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“I Want to Feel and Look Beautiful” Voices of Young Adult Banyankole Girls from the Ankole Region of Uganda

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Abstract

Young people who struggle with self-esteem, are much more susceptible to harmful societal messages and struggle with body dissatisfaction. Therefore, body image and self-esteem are integral issues in child development. This paper is part of a PhD study that examined the Older Adolescent Banyankole Girls' Response to sociocultural constructions of body image in the Ankole Region of Uganda. The paper further describes the barriers and facilitators of body image of older adolescent girls. A narrative inquiry method was used to analyze narrative interviews (N=30) of young adult girls (16-24), recruited from schools as well as the community and key informants who included nutritionists, fashion designers, pageant coaches and beauty influencers (N=5). Themes that emerged were parental influence, peer influence, media influence on adolescent girls' body image, and the influence of the fashion industry. There is need for government interventions in school that focus on positive attributes, media regulations and diversity skills of adolescents in order to harness positive feelings for a better generation. At the same time there is need for the government to provide mandatory training for general practitioners on mental health. Here general practitioners can in turn advise parents and caregivers on how to confidently inspire their children from a very early age encouraging a high self-esteem.

Keywords: Older Adolescents girls; Body Image; Self-esteem; body dissatisfaction and satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

In Africa, there are complex ideals of beauty across multiple varying cultures. These ideals are based on conflicting viewpoints: the traditional African view of a woman's body versus the contemporary-westernized view of a woman's body [1]. Many African beauty ideals suggest that a woman's body should be fat to be desired; a fat woman is a sign of good health and wealth while a slender body is an indication of poor health and poverty [1]. The westernized view, on the other hand, is often based on the overt media messages focusing on slender bodies for young women; fat bodies in this case indicate laziness and poor health [2]. These conflicting standards mean that women cannot simultaneously meet both sets of standards and may fall victim to shaming from those in a society that is keen on pointing out physical differences. Young women still trying to figure out life in Uganda may continue to face the conflicting standards of beauty brought on by contradictory beauty standards within the multiple cultures, if not addressed. According to the Ministry of Education, Uganda is estimated to have a population of close to 35 million with 33% below the age of 19. These young people are continuously plagued by challenges ranging from promoting sexual and reproductive health, maintaining spiritual and emotional well-being, and navigating conflicting cultural norms and practices, as well as modernization [3]. Whereas research suggests that Ugandan very young adolescents (10-14) have high self-esteem and positive body image [4], this tends to reverse as their bodies begin to change during the periods of middle and older adolescence. According to research [4,5], young people who reported to have low self-esteem eventually developed long-term health and psychosocial problems including depression, anxiety, substance abuse, obesity, sexual abuse and violence. Therefore, with the link between body image and how young people feel, society needs to understand concerns around body image and its influence on young people's lifestyles.

1.1 Background and Aim of the study

Before dissolution of kingdoms in Uganda by former president of Uganda Dr. Milton Obote in 1967, the Ankole kingdom existed from its formation in the 15th century [6]. Ankole had been a part of the Chwezi Empire which controlled all the great lakes region of East Africa for a couple of centuries prior to 1450 AD. After that period, the empire dispersed. Ankole, known then as Nkore¹, became one of the independent kingdoms of the inter-lacustrine region [7,8]. People from Ankole are referred to as Banyankole and their languages are Runyankole and English. The Ankole region is found in the south-western part of Uganda and is comprised of nine districts that include Mitoma, Buhweju, Bushenyi, Sheema, Rubirizi, Kiruhura, Ntugamo, Isingiro, and Mbarara districts [9]. The inhabitants of this region are divided into two ethnic groups which are the Bairu known as agriculturalists and the Bahima known as pastoralists. Historically the Bairu belonged to the Bantu speaking group while the Bahima are believed to have migrated to Ankole from Ethiopia; both groups have co-existed together [7]. They have been described to have different customs with a few similarities, especially when it comes to their standard of beauty. While the Bahima diets solely relied on milk, the Bairu's diet relied heavily on millet flour [10]. It should be noted that both subgroups' standard of beauty is a fat woman² [11,12]. The differences and similarities between Bahima and Bairu in terms of beauty ideals may appear the same but vary in levels of acceptability. For the Bahima beauty ideal, a young woman is expected to be tall, dark skinned with a satiated lower body (hips, buttocks and legs) with a slimmer waist while for the Bairu, the expectation for a young woman is a large body that shows strength during cultivation [10,11] These traditional perceptions of the

Ankole are largely influenced by the culture where society characterizes women's features based on male desire and marriageability [10]. However, increased education, rising economic independence, and exposure to western media currently have influence on perceptions of the female body [1]. Young women may still hold onto the traditional perceptions and yet, are inundated with contemporary perceptions largely brought on by peer and media influences. They may ultimately struggle with self-esteem trying to fit within both traditional and contemporary ideals. The study was guided by the socio cultural theory; it takes a holistic view of adolescent cognitive development in the context of societal norms [13]. Adolescent behavior is influenced by dynamic changes brought on by their own thoughts, peers, families and the community [14]. The feminist theory also informs us that the relationships adolescents have in society influence their perceptions of their body image and how this has dire implications on how they feel about their bodies [15]. This paper is representing a component of a larger PhD research study that looks at the Older Adolescent Banyankole Girls' response to the socio-construction of body image in the Ankole region. The purpose of this paper seeks to identify facilitators of and barriers to positive body image among young women. It addresses the specific aim of study which sought to identify enablers of positive and negative body image among young women and girls in Uganda.

1. *Before 1901 (Signing of the British agreement), Ankole was formally known as Nkore/Ankore while the inhabitants who are known as Banyankole were known as Banyankore and spoke Ruyankore known as today Runyankole.*
2. *Fat was and is described as a full lower body i.e. large buttocks, legs and hips with a slender waist, long arms and medium sized breasts.*

2. Methods and materials

2.1 Research design

The study adopted a narrative inquiry research design which is a type of phenomenological research methodology; this research design focuses on stories collected from experiences in life [16,17]. It captured stories of how body image was developed in young women, including the social experiences that were of influence over time [18]. This method sought out participants' identities through the stories told. Body image is an important factor of development in young people and for them to expressively talk about this phenomenon, narrative inquiry provided a mechanism of exploration through stories told [19]. Thematic analysis was used to analyze participant narratives [20].

2.2 Setting and sample

The Ankole region is found in south-western Uganda and is largely influenced by a cross-cultural setting of both rural and urban areas. This setting greatly dictates body image social constructions which are in opposition because of the urban lifestyle trends that are rapidly moving forward with western influences that challenge the rigid conservative rural lifestyles [21]. The focus of the study was on older adolescent girls in the community in the array of 16 to 24. Young women between the ages of 16-17 were considered as middle adolescents while 18-

24 were considered as older adolescents. Research suggests these ages are usually influenced by relationships they have with their peers, significant others and the community at large [22]. This population is usually in institutions of learning, have some form of formal education, in relationships and might also have families. [23]. The study also recruited 5 key informants who included a rural and an urban nutritionist, a fashion designer, a pageant coach and a beauty influencer. The purpose of the supplementary key informants was their expertise on dealing with body image and to provide insight on the lives of young women and the challenges they have to deal with in society. The study adopted purposive sampling using a homogenous approach to select a sample that came from the same region, and tribe. This type of sampling helped to focus on a small, homogeneous population yet divulging a great deal of information [24]. The sample included 30 young adult girls from Ankole region: 12 from Mbarara city which represented the urban center of Ankole region. Of the 12, 5 were secondary school students and 7 were out of school. 18 participants were selected from the rural areas in the region, with 6 participants from secondary school representing the nine rural districts and 12 participants out of school in the rural districts. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Mbarara University of Science and Technology and the Uganda National Council for Science & Technology. For accuracy and consistency in information, consent forms were translated in the local language of Runyankore. Young people below the consensual age of 18 were given assent forms in the presence of a teacher and guardian; parent permission forms were also given to the guardians or parents of the participants in the study with carefully written instructions about the study. Consent forms were given to participants above the age of 18 to describe the study procedures and potential risks while for the illiterate participants, consents were read to them. Participants were given identification numbers to protect their identities and all data were de-identified in this way.

2.3 Data collection procedures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in households and workstations of participants by research assistants and lasted between an hour and an hour and half. The interviews were organized around the objectives of the research study, focusing on the facilitators and barriers of self-esteem among people. The topics of the interview included the history of social influences on the developing body image, current body image, and impact of body criticism on health and well-being. Probing questions were used to gain a depth of description of experiences. (See Appendix A for Interview Guide).

2.4 Data analysis

The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for analysis by research assistants in constant consultation with the first author. The data were subjected to thematic analysis [20], where codes were highlighted against the printed discussion and then generated into themes. The steps in thematic analysis included 1) familiarization of the data; 2) initial coding the transcripts with descriptors that included social networks like Facebook and Instagram, ideal celebrity bodies, advertisements on TV; 3) merging codes that had commonalities into categories; 4) generating themes from the salient categories; 5) reviewing and defining the themes; and finally, 5) summarizing and interpreting the final themes. A deductive approach was used to generate the themes based on the socio cultural theory that guided the study, including concepts that reflected

the sociocultural factors (e.g., parents, peers and the media) influencing cognitive development and behavior in adolescents [12]. An example of theme generation incorporated codes such as body shaming by friends, comparing my body to my best friend and others to form the theme “Peer influence”. All the themes were then reread and data examined to avoid any misunderstandings, especially with the different dialect and terms that were expressed, especially when describing comments from families, friends and partners.

Thematic saturation, or the determination of sufficient redundancy of responses, codes and ultimately, themes was reached after 24 young women were interviewed. 6 additional interviews were conducted to verify developing themes and to ensure that no new conceptualizations were apparent. The 5 key informants were interviewed to further verify the findings.

3. Results

Data analysis produced five comprehensive themes that represented the facilitators and barriers that are perceived to have influence on body image: parental influence on Body image, peer influence on body image, media influence on body image, and finally, the influence of the fashion industry. Themes are presented with illustrations from the data.

3.1 Parental Influence on Body Image

In this section focus is on the influence of parents on the body images of their children. The sections further expresses parental influence as a facilitator and barrier to positive body image among young adult girls. Participants reveal how parental influence directly influences their responses towards body image. At the same time the section shows responses from key informants who have worked with parents and explain their experiences. Results suggest that parents play a critical role in enabling how participants view their bodies. This includes comments, expectations and relationships they have with each other and the perceived effect on how they feel about their bodies. Participants expressed that parents act as both a facilitator or barrier towards their body dissatisfaction and satisfaction. Mothers' and female relatives' critical comments and comparisons about participants' bodies encouraged negative feelings and low confidence among adolescents and young women and as a result, they turned to harmful body practices like body alterations and restrictive dieting. Participant 2 a 19-year-old university student living in the city stated that:

One thing that still infuriates me even until now is when I go back home to see my parents, my mum will make snide comments about my weight even when I have lost some of the weight. I have always been the chubby one in the family so my mum and aunts always made sure to point it out and compare me with my sisters. My mum will make comments like eeh why don't you stop eating fried foods and go on a diet. I hate eating in front of her and will even skip meals and do a crash diet before I go see her so as to avoid her making such comments. (Participant 2) On the contrary, while there is pressure for girls and young women in urban areas to be slender, parents that live in rural Ankole praised participants' weight gain and expressed distaste in their weight loss. This brought on negative feelings towards their bodies, especially for those who had sought living in urban centers where the body ideal tends to be more Eurocentric. Participant 23 lives alone in the city said:

My parents liked the fact that I was born a fat child..., fatness in Ankole meant that I was healthy and parents took care of me well. They told all their friends on how beautiful I was however when I went to work in the capital center, the standard of beauty is very European, everyone wants to be small so I adopted that lifestyle because my friends made fun of my fat body, I started dieting intensely and in the end lost a lot of weight. When I went home for my Christmas break, my parents were in shock and kept telling me how ugly and sickly I looked, till today I struggle with my body weight which keeps fluctuating. (Participant 23). In addition, key informants, in particular, the nutritionists expressed that parents arguably enabled negative feelings of body image among young adult girls. This is shown in the foods that are given from early childhood on until these young adult girls eventually left home. Nutritionists noted that rural Ankole parents consistently fed largely on carbohydrate foods to their children in order to fatten them. *Parents will feed their children on only millet flour with milk so as their child becomes fat. Parents believe that fatness is synonymous to wealth and health. This has led to a high number child obesity and some cases of child diabetes. These children grow up and struggle to maintain a healthy body weight.* (Key informant 1) Most of the participants who lived in rural areas expressed positive feelings towards their bodies and exuded confidence because they believed that they fit the standards of beauty that their parents insisted on, which acted as a facilitator towards their body satisfaction. Participant 5 expressed her experiences living in rural Ankole and how she still fits in the Ankole standards of beauty. *I have tried to maintain my dark skin not to bleach like most girls in the city. You see I think they hate their skin but for me, my mum and aunties always told me that I am beautiful, my nickname growing up was and still is Kyozi; - which is what we call beautiful black cows with big eyes. I love it when my mum calls me that, it makes me feel confident and happy with the dark skin I have.* (Participant 5) Participants described parental comments that were critical about how they should dress, eat and behave, and these were perceived as a means to control them. Participant 7 lives in the city and reported that occasionally, when she will go to the village to visit her parents:

“When I go back home I will have to dress down, here I will cut my hair, keep my nails short and wear a long skirt to avoid critical comments from my mum. Honestly that is why I don't like going back home during the holidays because my parents will always comment on my dressing and weight. And then keep asking me when am I getting married and that no one will want me when I am older and fat, it makes me sad and depressed that I even don't like getting into intimate relationships”. (Participant 7,). In light of that, a key informant who is a psychologist revealed that parents' remarks especially on how they looked in clothing will have them (children) fixate on how they look. *Children will always try to live up to their parents' expectations so whatever comments they make whether intentional or unintentional will have them nitpick at them. Children are gullible so when parents make negative towards their bodies, they will react irrational and obsess in trying to fix it but at the same time when parents shower their children with love and encourage self-love, their children usually exude high self-esteem.* (Key informant 2) On the other hand, a section of participants reported having good communication with their parents and were able to talk about everything from school, friends, and relationships, acting as facilitators towards how they felt about their bodies. These participants expressed positive feelings towards their bodies. A few of the participants expressed having positive relationships with their parents while the majority reported having largely received negative criticism towards their body appearance. This presented a barrier to the development of positive body image; to them, their bodies did not fit the “ideal body type” their parents wanted. Comments like “you're too small”, “too dark with a large nose” lets them know that they don't

fit in what they believe to be the “perfect ideal.” In most cases, participants who received such comments expressed negative feelings towards their bodies. *My legs are described by my parents as “antelope looking” while I have laughed off this remark, I will not wear short dresses or even shorts, It’s one thing on my body I wish I could change.* (Participant 26 from rural Ankole) In addition, parents were also said to have been influenced by media. Girls who had their parents making jokes and comparisons about their bodies with celebrities reported negative feelings towards their bodies and in turn, resorted to either extreme dieting or over-eating in order to fit those standards. Participant 18 still lives with her parents but intends to move to the capital city for university. She doesn’t get along with her mother due to clashing ideas about the world. She says;

“Whenever I am watching the news with my parents, my mum will always comment Sheila Ndihukire and Flavia Tumusiime renowned TV news anchors about how beautiful they are, my mum will say eeh imagine if my child looked like Sheila, eeh she's a very beautiful girl. You see she might not know it but comments like that make me feel so insecure given that I completely look different from her; my mother will not make such positive remarks about me but will do so to a total stranger”. Parents, in sum, were revealed to have acted as both facilitators and barriers towards the development of positive body image.

3.2 Peer Influence on Body Image

Study findings point out that friendships and peers influenced how participants felt about their body appearance. Nearly all participants reported being bullied by their peers at some time based on how they appeared and felt this contributed to developing negative feelings towards their bodies. Further, this bullying was perceived to have a negative impact on their performance in schools and in the workplace. Some participants reported having resorted to physical violence with peers that made fun of or rude comments about their bodies and they reported having felt much better after hurting the perpetrator. When asked the first time they experienced body criticism participants explicitly expressed that this began during the very young adolescent age, that is ages 10-14, especially when they started secondary school and these experiences were often linked with developing secondary characteristics of adolescence. Participant 12 says when asked when she started being criticized by how she looked... *“as I told you, from the time I was around 12, I think, I grew too, too big! In that, I could also look at myself and felt I was surely too big! I remember one time at school they came in class looking for fat girls or people who were strong and I was picked among those people! I felt so bad because people kept laughing at me that we were the fat girls in the class, I went on a crash diet to make sure I never become that big. This diet was so bad, I would starve myself and not eat lunch or supper, I remember getting stomach ulcers from this diet. Until today I will not eat junk food because I worry I will look like my 12-year-old self.”* (Participant 12) Furthermore, a key informant who is a school counselor recounted that young adult girls tend to exude low confidence and self-loath when bullied by peers. She expressed that unlike the boys, girls tend to spend considerable time on how they look based on societal norms. This has led to low academic performance, and in some instances school dropouts. *I have seen girls come to my office expressing how they think they are ugly because they don’t have long hair, good skin. In one particular incident, it was brought to my attention that a group of girls had started a rumor about a girl. Because she had bigger breasts than most girls, the rumor was that she had child. This girl eventually dropped out school because of this.* (Key informant 3) Similarly, data showed that there were a lot of body comparisons made among peers and friends, acting as a barrier

towards a positive body image. Participants sought out body features similar to their friends. Participants whose bodies did not fit with peer norms reported having negative feelings towards their bodies and feeling the need to make drastic changes to their appearance because of not fitting in with their peers. Participant 13, who lives in the city said:

I was about 13, then I got into secondary school, it was a mixed secondary school, an international mixed school so we had hair, makeup at Kaboja secondary school in Kampala. I remember I used to be bullied; there is one day some boy came and told me you are so fat, I remember feeling depressed and grades started to decline this continued on till I was like 18. Nearly all participants above the age of 18 told stories about changing their eating habits and lifestyles based on the comments made by their peers. This was shown in their reflections about school, relationships and workplaces. One young woman talked about how her boss's comments made her feel when she wants to eat. She says;

I always tell my friends that when lunchtime comes and my boss is in her office, I feel very, very afraid to pick food because I feel she is going to comment on my body the fact that she has body-shamed people and I don't know what to do after that. There is also another friend of mine that was called by her supervisor and every time he would be talking to her, she felt like she couldn't breathe in because her stomach would always complain about her body like "but you look at your stomach, it is very big!" and I felt sorry for her. (Participant 7)

Participant 18 lives in a rural Ankole where fatness is glorified and all her friends are described as fat. She said:

Most of the friends are big, they have big legs, wide hips, and big bums, as for me I have always been a petite girl, I remember the first time I became aware and insecure about my body is when I joined secondary school, this was a single-sex school and every girl there was big and beautiful. You see where I come from in a rural district, big women are considered very beautiful so you can imagine I have never felt confident about my body. My friends are always telling me to drink amakaamo (yogurt) and a lot of milk but I still will not put on weight. It frustrates me and I will not go out with them especially during holidays because I fear being laughed at or made fun of. Overall, responses demonstrated that social support from friends and peers helped to defend some young women from the socio-cultural pressures and facilitate to a more positive body image among participants who had supportive peers. In contrast, many participants reported having negative feelings towards their body appearance brought on by the kind of relationships they had with their friends and peers. Participants who received compliments from their spouses and partners reported having positive feelings about their appearance compared to those who did not. The majority of participants revealed that peer mentorship and counsel boosted their feelings of self-worth and gratification towards their bodies. One expressed that friends can be mentors to each other, encouraging one another to love their bodies and focusing on what they can do as individuals. She remarked:

As girls we need each other. Every magazine and TV show will focus on how we should appear, and most times these are unattainable bodies. Some days, I will talk and laugh with my friend about these unrealistic standards. This has made not feel bad and I think we should mentor young girls on how to love their bodies regardless of the type. (Participant 7)

3.3 Media Influence on Body Image

Media influences on participants' feelings towards their bodies was prevalent in these young women and predominantly acted as barrier to a positive body image. They identified that their negative feelings towards their bodies were brought on by the unrealistic standards of the female body shown in media. They reported using media as comparison point on how their bodies should appear, comparing their bodies to images they consume on social and traditional media. Participants who reported high viewing of media expressed that it acted as a barrier towards a positive outlook brought about negative feelings towards their appearance. Participant 3 says; *You know why the media affects most girls' confidence it is because when someone is talking about the ten most beautiful girls in Uganda or worldwide especially in the newspaper like Red pepper and the Sun, you will see that all look somewhat the same. They are skinny, they have some really small waists, they are light-skinned and long hair it is just the way it is. For example, people used to tell me when was growing up that "eehhh I can imagine if you were light, you could be so beautiful!" so I have felt insecure about myself given that I am in the limelight and I will always be compared to these girls.* Similarly, the majority of participants from urban areas reported having negative feelings towards their bodies because of how social media has dramatically grown in their social world. Women spoke of relying on media representations to guide their views of themselves. Young adult girls are now adopting the beauty trends in a media that is largely westernized. Participants explicitly shared their experiences with overuse of social media and the repercussions it has had on their mental health. Two participants spoke of their experiences living in the cities where light skin is the preferred skin tone-- this is the image commonly aired in the local media. One who lived in Mbarara, described a city largely influenced by social media:

Participant 12: *When you see a TV presenter who goes like!! "Obuwishiki oburikwera nobusha burungi aha TV; - meaning light skinned girls are more beautiful on TV," this shows light skin is the preferred skin tone on TV.*

Perceptions received from media exposure tended to focus on particular features of the female body to reel in listeners and spectators. These features are a mixture of Eurocentric and Afro-centric, which in most cases are unattainable. Several participants reported developing negative feelings towards their bodies and how they appeared brought on by the unrealistic comparisons of bodies in the media. Participant 8 from the urban center longs to be slender like a musician on television:

I always admire relatively small people, for example, this girl Lydia Jazmine, she has got this kind of body that is not exaggerated, she works out and she has some good body shape so when you are working out you are always aiming at that, well you may not achieve the exact results but you can try your level best. Young women revealed that there is lack of representation of various body types in the media acted as barrier towards their self-worth, also contributing to their negative feelings towards their bodies. Participant 3 complained that media lacks representation of the multiculturalism in Uganda, stating:

Our standard of beauty in the media is very western in Uganda, that's the standard of beauty; not too dark, because now too dark we can't sell that one. Then fair skin it's got to be gold skin, the woman got to be that way,

big eyes, lip size not too thin nor too thick it has to be moderate, the dental it should be perfect and white, then the nose slender, the face oval-shaped, forehead shaped, for figure not too much breast but medium size breast, slim waist, no fat because when you are fat you are not cute and hips then ass should not be too big, the height it's got to be moderate not too tall because you are going to intimidate men so you will have all the women on the news looking the same or with similar features, look at Flavia, Martha Kay and Sheila Nduhukire, they have similar features and when you don't look like that you feel ugly.

Additionally, an influencer expressed that the ever changing beauty trends encourage a poor body image among young adult girls. She explicates that social media in this day has become so vain and that it focuses on perfection, thus pressuring young women to aspire to unrealistic standards of beauty. She stressed that young girls tend to focus on unrealistic features that in reality don't exist and this creates a turmoil in one's sense of self-worth. *As an influencer there are a couple things that I have come to realize, one is that many young girls look to unrealistic standards of beauty, they don't even grasp that most of these celebrities they want to look like are either photo shopped or cosmetically enhanced. Before I post a picture of myself, I will use like 5 filters they remove all my blemishes. It's unfortunate but that is the media for you, you won't get the likes you need for your brand to succeed if you don't feign perfection* (Key informant 4) The data showed sexualization and objectification in media tended to encourage young women's negative body image and act as a barrier towards their self-worth. Most recounted that the kinds of messages and images they have been exposed to encouraged their feelings of self-doubt towards their appearance. The media will focus on certain body features and how they should be appealing to the eye, as shown in music videos, songs, and comedies. Participant 26 struggled with negative feelings towards her body because most of the people around her aspired to having the bodies they see on TV, however because she can't afford cosmetics to change her body, she will stand back. She said:

Zari is a trendsetter and celebrity, she looks so stunning, I always wonder how much she spends on her looks especially on her a body, I heard she will use lotions of over 500,000 Uganda shillings and yet for me I work in a small saloon where I earn 5000 shillings per day, so that means that however much I admire her I can never be like her. My friends have "men" that give them money so maybe I will go out and get a sugar daddy (laughs) to sponsor me to get that body. Despite the majority of participants re-counting their experiences of relying heavily on media and developing negative feelings towards their body image, some participants thought that media can also be used as a facilitator for developing feelings of self-love and discovery. Participant 5, explained how social media has become a safe space for participants where they can freely express themselves and not feel judged by others. With a following of 4017 people on social media, she has set out to represent plus size girls like her who have for a long time been shunned by social media. In this way, some young women revealed that the media can also act as a source of relief for people struggling with body image issues.

3.4 The Fashion Industry and its Influence on Body Image

Findings suggested that the fashion industry influenced how young adult women feel about their bodies. Some of the participants perceived that fashion magazines and clothing stores target certain types of bodies and exclude the rest. Some recounted their feelings towards the fashion industry as a contributor to negative feelings towards their bodies and how they looked. This was expressed in the clothes and makeup that targeted specific

features that they did not possess. Participant expressed frustration that the fashion industry ignored her body type, saying *“I hate shopping up to date because, you are more aware of your body and the person has got a lot of clothes and so he is going to look at you and say “sorry we don’t have your size.” It makes me sad and depressed and then they will make comments like eeh, but you’re too fat, you need to make your clothes because you won’t find your size”*. In summary, while nearly all participants' experiences showed that most clothing stores and beauty stores lacked diversity in skin tone and size, a few of the participants were hopeful the fashion industry is shifting and becoming inclusive of all body sizes and skin tones with more examples seen of diverse models. In conclusion, results show that societal influences, including parents, peers, the media and the fashion industry can facilitate or be a barrier to the development of positive body image among young adult girls.

4. Discussion

This paper observes that there is visible transition from the traditional to contemporary life, however there is still persistency of traditional values in spite of education and economic changes. Traditional values are seen to have influence on the cultural changes caused by western influences and rapid evolutions in global development. Findings contribute to our understanding of the facilitators and barriers to the development of a positive body image in Ankole young women in Uganda by articulating the social influences they experience. Parents of participants played a crucial role in body image development and their feelings towards their bodies. This supports findings from [25,26] study on the relationship of parents and peer influence on qualities of young adult girls. They found that parents’ comments on their daughters’ bodies influenced their attitudes towards their bodies. Findings from this study suggest that mothers’ negative comments on participants’ body images in older adolescence may lead to adoption of negative feelings towards their bodies and how they appear. In this case young people will adopt a healthy or unhealthy behavior as a retort towards these feelings. Studies [26,27] show that young people who are encouraged to love their bodies from a very young are likely to develop a healthy attitude towards food compared to those who were constantly belittled about their bodies. The study also showed that young people will emulate their parents’ behavior towards food and societal standards on beauty, when a child watches her mother obsess over diets and how they look they will most like develop body dysmorphia towards their own. Children need good role models since they are impressionable, encouraging a healthy lifestyle in children and self-love will act as a facilitator towards a positive body image [26]. However, findings from this study contradict other studies that suggest that parents in western world will encourage their adolescents to stay slender to maintain good health [27,28]. The study showed that in the rural Ankole society, parents will encourage their children to remain fat because fatness for Ankole is a sign of good health and wealth, however participants from the urban centers expressed that encouraging a fat body can lead to poor health. This is in alignment with a Uganda study where the ideal fat body type has led to rise of obesity and overeating, leading to a negative body image among women [1]. This study supports the finding that young women’s attitudes towards their bodies may change for the better when they leave their parents’ home [29]. There is also an assertion that women slender may also develop health complications brought on by over starving themselves leading to complete loss of appetite [28], this was a common among participants that lived in the city where parents encouraged participants to stay slender. Participants between ages 22-24 developed positive feelings towards their appearance and more confident about their lifestyles when they left their parents’ homes and could no longer hear their comments about their weight. Findings are consistent with previous

studies by [30, 29,26] showing that parents comments and criticism about adolescents' bodies are largely brought on by societal expectations. Parents will raise concerns about how their children should appear based on the existing standards in society brought by culture. Participants reported that parents' concern with appearance is largely driven by the existing standards of beauty and cultural expectations for women's bodies. Mothers' concerns about their children's bodies are based on the beauty expectations in society. Mothers and female relatives often make comments based on the notion of how a woman and girl is expected to appear. The study shows that parents from rural Ankole will encourage their daughters to remain fat at this time have them avoid protruding tummies because the beauty standard of young woman is fat with a slim waist. This continues to show them struggle with these expectations and adopting unhealthy behavior. These comments are derived from expectations of a woman's body that center the roles of reproduction and marriage [1]. Young women reported to have developed poor eating habits like overeating brought on by the beauty standards expected for young adult girls [1]. However, the study also shows contradictory statements on the expectations of women's bodies. While parents from rural Ankole encouraged their children to remain fat, this was not the case among parents that hailed from the urban areas of Ankole. Parents from these areas encouraged certain western standards of beauty that encouraged slenderness. This was integral for the study as it revealed that westernized views of beauty were common in areas with high levels of economic development [1,6]. The study suggests that peers have strong influence on participants' body image. While other studies [30,31,32], show that girls in the US and western Europe have body dissatisfaction as early as 8 years old, this study identifies a variation to this finding, demonstrating that participants began to notice each other's' bodies when secondary characteristics of girls like the enlargement of hips and breasts appearing, around the age of 13. This variation may be attributed to cultural variations. According to [4] body image and self-esteem among very young adolescents is largely high due to societal factors on gender. The study shows that young people will become aware of their bodies the older they become and the kind of the exposure they have had. Consistent with previous studies using the self-discrepancy theory [33], peers actively compare each other's bodies with their own and this negatively affects their body image development. This study suggests that participants take in their friends' and peers' opinions about their body appearance; when they don't fit the ideal, they will struggle with negative feelings and may adopt unhealthy eating habits like skipping meals, and overeating. The study found that young people will engage in unhealthy behavior because their friends had to engaged in such. School counselors in the study revealed that girls will pick up beauty trends like extreme diets from friends that have tried them too because of the peer pressure resulting to health risks. According to [28,31], participants hold peers to a higher standard than all other relationships, therefore, having positive friends and peers likely contributes to positive feelings and encourages confidence towards one's body, this will be likely brought on by the conversations they have with their peers. Confidence is largely brought on by an individual's mental wellbeing and self-love they have for themselves [31]. Participants reported the need for a good social support system as a facilitator to high self-esteem. When asked to mention ways one can build their self-esteem, nearly all participants mentioned peer support in the form of mentorship as a way they could lean on each other. Results show that both traditional and modern media mainly acted as a barrier towards positive body image. Participants expressed that images in the media have them comparing and adapting to such images through life altering procedures like bleaching and cosmetic surgery. The Pageant coach and the beauty influence in the study voiced that images in the media have become so vain and superficial thus acting as a barrier for young adult girls in achieving a healthy positive body image.

The images presented in the media whether on TV, in magazines, and on social media are believed to be the standard of beauty. Images in the media present the internalized beauty ideal that it is perceived to be standard and women may spend most of their years trying to achieve this ideal. [34,35]. Therefore because of these internalized images from the media, some of the participants adopted unhealthy habits to achieve the goal such as using diet pills and restrictive dieting or in some cases over eating. However, unlike previous research that shows that young women may develop negative feelings towards their bodies brought on by media that pushes the slender ideal as perfection [29,36], our participants from rural Ankole reported having high body satisfaction by revealing positive feelings towards their bodies compared to those that identified as urban dwellers. This was largely attributed to urban participants being exposed to more mainstream media, especially social media that includes images largely based on Eurocentric features like slenderness. This is in contrast the rural areas of Ankole where Afrocentric features like a fatness, natural hair and dark skin are valued. Most rural participants identified with these features and felt they had no pressure to change them. Nearly all participants in urban Ankole largely depended on mobile phones to access their information, with information from apps like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. Images they viewed on these apps were largely Eurocentric and therefore participants, especially young adult university students 19-23 years, may be at risk when trying to achieve such features through unhealthy practices like transactional sex and botched surgeries. According to [33] cognitive factors are integral to body image and self-esteem, young people develop body satisfaction on how they perceived themselves based on the similarities they had with the images they saw in media. The study found that when young people who believed that they had similar body qualities with their stars, reported to have high body satisfaction compared to participants who found differences in these qualities. Based on previous studies like that of [37], findings in this study support the claim that participants exposed to images from social media reported developing negative feelings towards how they appeared and poor evaluation of themselves based on the fact that they did not nearly look like the image showed in the media. Just as western media focuses on slenderness as the beauty ideal [34], Ugandan mainstream media has specific standards of a beautiful woman that includes fair skin tone, curvaceous body, medium height, and straight long hair. These characteristics of beauty are evident on local programs on Bukedde TV where women encourage skin lightening and body modification. Findings support the claim that young women without features like this may become withdrawn, shy and become self-distrusting towards their appearance [38]. Nonetheless, [39] suggested that while media might contribute to negative feelings about young adult girls' bodies, with the right kind of information targeted on body positivity, media can be a facilitator to high self-esteem and a positive body image among young adult women. Young women are starting to receive inspiration from a mainstream media that is slowly becoming diverse and inclusive of all body types. One participant identified with Esther Nakitende, a plus size Ugandan international model as one of her inspirations, pointing out that Esther embraces her curves and natural hair, features that were never popular in past mainstream media images. Clothing stores and the beauty industry in Uganda reportedly focuses on western standards of beauty. Young adult girls in this study explained that they developed a negative self-outlook towards their body because most clothing and beauty stores did not cater to their features. Clothes exported to Uganda are usually from Europe and Asia where the body standard of beauty is slenderness, while beauty products cater to fair-skinned women encouraging skin bleaching leading to dire effects on the body as evident in other research studies like [40]. Participants both from rural and urban centers reported having to spend large sums of money to obtain beauty products, putting a strain on their income and

encouraging dangerous income-generating activities like sex work to maintain such lifestyles.

5. Conclusion

Sociocultural factors, including parents, peers, media, and the fashion industry have a great influence on body image of young adult women. Beauty ideals are transforming from traditional norms and expectations to western influences that are consumed through media and fashion trends, yet traditional social expectations are still present, especially for rural young women. Adolescent Ankole girls and young women are caught in the middle, often experiencing the conflicting pressures of both. Feelings of self-doubt and low self-confidence may stem from not fitting certain beauty standards and may contribute to the adopting of unhealthy behaviors, including overeating, restrictive dieting, and skin bleaching. These behaviors potentially lead to long term health problems.

6. Limitations and recommendations

While the small sample size can be seen a limitation in the research, data saturation was achieved given that the sample was of a homogenous ethnic background, with minor variations among the Bairu and Bahima. There is need for further research among older adolescent girls in Uganda to reflect the multicultural nature of Ugandan society with its variations in body image expectations. Imposing standard beauty ideals over multi ethnicities may create a lot of fallacies. There is a need for media houses to engage in social diversity when it comes to representations in the media. Media houses should have strict regulatory actions that protect their users from online bullies and trolls. There is a need for the training of health workers, nutritionists, school counselors, and psychologists in advising parents on how to encourage and build children's self-esteem from an early age. There is a need for community campaigns that focus on building young people's self-esteem other than those that look at Obesity, where communities can come together and promote young people's skills and not how they look. Parents need to start early when building a relationship with their children, that way it is easier for their child to talk to them about sensitive things they have to deal with.

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Appendix A (Interview guide)

Facilitators and Barriers to Body Image and Self-Esteem among Older Adolescents' girls

1. When did “body criticism” begin in your life?

- What was happening with your body during this time?
- What messages did you receive about your body and appearance?
- What did people say about your body?
- What kinds of non-verbal messages did you receive?

2. What do you see when looking at yourself today?

- When do you focus on the physical aspects that you think need to be changed?
- When do you feel comfortable with what you see? What traits do you like?
- How do others respond to your appearance now? Does this have an effect on your feelings of body criticism or acceptance?
- What circumstances, emotions, thoughts or other factors might impact whether you feel positively or poorly about your body in your current daily life?

3. What kind of impact does “body criticism” have in your life today?

- To what extent does “body criticism” limit, constrain, hurt or otherwise feel oppressive to you?
 - Does it cause harmful body practices such as over or under-eating, over or under-exercising, etc.?
 - How much time do you spend thinking about your body and appearance in interactions with others? How do you think body criticism affects your interactions with others?
4. How often do you engage in conversations about body image and how do you think they affect you?
 5. As a young person growing how did your attitude about skin tone develop throughout your life, particularly your childhood?
 6. Is there a body shaming issue at school, in your homes, from the community and intimate relationships? (**Probe: If you feel there is body shaming, what should be done about it?**)
 7. In your own experience, because of the media is there a specific definition of a ‘perfect body’ that Participants want to achieve? (**Probe: what struggles do you through to achieve this body**)
 8. In your own experience does the Ankole traditional society create an unattainable body image for young women and how do you feel about the way the media portrays women and men?
 9. In your own experience what do we do about the ways we view our bodies a norm that has been ingrained into our psyche for many years?