentric, Body Dissatisfaction, Afrocentric

Introduction

Body image and self-esteem among Jamaican youth are significantly shaped by the burden of meeting societal expectations, a phenomenon deeply rooted in the Caribbean's complex history and the legacy of the plantation system. This

system, characterized by exploitation, slavery, and colonialism, has indelibly shaped the region's cultural and social dynamics, influencing perceptions of beauty and social status (Adetoogun *et al.*, 2023). This study is grounded in the theoretical framework of Participatory Action Research (PAR), which involves participants as co-

researchers in a cyclical process of reflection, action, and evaluation to address issues affecting their communities. The constructs of body image and self-esteem, while broad, are operationalized in this study as follows: Body image refers to youths' subjective perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about their physical appearance, while self-esteem denotes their overall sense of self-worth and value, particularly as influenced by social and cultural standards.

Historical Context

The transatlantic slave trade and subsequent European influence on beauty standards led to the internalization of white beauty ideals and the devaluation of darker skin tones in Jamaica (Adetoogun *et al.*, 2023). This historical context has contributed to skin bleaching, driven by low self-esteem, social pressure, and the belief that lighter skin is associated with beauty, success, and social acceptance. Skin bleaching is often perceived as a strategy for upward social mobility, with individuals believing that lighter skin will improve their prospects in areas such as employment, relationships, and social status (Adetoogun *et al.*, 2023).

Complexion Standards in Jamaica

In Jamaica, children face pressures to conform to specific standards of complexion, compounded by historical and socioeconomic factors. Despite the predominantly African heritage of the population, Jamaican culture places significant emphasis on gradations of skin tone, with socially accepted distinctions between light and dark skin. This intricate interplay of skin tone and socioeconomic status traces its roots to the mixed-race children of white plantation owners, who inherited both wealth and lighter skin from their ancestors (Ferguson and Cramer, 2007). Consequently, concern about skin tone and hair texture has become a deeply ingrained cultural bias, where lighter and straighter features are often deemed more attractive. The legacy of the plantation system, Western beauty ideals, and constant media reinforcement converge to create an environment where Jamaican children feel pressured to conform to specific beauty standards.

Contemporary Implications: Social Pressures

In today's media-saturated environment, social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok play a significant role in shaping beauty ideals among Jamaican youth. Recent research highlights how social media filters and influencer culture contribute to body dissatisfaction by promoting digitally altered, often unattainable, beauty standards (Bani Issa *et al.*, 2025; Pedalino and Camerini, 2022).

This constant exposure reinforces Eurocentric ideals, intensifying pressures on young people to conform to narrowly defined standards of appearance.

The psychological impact of these pressures is profound. A tragic example is the case of a 13-year-old girl attending a corporate all-girls school in Jamaica, whose experience of relentless bullying due to a medical condition affecting her appearance led to a suicide attempt (Wilson Harris, 2017). This incident poignantly illustrates the enduring consequences of deeply ingrained beauty norms and the fragile self-esteem of Jamaican youth. It underscores the complex interplay between historical legacies, contemporary social pressures, and peer dynamics that shape young people's self-image and emotional well-being.

Physical appearance remains a primary factor influencing social interactions and judgments. As Pop (2016) notes, the global tendency to associate physical attractiveness with positive personal qualities has been reinforced by Western cultural norms, contributing to pervasive stereotypes. This societal emphasis on appearance drives individuals, including children and adolescents, to invest heavily in their physical presentation through cosmetic products, procedures, and fashion choices as a means to gain social acceptance (Pop, 2016).

Moreover, the prevalence of thin, Eurocentric models in television, magazines, films, and online media inundates young audiences with unrealistic ideals (Vonderen and Kinnally, 2012). These images shape children's and adolescents' perceptions of beauty, often leading to harmful comparisons and diminished self-esteem.

Together, these factors, historical legacies, media influence, social pressures, and socioeconomic disparities form a complex context that shapes the experiences of Jamaican youth. They not only affect self-esteem and body image but also influence overall well-being and a sense of belonging in a society where conforming to specific beauty ideals remains a significant challenge.

To provide clarity, this study defines body image as an individual's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about their physical appearance (Thompson *et al.*, 1999). *Self-esteem* is defined as an individual's overall sense of self-worth and value (Rosenberg, 1965). Given the focus on societal influences, this study adopts a sociocultural perspective, which posits that societal norms, media representations, and interpersonal interactions play a significant role in shaping body image and self-esteem (Thompson *et al.*, 1999). The sociocultural perspective is particularly relevant for understanding Jamaican youths, who are exposed to Eurocentric beauty standards through media and social pressures, and where historical and cultural factors significantly impact self-perception.

Theoretical Framework and Research Question

This study employs Participatory Action Research (PAR) as its guiding methodology. PAR is underpinned

by critical theory and social constructivism, emphasizing the empowerment of participants through active involvement in the research process. The cyclical nature of PAR, comprising reflection, action, and evaluation, facilitates the identification and resolution of social issues as experienced by the participants themselves. In the context of this study, PAR enables Jamaican youths to articulate their experiences with body image and self-esteem and to collaboratively develop strategies for positive change.

Statement of the Problem

Jamaican youths face considerable pressure to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards, a phenomenon influenced by various channels, including social media, traditional media, and interpersonal relationships. This pressure creates a burden for young individuals who seek social acceptance. Consequently, some youths may engage in practices such as skin bleaching and other cosmetic modifications, which can pose risks to their well-being. These experiences may contribute to low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction. While research has explored body image and self-esteem in various cultural contexts, there is a need for more local and regional studies focusing specifically on Jamaican youths and the unique interplay of historical, cultural, and social factors that shape their perceptions of beauty. This study seeks to address this gap by examining these factors and their influence on self-esteem and body image among Jamaican youths.

Significance of the Study

This research is significant as it aims to uncover how Jamaican youths perceive beauty and their self-image in the context of prevailing Eurocentric standards. By gathering insights from young individuals about their definitions of beauty and self-esteem, the study will contribute valuable data that can inform the development of targeted interventions aimed at enhancing self-esteem among this demographic. The findings will enrich existing literature on beauty culture and self-esteem issues among Jamaican youths, providing schools, parents, and community organizations with essential knowledge to address these challenges effectively. Additionally, this research will empower stakeholders to design programs that promote self-acceptance and challenge harmful beauty norms.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of beauty among Jamaican youths and how these perceptions influence their self-esteem. By investigating the interplay between societal pressures, media representations, and individual experiences, the study seeks to foster a greater appreciation for diverse

standards of beauty that reflect cultural heritage. Ultimately, the research aims to utilize its findings to enhance self-esteem workshops organized by the Programmes Coordination Division, thereby promoting positive self-image and resilience among Jamaican youths facing challenges related to body image and self-acceptance.

Research Question

How do Jamaican youths conceptualize and experience body image and self-esteem, and what community-driven interventions can be developed through PAR to promote positive self-image among this population?

How do Jamaican youths conceptualize beauty in relation to Eurocentric standards, and what cultural narratives influence their definitions of beauty?

In what ways do societal pressures and media representations shape the self-esteem and body image of Jamaican youths?

What strategies do Jamaican youths employ to navigate these influences and promote positive self-image and self-acceptance amidst prevailing beauty standards?

What strategies do Jamaican youths identify as effective for promoting positive self-image and self-acceptance amidst prevailing beauty standards?

Literature Review

Self-Esteem and Body Dissatisfaction: Influencing Factors and Outcomes

Self-esteem and body dissatisfaction are two interconnected concepts that significantly impact individuals' psychological well-being and self-perception. Self-esteem is the subjective evaluation and appreciation of oneself, independent of external validation, encompassing an individual's overall sense of worth (Cherry, 2021).

Body dissatisfaction, in contrast, is the perception that one's physical appearance falls short of societal or personal standards (Heider *et al.*, 2018). It often arises from a perceived gap between one's actual and ideal body (Heider *et al.*, 2018) and is influenced by a variety of cultural, social, and media factors (Tort-Nasarre *et al.*, 2021; Thompson and Keith, 2001). This literature review explores these contributing factors and their impact on self-esteem and body dissatisfaction among Jamaican youth.

Factors Influencing Body Dissatisfaction

Cultural and Ethnic Influences

Culture significantly shapes perceptions of self-worth and appearance standards. Thompson and Keith (2001) discuss how gender roles and skin tone influence self-evaluation, particularly among women, where darker skin tones are often correlated with lower self-esteem. Historical contexts have reinforced these biases, with Black people, for instance, facing stigmatization and

discrimination linked to physical features perceived as inferior (Ferguson and Cramer, 2007). This long-standing association with Eurocentric beauty standards has compelled many Black individuals to alter physical traits, sometimes even adopting what Patton (2006) describes as the "Lilly Complex" to conform to Western beauty ideals. This highlights the internalized pressure to adhere to dominant cultural norms.

Peer, Family, and Social Influence

Family and peer opinions are influential in shaping body image and self-worth. Women and girls often internalize a thin ideal due to pressures from family, friends, and media (Thompson and Stice, 2001). Social interactions help develop a person's self-image, as peers and family adopt media-driven ideals (Causey *et al.*, 2015). Studies also show that family support for weight loss, especially from mothers, is a significant factor in body dissatisfaction (Benedikt *et al.*, 1998; Wertheim *et al.*, 1999). Peer influences are also significant; boys and girls alike feel pressure from friends about appearance, with girls more frequently discussing appearance ideals (Jones and Crawford, 2006). Negative feedback from peers and family contributes to long-term issues with self-image (Davison and Birch, 2002). These influences underscore the importance of social support and validation in shaping body image.

Social Media Influence

Social media serves as a powerful medium influencing body dissatisfaction. According to Vogels *et al.* (2022), a significant majority of teenagers report daily internet use, making social platforms an integral part of their lives. Studies reveal that engagement with social media, especially viewing images portraying idealized physiques, decreases appearance satisfaction and increases body dissatisfaction (DeBraganza and Hausenblas, 2010; Stieger *et al.*, 2022). For instance, Facebook usage correlates with increased body dissatisfaction and higher risks of eating disorders (Cohen and Blaszczynski, 2015).

Outcomes of Low Self-Esteem and Body Dissatisfaction

Eating Disorders, Obesity, and Depression

Body dissatisfaction has been closely linked to eating disorders. Individuals struggling with body image may exhibit unhealthy eating behaviors, as seen in studies indicating a high prevalence of body dissatisfaction in those with binge eating disorders (Svaldi *et al.*, 2011). Body dissatisfaction is also identified as a risk factor for eating disorders (DeBraganza and Hausenblas, 2010). Obese youth experience higher rates of body dissatisfaction and depression than their normal-weight

peers (Goldfield *et al.*, 2010). The connection between male body dissatisfaction, anxiety, and depression also illustrates the broader psychological effects of appearance dissatisfaction (Barnes *et al.*, 2020). In female adolescents, body dissatisfaction due to weight issues correlates with low self-esteem and heightened depression symptoms (Contreras-Valdez *et al.*, 2016).

Surgical Enhancement and Skin Bleaching

Low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction sometimes drive individuals toward surgical enhancement or risky skin-lightening practices. Sarwer *et al.* (2003) report that body dissatisfaction is common among those seeking cosmetic surgery. Similarly, Meningaud *et al.* (2001) observe that individuals opting for surgery often display psychological vulnerability, suggesting deep-seated issues related to societal acceptance. Studies indicate that cosmetic surgery may temporarily improve body image but is also influenced by self-esteem and cultural beauty pressures (Farshidfar *et al.*, 2013; Von Soest *et al.*, 2009). Robinson (2011) discusses the appeal of lighter skin, with people pursuing skin-lightening procedures due to the media's perpetuation of pale skin as more attractive.

Methodology

This qualitative study, grounded in Participatory Action Research (PAR), explores the perceptions of body image and self-esteem among children aged 9–15 who participated in a 3-day Self-Esteem and Image Enhancement Workshop hosted by the Institute of Jamaica in July 2021. The workshop engaged 37 Black students (23 females, 14 males), equipping them with knowledge and skills related to self-worth. Post-workshop focus group discussions, guided by open-ended questions, were conducted in a supportive environment to elicit participants' experiences. Data were recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Aydin *et al.*, 2022). Consistent with PAR principles, the study emphasizes collaboration, participant empowerment, and practical application, to inform future interventions to foster body positivity among youth (Stewart, n.d; Vaughn and Jacquez, 2020).

Model and Context

The model for this study is a youth-centered PAR cycle, initiated with a Self-Esteem and Image Enhancement Workshop, followed by focus group discussions and thematic analysis. The context is Jamaican urban and peri-urban communities, with attention to the unique cultural, historical, and social influences that shape beauty standards and self-perception among youths aged 9-15.

Sampling Technique

This study employed purposive sampling, a non-probability technique suited to qualitative research that involves selecting participants based on specific, relevant characteristics (Patton, 2006). The sample comprised 37 Black children (23 females and 14 males), aged 9–16, who participated in a 3-day Self-Esteem and Image Enhancement Workshop hosted by the Institute of Jamaica. Participants were intentionally selected for their direct engagement with the workshop's content, ensuring they could offer rich, context-specific insights into issues of body image and self-esteem. The workshop provided a shared experience and a common vocabulary related to self-esteem and body image, allowing participants to articulate their perceptions and experiences more effectively. For example, the workshop included sessions on media literacy and critical analysis of beauty standards, which directly informed participants' ability to discuss these issues in the focus groups. This approach aligns with the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR), promoting collaboration and participant empowerment (Stewart, n.d.; Vaughn and Jacquez, 2020). By focusing on individuals with lived experience of the intervention, purposive sampling enhanced the depth and relevance of the findings. While this sampling approach provided valuable insights, it's important to acknowledge that the sample may not fully represent the diverse experiences of all Jamaican youths, particularly those who have not participated in similar interventions. The workshop participants, while diverse in socioeconomic background, shared a common interest in self-improvement, which may have influenced their perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Director and Manager of the Institute of Jamaica's workshop program. Given the absence of a formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the Institute of Jamaica, ethical oversight was provided by these individuals, who possess extensive experience in youth development and program management. The Director and Programmes Manager has over 15 years of experience in designing and implementing youth programs. Their approval was based on a thorough review of the research protocol, consent forms, and data collection procedures to ensure alignment with ethical principles and the protection of participants' rights.

This study adhered to the APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2017) and the guidelines outlined in the Jamaican National Children's Policy (2009), particularly those related to the protection of children's rights and welfare. Written informed consent was obtained from the legal guardians of all minor

participants, and written assent was obtained from the participants themselves using age-appropriate language. The consent and assent forms fully explained the study's aims, procedures, potential risks, benefits, confidentiality protections, and the voluntary nature of participation, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and all focus group discussions were conducted via the Zoom platform to ensure safety and accessibility. The researcher facilitated discussions in a respectful and supportive manner, acting as a neutral facilitator to minimize bias and encourage authentic responses. Additional care was taken to safeguard the welfare and autonomy of the minor participants throughout the research process. While approval from the Director and Manager provided essential ethical oversight in the context of the Institute of Jamaica, it is acknowledged that this process may not be equivalent to a formal IRB review.

Materials

The materials used for this research included participant consent forms, a focus group discussion guide with 15 open-ended questions, Zoom conferencing software for virtual engagement, and data collection tools such as audio recording devices and field notebooks for notes. All materials were developed and reviewed by the Programmes Coordination Division to ensure age-appropriateness and cultural sensitivity.

Site and Setting

This group discussion was conducted virtually, using the Zoom platform for discussions between the participants attending the self-esteem workshop. All participants came from different socio-economic backgrounds and discussed personal experiences regarding body image and self-esteem. Permission was obtained from the workshop coordinator for allowing the students to participate in the study, and permission was also well sought from their parents in advance. The communication and interaction were made easy with the help of Zoom meetings; participants were given ample opportunities to express their opinions in an encouraging environment. Face-to-face discussions allowed for rich dialogue among participants in reflection on experiences in such a way that their voices were heard in a collaborative setting.

Data Collection and Procedures

Data were collected through virtual focus group discussions, each guided by open-ended questions addressing key issues around self-image, societal pressure, media influence, and cultural standards of beauty. The participants were first briefed in a large group session, after which they were divided into two smaller

breakout rooms to encourage free-flowing and comfortable conversations. The discussions were audio-recorded and supplemented by detailed field notes. These notes captured verbal and non-verbal cues, key phrases, emotional tones, and recurring ideas that helped contextualize participant responses.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This six-phase approach includes:

- (1) Familiarization with the data
- (2) Generation of initial codes
- (3) Searching for themes
- (4) Reviewing themes
- (5) Defining and naming themes
- (6) Producing the final report

Transcripts and field notes were thoroughly examined and manually coded. A color-coding system was employed to identify emerging patterns and to group related responses.

To mitigate potential bias from single-researcher coding, several strategies were employed. First, methodological triangulation was achieved by comparing codes derived from the focus group transcripts with observations recorded in the field notes and with key quotations extracted from the audio recordings. For example, participants frequently mentioned the pressure to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards, as evidenced by direct quotes such as, "If you don't have light skin and long hair, you're not seen as pretty." This sentiment was consistently reflected in the field notes, which documented the participants' emotional reactions when discussing media portrayals of beauty.

Although formal member checking was not conducted, extensive use of audio recordings ensured the accuracy of transcriptions and preserved participants' intended meanings. This contributed to interpretive validity by allowing the researcher to remain closely aligned with participants' original expressions. Additionally, peer debriefing was conducted with an experienced qualitative researcher familiar with the cultural context of the study. The researcher reviewed the coding scheme and the identified themes, providing feedback on the interpretations and challenging potential biases. For instance, during one debriefing session, a researcher questioned whether a particular theme was overly influenced by existing literature on body image, prompting a re-examination of the data to ensure that the theme was grounded in the participants' own experiences. Finally, a reflexive journal was maintained throughout the analysis process to document personal biases, assumptions, and decision-making processes.

This journal served as a tool for self-monitoring and critical reflection, enhancing the transparency and dependability of the analysis.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Trustworthiness was ensured through methodological triangulation (field notes, participant quotations, and recordings), prolonged engagement during the sessions, and peer debriefing with colleagues familiar with the workshop. Participants were given autonomy and encouraged to express their views without fear of judgment. A reflexive journal was maintained by the researcher to document biases, assumptions, and decision-making processes. This helped ensure transparency and dependability in the research process. The safe and supportive setting, along with ethical rigor, contributed to the credibility of the data and the authenticity of participants' voices.

Findings

This focus group study explored how 37 Jamaican youths (23 females, 14 males), aged 9–16, interpret and respond to societal beauty standards and body image ideals. The group's responses, collected through open-ended questions, revealed deeply nuanced understandings of beauty, shaped by both local culture and external influences.

Perceptions of Beauty in the Community

In response to the question, "How do you define beauty? What characteristics or features do you associate with beauty in your community?", students described beauty as a combination of outward appearance and inner character. Common physical attributes included smooth skin, styled hair, and a proportional body "not too fat or not too skinny" (Participant 7, age 14). However, many emphasized personality traits such as kindness, confidence, and authenticity, indicating a broader understanding of beauty beyond appearance.

The Impact of Eurocentric Standards

Students were acutely aware of Eurocentric beauty norms. They frequently referenced light skin, straight hair, and slim physiques as dominant ideals portrayed in media and advertising. This often led to an internalized negative self-image. One participant noted, "Mi feel seh mi nuh pretty like dem pon TV" (I don't think I'm as pretty as the people on TV) (Participant 12, age 13). Several female students discussed using skin-lightening products or hair relaxers to meet these perceived standards, while others expressed discomfort with such practices, reflecting the tension between cultural pride and globalized aesthetics.

Cultural Narratives and Contradictions

Students articulated mixed messages within Jamaican cultural narratives. Reggae music was cited as affirming natural Black beauty, while aspects of dancehall culture emphasized surgically enhanced features or “lightness.” The emerging “dolly” ideal referencing cosmetically enhanced women was particularly influential: “Becoming a ‘dolly’” (Participant 9, age 15). This reflects a generational tension between Afrocentric pride and global beauty trends, especially within music and entertainment spheres.

Media Representations and Self-Esteem

When asked, “How do you feel media representations of beauty affect your self-esteem and body image?”, students emphasized the negative impact of curated, filtered images, particularly on Instagram and TikTok. “Miss, you know ‘bout Instagram model, a suh mi wah look; mi wah my body fi up, lol” (Miss, do you know about Instagram models? That is how I want to look) (Participant 17, age 14). Many reported comparison fatigue and noted a drop in self-confidence when consuming such content. Some students had taken proactive steps to limit exposure or curate more positive feeds.

Societal Pressures and Daily Life

Responses to “What societal pressures do you experience regarding beauty standards? How do these pressures impact your daily life?” revealed a range of challenges. Girls described pressure to appear “slim” and “brown” (light-skinned), while boys felt compelled to develop muscular bodies and maintain a “cool” appearance. These pressures impacted how students dressed, socialized, and even posted online. Some expressed anxiety, shame, or avoidance behaviors linked to body dissatisfaction.

Peer Influence

When asked, “How do your friends and peers influence your views on beauty? Do you feel pressure to conform to certain beauty ideals among your peers?”, students cited peer influence as both supportive and critical. “Mi fren dem always a talk ‘bout weight and skin tone. Sometimes dem seh mi black an’ mi need fi bleach, Miss” (My friends always talk about weight and skin tone. Sometimes they say I’m too dark and I need to bleach) (Participant 6, age 13). Others described peers who encouraged self-acceptance and natural beauty, suggesting that peer relationships can be either affirming or undermining.

Coping Strategies

In response to “What strategies do you use to cope with the pressures of societal and media representations

of beauty?”, participants described various coping mechanisms. “Mi tell myself seh mi pretty every day, Miss; nuh body cah tell me seh mi ugly an’ mek me bawl afta dem nuh more dan mi” (I tell myself that I’m pretty every day, Miss; no one can tell me I’m ugly and make me cry they’re not more important than I am) (Participant 5, age 16). Others reported engaging in physical activities: “Mi play ball pon di ball grung when mi stress, Miss and tek out mi stress pon di ball” (I play football when I’m stressed, Miss, and release my stress in the game) (Participant 13, age 15). Some students distanced themselves from platforms like TikTok: “Miss, mi nuh waste time pon TikTok again ‘cause a pure keyboard bully and bad people deh pon dat” (Miss, I don’t waste time on TikTok anymore because it’s full of bullies and toxic people) (Participant 8, age 15).

Sources of Support

When asked, “Who or what provides support for you in navigating these influences?”, many students identified family members, particularly mothers and older siblings, as trusted sources of affirmation. “I talk to my big sister because she is pretty and popular at her school, so she can give me good tips” (Participant 21, age 12). Others cited friends, teachers, and school counsellors. The presence of a reliable support system was strongly correlated with higher self-confidence and better emotional resilience.

Maintaining a Positive Self-Image

Students were asked, “How do you maintain a positive self-image in the face of conflicting beauty standards?”. Many emphasized the importance of celebrating personal talents, achievements, and cultural pride. “Mi proud fi be Jamaican, an’ mi nuh haffi follow no foreign look fi look good u nuh si seh every likkle Jamaican dance weh deh pon tiktok all American dem a follow and know it” (I’m proud to be Jamaican, and I don’t have to follow foreign trends to look good, don’t you see that every little Jamaican dance on TikTok is being followed by Americans?) (Participant 2, age 15). Participants framed self-worth around identity, community values, and artistic expression.

Community-Based Solutions

When asked, “Are there community initiatives or programs that you believe could help promote positive body image among Jamaican youths? If so, what would they look like?”, students expressed enthusiasm for mentorship programs, body positivity clubs, and media literacy workshops. One student proposed using popular role models to lead sessions: “Miss, you guys must do a mentorship program like a big brother and big sister program, Miss. Mi wah Jada Kingdom and Swiss Lee fi be mi big sista and big bredda” (Miss, you should do a mentorship program and use social media influencers and music artists like Jada Kingdom and Swiss Lee as our big

sister and big brother) (Participant 4, age 14). This highlights the potential of culturally relevant interventions rooted in the lived experiences of Jamaican youth.

After the focus group discussion, students were re-engaged in a brief follow-up conversation to share preliminary findings and gather their reflections. This post-discussion served as a member checking opportunity, allowing students to confirm the accuracy of how their input was understood and interpreted. The facilitator explained how their feedback would be used to improve future iterations of the body positivity and self-esteem workshops, directly benefiting other students from the surrounding communities who attend the centre. This reflective engagement not only enhanced the trustworthiness and confirmability of the findings but also reinforced a key principle of Participatory Action Research (PAR): that participants are co-creators in the research process. Students expressed pride in knowing that their voices could influence meaningful change, underscoring the empowering nature of involving youth in shaping interventions that affect their personal and social development.

Emergent Themes

Duality of Beauty Ideals: Youths navigate conflicting standards, Afrocentric pride versus Eurocentric benchmarks.

Media as a Shaper and Disruptor: Social media platforms amplify beauty anxiety while also offering spaces for body positivity.

Community and Peer Support: Trusted relationships are essential in shaping self-image and coping with societal pressures.

Cultural Confidence as Resistance: Jamaican cultural pride and identity serve as powerful tools for fostering resilience.

Demand for Localized Interventions: Students identified the need for inclusive, youth-led programs addressing body image and esteem.

Discussion

This study provides rich insight into how Jamaican adolescents conceptualize beauty and manage societal pressures, particularly within the interplay of local and global beauty standards. The findings reveal a complex negotiation between cultural pride and Eurocentric ideals, underscoring how self-esteem is shaped by both media exposure and sociocultural influences.

Participants expressed a multifaceted understanding of beauty that integrates both physical traits and personal values such as confidence and kindness. This aligns with Thompson and Keith's (2001) assertion that self-worth is deeply influenced by cultural narratives. However, despite affirming their Afrocentric features and cultural identity, many participants reported internalizing

Eurocentric standards, particularly lighter skin and slim body types, as ideal. This mirrors longstanding issues of colorism and colonial residue in beauty discourses, as highlighted by Ferguson and Cramer (2007); Patton (2006), and remains a relevant concern among contemporary Caribbean youth. A notable tension emerged in the participants' reflections on local music. While reggae and dancehall genres often celebrate Black identity and Afrocentric features, they also contain contradictory messages that promote skin bleaching and cosmetic alterations. These mixed messages can reinforce body dissatisfaction while simultaneously offering empowerment. This paradox is consistent with findings by Vogels *et al.* (2022), who argue that media content can have both affirming and undermining effects on self-image.

Media's influence was particularly salient among female participants, who cited social media platforms like Instagram as sources of both inspiration and distress. Consistent with studies by DeBraganza and Hausenblas (2010); Stieger *et al.* (2022), participants linked frequent exposure to idealized imagery with feelings of inadequacy. Participant 17 (age 14) encapsulated this sentiment: "Miss, you know 'bout Instagram models? A suh mi wah look; mi wah my body fi up." This statement reflects a desire for aesthetic conformity shaped by curated online standards, often out of reach for most adolescents. However, unlike much of the literature that frames youth as passive recipients of media messaging, this study uncovers a trend toward media literacy and digital self-regulation. Several participants reported curating their social media feeds to include body-positive influencers and content that celebrates diverse beauty standards. This emergent coping strategy represents a cultural shift in how Jamaican adolescents are asserting control over their media environments, challenging dominant narratives that position them as merely vulnerable to online pressures. It also signals a proactive stance towards self-empowerment, which deserves further scholarly exploration.

Peer dynamics also played a critical role in shaping self-image. While peers were sources of affirmation, they also reinforced harmful beauty norms. This duality aligns with Jones and Crawford's (2006) findings on adolescent socialization, where the desire for acceptance can sometimes override personal values. Notably, male participants felt pressure to maintain muscular physiques, while female students expressed anxiety around weight and complexion. These pressures often led to a performative engagement with beauty norms, contributing to fluctuating self-esteem levels. Students employed various resilience-building strategies to navigate these challenges. Practices such as self-affirmation ("Mi tell myself seh mi pretty every day") and engaging in hobbies provided emotional grounding. These coping mechanisms align with Contreras-Valdez *et al.* (2016), who identified self-talk and creative expression as

protective factors against body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, the role of family emerged as central to students' confidence, suggesting that intergenerational support systems remain pivotal in fostering self-acceptance.

This study also explored action-oriented solutions, a core tenet of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Participants were not only co-creators of knowledge during focus group sessions but also engaged in a follow-up validation session to assess the findings. Their confirmation of the themes and proposal for a youth-led social media campaign promoting body positivity exemplifies the empowerment and collaboration embedded in PAR methodology. Such participatory approaches elevate the youth voice and offer practical, community-rooted interventions. The findings are best understood through the lens of Social Identity Theory (Turner *et al.*, 1979), which posits that individuals derive a sense of belonging and self-worth from their group affiliations. Jamaican adolescents navigate the dual pressures of upholding their cultural identity while contending with Westernized standards of beauty. This tension underscores a broader struggle: The negotiation of self-worth within intersecting identities of race, gender, and nationhood.

Importantly, this study contributes original insights to global body image literature by centering the Caribbean adolescent experience, which is often underrepresented in scholarly discourse. It challenges dominant frameworks that universalize Western conceptions of beauty and body dissatisfaction, proposing instead that Caribbean youth are developing distinct strategies of resistance and redefinition. The proactive media curation, emphasis on cultural pride, and community-based solutions presented here suggest a generational shift toward greater self-awareness and collective resilience. Future studies would benefit from longitudinal tracking to assess how these strategies evolve over time and whether they translate into sustained improvements in self-esteem. Additionally, expanding the research to include rural populations or other Caribbean territories could deepen understanding of regional differences in beauty perceptions.

Conclusion

This study explored how Jamaican youths conceptualize beauty, experience body dissatisfaction, and manage self-esteem in relation to both local and Eurocentric beauty standards. The findings underscore a dynamic tension between cultural pride and external pressures especially those perpetuated by media representations that shape adolescents' perceptions of self-worth. Participants' reflections revealed the impact of peer influence, societal expectations, and curated social media content on their self-image. Importantly, students demonstrated resilience through strategies such as self-

affirmation, selective social media use, and reliance on family support systems.

Grounded in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework, the study emphasized the voices and lived experiences of youth, who not only validated the findings in follow-up sessions but also proposed actionable interventions such as body-positive social media campaigns and community-based mentorship programs. These insights point to the value of engaging youth as co-researchers and change agents in addressing psychosocial challenges related to beauty and self-esteem.

While the study offers meaningful contributions to the literature on adolescent body image in the Caribbean, it is not without limitations. The qualitative design, although rich in depth, restricts generalizability. The age range and demographic scope were limited, and the analysis was conducted by a single researcher, potentially introducing interpretive bias. Future research could broaden participant diversity, include multiple analysts for triangulation, and extend the inquiry to other Caribbean contexts to strengthen regional relevance.

The study's implications suggest a critical need for sustained, culturally responsive interventions. Community organizations, schools, and policy-makers can support these initiatives by integrating mentorship programs led by relatable role models, promoting inclusive beauty narratives in curricula, and using youth-led media to counteract harmful beauty ideals. By centering young people's voices and fostering agency through participatory methods, these interventions hold the potential to reshape how beauty and self-worth are defined and experienced by Jamaican adolescents.

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Ethics

I acknowledge my continuing ethical obligation to monitor and address any issues that may emerge after

publication of this manuscript. If any errors, misinterpretations, or risks to participants are identified, I will promptly inform the journal, request appropriate corrections (such as errata or corrigenda), and collaborate with the editor to implement any necessary remedial actions, including retraction if warranted. I also commit to responding in good faith to any post-publication queries or concerns raised by readers, participants, or the journal.

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