A PICTURE-PERFECT PANDEMIC: CLOAKED WITH LONELINESS AND UNREALISTIC SOCIETAL STANDARDS OF BEAUTY

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Abstract

Shared beliefs or perceptions are reflected by social constructs, which are only valid because of popular sanction. This paper examines the historical occurrence of body image concerns. Despite the fact that women's roles in modern society have evolved, they are nevertheless frequently subjected to a lot of predetermined notions. The Creation of Eve is one of the best examples of this argument. Even men face a significant amount of criticism these days. The pattern of such a severe problem is experimentally investigated in this work. Twelve questions on a survey that dealt with body image issues were presented to individuals who ranged in age from fourteen to over twenty-five. The connection between the spread of the virus, its reverberations on the human body, and eating disorders' impacts on physical and psychological health have also been discussed. According to the study's findings, 63.6% of participants wished to alter some aspect of their physical appearance. Furthermore, these ideas were and still are greatly influenced by the media. The study aims to compare how individuals see their bodies today with how they did in the past. It examines how people's obsession with changing their bodies prevents them from appreciating their worth.

Keywords: Eating Disorder; Pandemic; Psychological Health; Social Construct

Introduction

Social practices emphasize and downplay individual differences and similarities while constructing the varied masculine and feminine bodies that social groups esteem through physical labor, exercise, sports, and surgery. A person's physique may be perceived as lacking self-control and self-respect if it defies social norms for weight, height, and shape. As opposed to this, those whose bodies adhere to accepted norms are respected, complimented, and held up to others as models to imitate. In other words, members of a social group influence and push one another to create socially acceptable and similar-looking bodies by criticizing, rewarding, and punishing people of diverse body proportions, shapes, weights, and musculature. Men's physique should be muscular and physically powerful because society expects them to be aggressive promoters of action and guardians of women and children. Women are supposed to be nurturing and emotionally generous, willing to put aside their own interests for child rearing and their own wishes in order to 'please' men. Therefore, young women's bodies should be supple and seductive to males, whereas older women's bodies should be plump and maternal.

Beauty perceptions changed over time as they were created by cultural and historical influences. Historically, a woman's body was her best survival tool in patriarchal societies; expectations about a woman's size and physical characteristics were dictated *"by male desire and marriageability."* Accordingly, social and cultural ideas, beliefs, and values, as well as technology, continue to have a significant impact on a woman's body, looks, and wellness. Consequently, these forces tend to limit women's conceptions of who they are and force them to make choices in order to conform to societal and cultural expectations that their bodies acquire on an idealized appearance.

The famous *Bridgerton*[1], a period drama on Netflix, takes place in a highly stylized portrayal of Regency-era London and various made-up English rural estates. The tale and characters are mainly made up, and the plot is primarily based on a series of eight novels published in the twenty-first century by author Julia Quinn. The books extensively use historical facts from the time, such as the competitive marriage market, the aspirational society mothers, and the prevailing societal mores. *"I was able to squeeze my waist into the size of an orange-and-a-half when I was Prudence's age,"* Lady Feathering ton mentions. That is one example of what was expected from women of that time.

The majority of women, up until recently, were the focus of body image research. In comparison to the male body, women's bodies are depicted in the media more frequently, and portrayals of women are typically more embodied. Men's body contentment has captured the attention of psychologists and sociologists during the past ten years. This is attributable primarily to the fact that the male body has grown more 'visible' in popular culture, sparking interest in how this has affected men's contentment with their bodies. Most men, according to common consensus, prefer a muscular mesomorphic[2] form to an ectomorphic (thin) or endomorphic

(fat) build since it is characterized by an average build, well-developed muscles on the chest, arms, and shoulders, and a small waist and hips.

The beginning of humanity

The biblical account of Genesis throws light on the creation of Eve from the rib of Adam and their expel from the Garden of Eden thereafter when Eve gave in to the serpent's temptation and persuaded Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. In opposition to Islamic beliefs, which held both of them equally accountable, Christian and Jewish doctrines blamed Eve (often referred to as the fall of man).

" I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;
with painful labor, you will give birth to children.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you." [3]

Eve was "cursed" by God for her transgression and condemned to a life of servitude to Adam. According to Rabbi Joshua,

"God deliberated from what member He would create woman, and He reasoned with Himself thus: I must not create her from Adam's head, for she would be a proud person, and hold her head high. If I create her from the eye, then she will wish to pry into all things; if from the ear, she will wish to hear all things; if from the mouth, she will talk much; if from the heart, she will envy people; if from the hand, she will desire to take all things; if from the feet, she will be a gadabout. Therefore, I will create her from the member which is hidden, that is the rib, which is not even seen when a man is naked." [4]

Adam and Eve's creation represents the beginning of humanity on earth. However, the idea that women are less valuable than men is deeply engrained in society due to religious beliefsand patriarchal iconographies.

Figure 1- *The Creation of Eve*, a painting by Michelangelo Buonarroti.
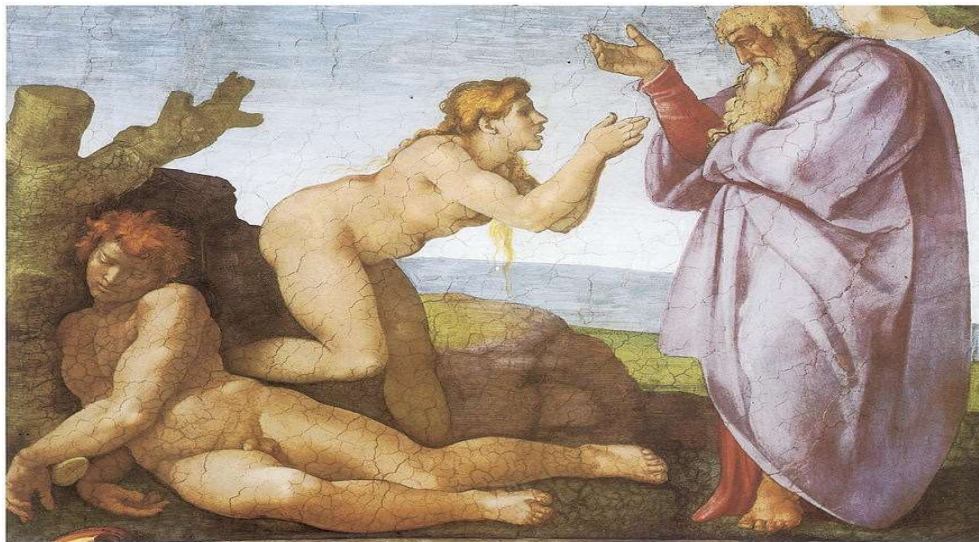
[1] In several areas, the series reinforces traditional, conventional beauty ideals. For instance, Daphne, the diamond of season one, is depicted as being slender, white, graceful, and attractive.
[2] According to everydayhealth.com, mesomorphs are naturally muscular; they typically have moderate-size frames, with wider shoulders and a narrow waist, strong arms and legs, and modest amounts of body fat.
[3] Genesis 3:16 Parallel Verses

[4] Source medium.com > the collector

Figure 2- Adam, Eve, and the serpent in a 13th-century sculpture at the entrance to Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, France. The portrayal of the serpent as a mirror image of Eve was common in earlier iconography because women were seen as the source of the original sin.

Tertullian[5], regarded as the founder of Latin Christianity, referred to women as the *"devil's gateway."* However, Saint Augustine criticized Tertullian's thinking and asserted that the original sin could not depend on Eve's sins because she was tricked by the serpent, whereas Adam was aware of his sin. Adam opted for a life of sin with a woman rather than a life with God.

Role of culture

"Culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving." [6]

Over the past few decades, models in Western culture have become slimmer, depicting a slender figure as the contemporary benchmark of feminine appeal. On the other hand, the ideal feminine features in historical India were *"large breasts, wide hips, and tapering legs."* Before, being slim was considered harmful and unattractive rather than a positive attribute. On the other contrary, being plump was regarded as attractive and a symbol of prosperity. It has been determined that cultural values and attitudes play a crucial role in the emergence of eating disorders. The prevalence of these illnesses appears to differ between various racial/ethnic and

[5] Early Christian author Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus was born at Carthage in the Roman province of Africa. He was the first Christian author to produce an extensive corpus of Latin Christian literature.

[6] https://people.tamu.edu/~i-choudhury/culture.html

national groupings, and it also varies through time as cultures change. In order to fully comprehend the rise of body image issues and eating disorders, we should also take into consideration the processes of urbanization, including changes in population demographics, food supply and preferences, gender roles, family structures, and the increasing participation of women in emerging labor forces. An

idealized physical body becomes a social body, and, as Deborah Sullivan states, it *"bears the imprint of the more powerful elements of its cultural context ... providing important clues to the mechanics of society."*

The stereotypical notion of appearance

Our interaction with our bodies can be challenging. It takes time to become familiar with their behavior in both public and private settings. When it comes to women, they become an even more contentious matter. The ongoing propagation of the idea and myth of an *"ideal, beautiful, and desirable"* woman is one of the myriad problems that endanger women's autonomy over their bodies. It is constantly reinforced that a *"beautiful"* woman is *"fair, thin-bodied, with long hair, and without any scars or markings."* Women are encouraged to strive for a *"perfect"* physique and look since they are devalued for their appearances, which causes them to scrutinize their bodies and develop eating disorders and negative self-image. Women's bodily autonomy is taken away from them by constant body scrutiny and social pressure to look a specific way, which molds their bodies to fit the patriarchal ideal of a woman.

Even youngsters are subjected to gender stereotypes; for example, many children today believe fairy tales are true due to Cinderella, which has a negative effect on them. Cinderella is well-known all throughout the world thanks to the many different ways it has been retold, all of which feature traditional gender roles. Cinderella serves as an example of the social mistreatment that can follow from having *"undesirable"* physical qualities. As kids get older, outward beauty is increasingly valued over inward beauty, which leads to prejudice against those from lower socioeconomic positions and bullying in schools.

The unexpected isolation and growing loneliness

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated mental health and body image problems worse. It resulted in loneliness, which has been linked to a number of negative psychological and physical repercussions, including raised systolic blood pressure and a higher risk of heart disease. Additionally, studies have indicated that social isolation and loneliness both provide separate risks for a higher all-cause death rate. Loneliness adversely affects mental health. Reduced time in bed spent asleep (7% reduced sleep efficiency) and increased wake time after sleep onset have been related to loneliness (Cacioppo, 2002 Fässberg, 2012). Increased depressive symptomatology may also be caused by loneliness, along with poor self-rated health, impaired functional status, vision deficits, and a perceived negative change in the quality of one's life (Lee, 2019). A systematic review of suicide risk also found that loneliness is associated with both suicide attempts and completed suicide among older adults (Fässberg, 2012). Loneliness, clubbed with depressive symptoms, contributes to worsening cognition over time. A systematic review concluded that loneliness and social isolation were significantly associated with incident dementia (Kuiper, 2015).

What are eating disorders?

As a substantial contributor to the onset and maintenance of a variety of disordered eating behaviors, including dieting, fasting, binge eating, food restriction, and purging, body dissatisfaction is a serious public health issue. Eating disorders are consequential, frequently fatal illnesses linked to major abnormalities in eating habits or patterns. Most of the time, obsessive thinking about food, body weight, and body shape leads to eating disorders. Nutritional deficiencies that impact the gastrointestinal system, cardiac system, teeth, bones, and oral cavity are frequently caused by a significant change in eating habits. Despite the fact that illnesses can emerge at any age, eating disorders are common among teens and young adults.

Anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder are the three most prevalent eating disorders. When a person severely restricts their food intake out of an obsessional fear of gaining weight, anorexia nervosa develops. Due to the extreme body weight reduction, this illness might cause serious health issues. Unreliable perceptions of body weight or form are the main cause. When individuals consume enormous amounts of food on occasion and then attempt to reduce their calorie intake in an unhealthy way, bulimia nervosa develops. People frequently push themselves to vomit, exercise vigorously, use laxatives, or stop eating in order to make up for episodes of binge eating because they feel guilty about it. Bulimia nervosa patients may be of ordinary weight or somewhat overweight. When people repeatedly overeat but do not strive to lose the additional weight like a person with bulimia nervosa does, the binge-eating problem arises. At least once every week, a fresh instance of binge eating takes place. People frequently become overweight or obese as a result of unexpectedly high food intake.

The link between COVID-19 and Eating Disorders

Due to disruptions in daily routines, restrictions on outdoor activities, an increase in exposure to anxiety-provoking media, and concerns about contagion, the COVID-19 outbreakhas created particular dangers to body image. Increased *"self-time"* and *"screen time"* have both contributed to *"self-centric"* ideas that emphasize one's appearance and body image. This may have made people talk more about their weight, their eating habits, and their lifestyles, which may have already been affected by the pandemic's

disruption of social systems. Ever since the lockdown, the public has been inundated with messages encouraging self-improvement, including countless diet and fitness programs that typically feature *"perfect"* bodies. While the purpose of this fitness inspiration is to encourage viewers to lead healthier lifestyles by promoting physical activity and wholesome eating, it may have the opposite unforeseen consequences.

Lockdown and denial

Just as most of us were trying to escape the reality of the pandemic, so was Virginia Woolf's Clarissa and Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*[7]. She is introduced by Woolf as she wanders the streets of London looking for flowers for her party that night. She thinks about all the things she cherishes as she waits on the curb: *"life; London; this moment in June."* Although she does mention the war, the devastation and loss are touched upon in her description. When she isolates herself with her thoughts, she has a deep *"alienation caused by a traumatic shattering of her identity,"* yet she must conceal how she genuinely feels and seem cool in front of other people. Despite an individual's best efforts to maintain a *"perfectly upright and stoical bearing,"* Woolf reflects a society that suffers collectively. Clarissa chooses to create beauty to cover up her misery rather than denying and suppressing it. Septimus commits suicide in order to release himself from the pressure of having to live up to the English standard of strength and masculinity that Holmes and Bradshaw had imposed. Despite Clarissa's best efforts to dodge death and remain immune to the destruction, it emerges at her party.

Negative feelings were intensifying, causing anxiety and depression because (in most cases) there was no regular schedule or physical activity taking place. People were trying to portray their life as 'normal.'

The ongoing trend of Fad diets

Fad diets are on the rise, especially those that drastically limit food groups or nutrients that may cause one to miss out on the health benefits that come from following a balanced meal. The rise in obesity, the use of social media, and the pressure to be thin in society are the causes of this. Diets that seem unrealistic are probably fad diets. Some fad diets are marketed as being exceptionally low in fat, high in protein, and/or low in carbohydrates. Some recommend drinking a lot of a certain substance, such as grapefruit or celery juice. Others will focus on utterly avoiding a portion of certain food. Fad diets are typically created by people who have little knowledge of how they will affect their health in the long run.

Healthy eating habits must be maintained, but dieting can lead to physical problems and unhappiness, especially if one's weight changes after he/she stops eating well. Long recognized is the fact that even *"moderate"* dieting may increase the risk of developing an eating problem. Dieting or restrictive eating can also cause preoccupation with food-related concerns. When someone is interested in losing weight or improving their physical appearance, fad diets can be appealing. These diets often promise to deliver dramatic results in a short amount of time. To deliver these results, fad diets require dieters to engage in unsafe behaviors, such as cutting out entire categories of food, fasting for extended periods, or restricting overall food intake considerably. All of these behaviors put dieters at risk of developing an eating disorder.

The best is to scrap out the fad diets and adopt a healthier lifestyle in order to prevent such disorders. One should concentrate on eating a healthy, balanced diet rather than worrying excessively about the number of calories they consume, certain types of food, or macronutrients. People can maintain a healthy weight by eating sufficient calories and getting the right nutrition. If a person needs to drop a few pounds due to their being overweight, they should only adjust their diet and level of physical activity under a doctor's supervision.

Effects of media

Social media platforms have been crucial for spreading information during the pandemic, allowing for faster communication than at any other time in human history. Furthermore, there are several benefits and drawbacks to social networking sites that need to be taken into account. Although Problematic Social Media Use[8] is not a recognized mental health condition, previous studies have shown that it can alter a range of psychiatric outcomes and behaviors over time, ranging from but not limited to outcomes related to suicide as well as increased severity of insomnia, stress, depression, and anxiety. At the cross-sectional level, it has been linked to emotional maladjustment, lower productivity, narcissistic characteristics, poorer psychological functioning, excessive drinking, and addictive behavior. Social media posts have the potential to foster emotions of inadequacy and low self-worth, as well as establish unreasonable expectations. This may help to explain why body image and anxiety issues were the most prevalent on Instagram, where users' personal photographs take center stage. *"Instagram easily makes girls and women feel as if their bodies aren't good enough as people add filters and edit their pictures for them to look perfect."* [9]

There is proof that consistent media exposure and the emergence of eating problems are positively correlated. The use of photo-based social media by youth can forecast the likelihood that they will experience eating disorders. Evidence suggests that avoiding social media photo sharing, investing in images, and photo tampering are linked to a higher risk of eating disorders. Social networking can impact self-esteem in a number of different ways. Social media, whether it is in regard to appearance, fortune, or accomplishments, can serve as an example for many people of how life should be. When social media accounts have data that encourages upward comparisons, such as details about having lots of friends or maintaining a healthy lifestyle, self-esteem is more likely to suffer. Social media's detrimental effects on self-esteem are particularly hazardous as they extend beyond physical looks. Lower self-worth in other aspects of life can also be a consequence of feeling incompetent due to bodily form or size. Higher rates of sadness and anxiety are related to a sense of worthlessness, which can also encourage harmful behavior.

Consumerism and the privilege feud

Being one of the most social species, man has developed over numerous millennia. One finds himself/ herself suddenly alone and apart, not on a mountainside, in a desert, or on a boat at sea, but in a city of men, within reach yet not in contact. Our society is indeed very individualistic and materialistic, despite the fact that we fear loneliness. As a result, people are not anymore referred to as people but rather as "individuals," and they are no longer categorized according to their social roles, needs, or aspirations but rather as per their economic function or consumer status. Loneliness is a manifestation of the conflict between our want for meaning and the absence of meaning in the world in contemporary societies where conventional and religious accounts of meaning have been sacrificed on the frail altar of truth.

Depression and anxiety may also result from materialistic outcomes. After all, it might develop into a ripple effect if the issue persists and gets worse. However, the issue with materialism begins with self-esteem issues and/or feelings of insecurity. The dread of being rejected by society could drive a stronger desire to buy items that are imprudent and merely for social gratifications.

For instance, Hindustan Unilever Limited's Fair & Lovely[10] has built a reputation as a skin-lightening cream for many years and was found in almost every other house. There are definitely many more competitors in the market. Much criticism came towards Fair & Lovely via social media for its poor brand name selection, promotion of unattainable beauty standards, and mainstreaming of skin tones through commercials. Whereas, Victoria's Secret, with its scant, glittery lingerie, slender international models, and yearly televised catwalk shows, helped set the bar for what was considered to be *"sexy."* They established the threshold for what was deemed beautiful, regardless of how improbable or distant those standards were. Millions of women were enticed into spending money on the brand anytime they required a new bra or pair of underwear by the seductive looks and perfectly sculpted bodies, always in a particular size and shape descending down the diamond-encrusted runways. In its zenith, the business ruled the international market and grew to be one of the biggest and most valued brands in the world. Aerie, ThirdLove, and Rihanna's Savage X Fenty launched on the market during the #MeToo movement and promoted the sex appeal of all body shapes, but Victoria's Secret refused to change. People took notice, and sales were down significantly. A dramatic decline occurred in viewership. Sexism, harassment, and bullying-related disputes repeatedly surfaced.

The method used

A Questionnaire was made and circulated among peers, classmates, and relatives. The Informants were expected to read and understand the questions and reply to the multiple-choice questions provided in the questionnaire itself. A set of twelve questions were created.

[7] The two main factors that significantly influence Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway are her mental illness and her manic-depressive disorder. She shares her observations of modern British society and paints a patriarchal picture of a society that lacks a true understanding of mental illness. She also talked about shell shock, which is now Post Traumatic Stress disorder.

[8] Problematic social media use reflects a non–substance-related disorder by which detrimental effects occur as a result of preoccupation and compulsion to excessively engage in social media platforms despite negative consequences.

[9] https://time.com/4793331/instagram-social-media-mental-health/

[10] The company then changed its name from 'Fair & Lovely' to 'Glow & Lovely.'

Results and Discussion
Quantitative Data

According to the questionnaire's data, 31.8% of the participants do not feel comfortable with the size and/or shape of their bodies. 41.8% had a very strong desire to lose weight. The media (television, movies, magazines, music videos) negatively influenced 39.1% of the participants and how they felt about themselves, whereas 18.2% were not sure. 42.7% have been deliberately trying to limit the amount of food they eat to influence their shape or weight, which leads to several issues and trends, such as fad diets.

Have you been deliberately trying to limit the amount of food you eat to influence your shape or weight?

110 responses

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

37.3% No
20% Sometimes
42.7% Yes
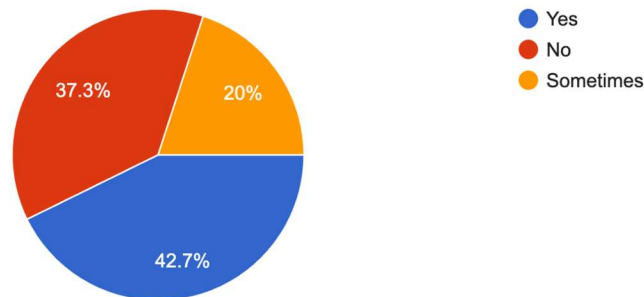
47.3% have been bullied because of their physical appearance, and 43.6% consider that COVID-19 affected the perception of their body image and beauty standards. Since the pandemic began, 28.2% said that they felt more negative about their body image than before the pandemic, and 43.6% said that their feelings stayed about the same.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, would you say you feel more positive or more negative about your body image than before the pandemic, or have your feelings stayed about the same?

110 responses

- More positive
- More negative
- About the same

43.6% About the same
28.2% More negative
28.2% More positive
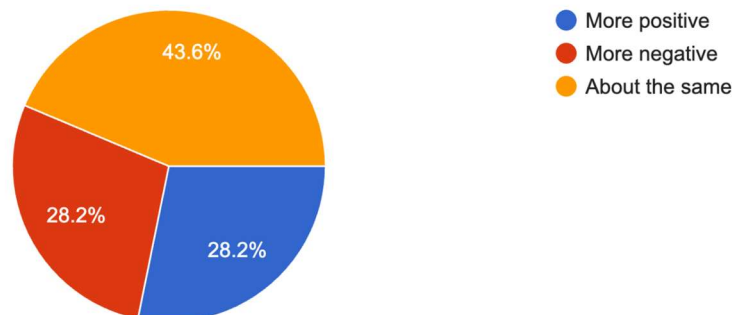
The survey, henceforth, puts forward that COVID-19 and beauty standards go hand in hand, and it also suggests how their correlation with one another amidst societal expectations negatively impacts numerous people. Another observation was that there is still some stigma associated with seeking help when one is in need. Some people were not willing to speak up or share. People frequently overlook the importance of and connections between mental and physical health. Even the World Health Organization (WHO) defines "*health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.*"

Qualitative Data
Interview 1- 3rd October 2022,

"*Growing up, I was a chubby kid. While you are a child, you are adored for being chubby, but over time, as you grow older, that trait that was once adored starts becoming a blemish. People started identifying my worth and what all I could do according to my weight. I was constantly told to eat less and exercise more, not only by my distant relatives or neighbours, but also by my closest*

friends and family. There were many times when I was mocked and called by certain names due to the way my body looked. I started believing that I was highly flawed and something was wrong with my body. All this summed up and resulted in me hating my body. At the onset of the pandemic, when we were all confined in our homes, and social media were our only source of escape. I joined Instagram and slowly, bit by bit was consumed by a whole new world.

My relationship with my body became even worse when I started comparing myself with all the models and influencers who had the so-called "perfect figures." Then, all of a sudden, during the lockdown, there was a new trend about how people were transforming their bodies with home workouts. Apparently, every other person was hopping on this bandwagon, and so did
I. Which, on a positive note, made me get up from my couch and made me exercise, but for me also validated the fact that, in order to fit in, I need to maintain a particular ideal weight.

Personally, during covid, my body image perception was largely based on comparing my body with the way other people of my age looked. Though mostly I was affected negatively by comparing myself with others on Instagram, there were times too, when I came across women who were not ashamed of how their bodies looked and were confident and comfortable in their bodies. They made me realize that I need to be kinder to my body. Although I still have a long way to go when it comes to finding a piece with the way I look, I still feel it's safe to say that now I have become much more open and am still learning about my body."

Interview 2- 14th October 2022,
"I used to be fairly plump and short in height according to the 'societal' norms when I was 16. Time and again, everyone just felt as if it was their 'duty' to just pass comments on my physique and suggest all sorts of remedies to 'correct' my body type in order to fit in the ideal body shape. Regardless of whatever I achieved, it always fell short in front of me gaining weight, and everyone just had one concern for me: my weight. Society made me think that I am an incapable person no matter what I accomplished till the time I was a plump child. One such thing happened when my classmates started to bully me because of my sudden weight gain. I became the easiest target of their not-so-funny jokes, and it continued to happen time and again. It's been four years since such comments were passed, and now, after I lost weight and became an average-height person, the same people who dismissed my achievements back then are the first ones to congratulate me. I have closely seen the difference in behavior in people just because of the change in my physique. Society has taught me how it is important to just be because 'Kuch toh log kahenge' irrespective of whatever you achieve."

Interview 3- 16th October 2022,
"I know I become very inactive on this platform (Instagram) sometimes... I have so much on my mind that I want to create, but I shy away from doing it because I don't look or feel "my best." I feel overwhelmed. Avoiding looking in the mirror, avoiding pictures, avoiding meeting people, looking at your old pictures constantly, and seeing your body fluctuate: I'm a work in progress, but pushing myself to create again like I used to!" [11]

Conclusion
Technology improvements provide us with both advantages and disadvantages when it comes to historically big global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. By becoming more aware of the potential risks that mass media may pose, we may control how these services are used positively and beneficially. The pandemic's arrival and all these traditional beauty standards contributed to an upsurge in body dissatisfaction. Our mood, sense of self-worth, relationships, and even the things we do can all be severely harmed by it. People went and still go to great lengths to conform to "societal standards," which are more pervasive than we realize. We are forgetting what a normal body looks like and are trying to follow trends and diets that are harmful to both our physical and mental health. A hesitancy was seen among the people when they were asked to fill out the questionnaire, as there is still a kind of stigma that lingers in society. Many people were not ready to come out and talk about their issues because they were scared to be judged. There still are cultural and social barriers attached to seeking therapy in various countries, including India, as the person is considered to be 'psychotic' or 'insane.' Social media made us believe in the pretense that people were putting in front of the world, just like a mask that is used to hide reality. The COVID-19 outbreak triggered a significant deal of upheaval in our way of life, including, at moments, uncertainties, irregular work schedules, financial strains, and feelings of loneliness and alienation.

[11] manal on Instagram: TW Body Dysmorphia: I know I become very inactive ....
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