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**The Impact of Western Beauty Standards on the Identity Formation and Self-Perception of  
Young Latinx Women**

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Bachelor of Science

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University Honors

and

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Portland State University

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## **Abstract**

Young Latinx women are experiencing an impasse resulting from the conflicting beauty standards of their two cultures. While women are experiencing dissatisfaction with their bodies all over the world, Latinx women are stuck not fitting their cultural or domestic standards. Previous research has found that young Latinx women, born to Mexican parents, don't feel like they fit into either of their cultures because the ideal in the U.S. is pushing thinness while the Mexican ideal is pushing curvy yet thin. This lack of feeling as if they belong is causing a negative self-perception of themselves and causing a deep dissatisfaction with their bodies. This dissatisfaction can lead to bodily hatred, poor perception of self, low confidence, anxiety, eating disorders, and disordered eating. Through interviews, surveys, and observational studies, we find that young Latinx women are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction than their white counterparts. This literature review will look at the various contributors, cultural and environmental factors, that lead young Latinx girls to a poor perception of themselves.

## **Introduction**

Women continuously find themselves being held to a high standard of beauty despite it being extremely unattainable for many. Even now, in 2024 there is a trend of "heroin chic"<sup>1</sup> coming back into fashion. Why are women's bodies being seen as a trend? The standards are so unrealistic that Ozempic, a drug used for diabetics, is being abused by (primarily) women to lose weight (Han, 2023). Media in the early 2000s, particularly television media in the United States, portrayed thin women being held as a prize and mid-sized bodies being portrayed as fat and undesirable. Mid-sized refers to the average pants size of a woman, the average pants size of a woman in the U.S. is between 12-18. This range is given due to the variation of sizing among

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<sup>1</sup> Diaz, A. (2022, November 4). Bye-bye booty: Heroin chic is back. New York Post. <https://nypost.com/2022/11/02/heroin-chic-is-back-and-curvy-bodies-big-butts-are-out/>

women's pants. Bodies of women are consistently criticized and expected to change in ways that society perceives as attractive. Not only are women held to a standard in terms of their body, but also expected to maintain a house, bare children, and much more, all while having to make it look effortless and maintain an “attractive” figure. Previous literature has found something interesting in current events and current media. There is a body-positive movement taking over social media, but this is also a trend it seems to be, as it is so difficult to keep up with what is being demanded of women. Campaigns see this and adapt to what the public wants to see. Even in New York Fashion Week, models are now being expanded, a runway model and their appearance are now being questioned. This means that models are no longer expected to look a certain way. Of course, this also brings complications and conflict with older and younger generation people. Drawing back to the question at hand, how does the portrayal of white U.S. beauty standards in media affect the self-confidence of young women consuming this media? More specifically, what negative effects did U.S. media have on young adult Latinas in their adolescence?

## **Methodology**

### **Introduction**

I will be performing a literature review where I will be analyzing qualitative scholarly literature, mixed methodology, and Western media that depicts different beauty standards in the U.S. vs Mexico. The majority of the literature referenced contains qualitative data, two of the articles used contain mixed methods, and the remainder of the sources use media within the past five years. In the two articles by Ahern (2008), and Bessenoff (2006), we can see the results of a qualitative survey in a quantitative manner, displaying the disparities of Young Latinx women and their body dissatisfaction compared to their white peers. The literature shows that there is a

negative effect among young Latinx women and their body image that is impacted by the media they are consuming. The literature used was found by searching terms such as Western beauty standards and “Latinas”, “Latinas and eating disorders”, “ethnic body perceptions”, and “thinness in media”. All of the published literature was accessed using the Portland State University library, while media examples used were brought in from personal experience and observations from my own social algorithm<sup>2</sup>. Young Latinx emotions and perceptions of themselves are the qualitative aspects of the research. The result of their perception, such as psychological effects and disorders, is the mixed methodology data. The beauty standards outlined in this literature review reflect current beauty standards, as well as previous ones, both negatively affecting young Latinx Women. Though some of the standards vary, due to constant changing body trends, they continue to have a negative impact on young Latinx women. The constant change of the standard creates greater identity insecurity among young Latinx women. Keeping up with body trends is already extremely difficult, but it is that much more difficult when it switches from one extreme to another. Alexander, B. K. discusses this, an example being the thin ideal in the 2000’s switching drastically to a much curvier ideal around 2016.

### **Previous Findings**

Previous literature has found that adolescent Latinas find themselves in a place of constant comparison because of the different media they are consuming (Romo, 2016). Because these young girls are consuming media from the U.S. and comparing it to what they have grown up knowing it leaves them feeling unwanted and conflicted about what the ideal body is. They feel as if they don’t fit in anywhere, and the unrealistic body expectations are made that much more unattainable. These young girls said the ideal body in the U.S. is extremely thin and tall,

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<sup>2</sup> Social algorithm is tailored to the individual consuming media on a given platform. For example: someone is regularly interacting with workout videos, so majority of their explore page will be workout videos, because the algorithm has noticed they are most interested in it.

while the ideal body of Latinas is thin but still curvy (Romo, 2016). Adolescents are also aware of how their peers respond to images in media. Romo finds that around the ages of 14-16, young girls start to think about the male gaze, and here they are perceiving what media the boys are consuming. Young boys will talk about their ideal woman and begin commenting on women's bodies. This is also the age when young adolescents begin to date. Girls will look at the dating history of a boy they are interested in and compare themselves to the girl they were with before, trying to figure out if their body is desirable (Romo, 2016.) The biggest differentiation in this literature review is that the Latinas being discussed are U.S.-born. This is an important aspect of the study because they are the ones consuming various types of media and having different expectations set on them due to two different beauty standards being pushed onto them. The study specifically asks the young women in the study what they perceive to be the beauty standard in Mexico and the U.S. This is a unique study that specifically addresses contradicting, yet equally impossible, standards that young women are chasing. They perceive different beauty standards from the two cultures they are growing up with. In a study by Romo, L. F. et al. girls describe the ideal body type of a white woman and the ideal body type of a Latina. The girls themselves describe the ideal body type for a woman in the U.S. is for them to be scarily thin, with no fat anywhere. While they describe the ideal Latina body as thin, there are still curves, so she is not too thin. The two different media are almost contradicting themselves, but they are both unrealistic for young girls to achieve. Many of the girls (14-16) are barely beginning puberty, and they are comparing themselves to fully grown women.

In a different study by Romo, L. F., Mireles-Rios, R., & Hurtado, A., they have mothers and daughters talking about their bodies. The participants were brought into a private room, where it was only the mother and daughter in the room, with a research assistant entering only to

prompt conversation. The first topic they were given was something easy to make everyone feel relaxed, they were asked to talk about the ideal vacation for three minutes. Upon the return of the research assistant, they were asked to talk about how they felt about their body for the following five minutes. The study was hands-off and allowed for conversation to flow as naturally as possible. They are not guided to have it be negative or positive. Rather the dynamic of the mother and daughter is left to be as organic as possible. With this, they observed that mothers who are unhappy with themselves will often pick apart their daughters. Giving unsolicited advice and comments about what to do with their bodies. However, when a daughter compared herself to another young girl the mother would almost tease the daughter and be funny as a way to put down the other girl. This is an interesting dynamic as it puts the girls above others, but they are still comparing themselves to other girls, their mothers seem to put themselves in a place of power. Power in the sense that they are the only ones allowed to criticize their daughters. Mothers tend to see themselves within their daughters and pick at them, pushing their own beliefs about their bodies onto them (Story, 2022). The mother-daughter dynamic is important as it is one of the determining factors in how a girl is brought up, they will see their mother dieting, or receive unwanted comments about their body, internalizing their mother's expectations. This interview study noted that mothers who are unhappy with their own bodies will often pick apart their own daughters. In Mexican culture, it is very normalized to tease people's characteristics that are perceived as negative, using it as a nickname. An example is that if you are considered fat they will use that to address you. Relatives will call you “gordo/gorda”, and it is excused as being endearing. When it is harmful and causes body image issues among many young adults.

### **Current Events and Media**

Currently and historically the ideal body type for a woman has fluctuated throughout the decades. Five years ago the trend was to be “slim thick”, then it was to be a “fit” version of that, and now we are back to being skinny (McComb, 2022). The trend of this back-and-forth body type has primarily taken place in the U.S. The trend is prominent in media such as magazines, social media, and cinema. It is important to note that these body trends were only acceptable when a white woman was the one displaying them. Alexander, B. K. talks about how certain body types are not seen as desirable until a white woman does this. Alexander uses the example of typically curvier women, black women, who have had this body type of being “thicker”, and yet it was not glamorized until someone like Kim Kardashian did it. That is an important factor to acknowledge since many women of color had a body type of “slim thick” prior to it becoming popular in Western media. This body type was not seen as desirable until white women were doing it, because there was an aspect of respect associated with it (Alexander, 2023). It was pointed out that white women are more respected and treated with greater fragility, allowing them to set the standard. Before popularizing that body type, it was already a standard among the larger Latin American Media. Mexico, specifically, has had this standard for a while, purposefully putting curvy women in the media to attract sex appeal (Martinez, 2019). However, Mexico and the U.S. have had a drastic change in beauty standards within the last year. For the first time, there seems to be a similarity among both cultures of what is expected of a woman’s body. Both are now leaning toward the Western standard of tall, thin, and white. For a young Latinx woman, this is a confusing time because there is now nowhere they can feel as if they fit in. Before it was confusing because they were trying to fit both, as Chicana<sup>3</sup> women, but now there is nowhere they seem to fit in. The media in both countries has shifted to portraying very

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<sup>3</sup> Chicana(o) is a term used among Mexican-Americans to describe themselves. Usually born to immigrant parents from Mexico, with themselves born here, practicing a culture of Mexican traditions along with American ones.



thin white women as the standard. These constant back and forths and impossible standards are toxic and harmful to young Latinx women. It creates uncertainty and a negative perception of themselves, showing in ways of lack of confidence, eating disorders, anxiety, and depression (Ahern, 2008). It is impossible to keep up with two beauty standards, but even more impossible when the standard does not show anyone who remotely looks like you. The ideal body being a thin white woman increases the chances of young Latinx women developing eating disorders due to the lack of representation and relatability being shown in mainstream media (Gordon, 2010). Ethnic women's distinct features not being shown in the media makes it a lot easier for young Latinx women to develop a low sense of self-esteem because all they can see is that they are not wanted by the larger population.

### **Buchona Culture**

Buchona refers to an aesthetic and culture that a woman presents that originated in Mexico. A buchona was originally a woman who was the wife or mistress of a drug lord and presented herself in heavy makeup and visible plastic surgery alterations (Apodaca-Cabrera, 2024). Now the term buchona has turned into its own aesthetic consisting of a Mexican woman with long black straight hair, long nails, heavy makeup, tight clothing, and a body that was likely achieved through a BBL<sup>4</sup>. It is now even being used to describe a flower bouquet, ramo buchón, it describes a bouquet that is big, sparkly, and expensive. The aesthetic of buchona was frequently shown in Music Videos, but it now seems to be taking a turn to showcasing thin white women who look like Instagram models. An example of this is Fuerza Regida, a Mexican regional music that originated in California, uploaded its new music video in April of 2024 showcasing only white women. This is problematic because while the artists were born in the

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<sup>4</sup> A BBL is known as a Brazilian butt lift, where fat is taken from one part of the body and inserted into the breast and glutes, in order to enhance their size.

U.S., they are Mexican American, and perform Mexican regional music, yet are showcasing white women in abundance in their music video (Fuerza, 2024.) People took to social media to express their disappointment, emphasizing the use of the word “Güerita” being inappropriate in this context. Güerita is a term used to describe pale Mexican women, yet here it was used to describe a white woman, making it a poor choice of words. People were disappointed that a white woman was showcased, they expected a Mexican girl to be shown, especially after listening to the music prior to the release of the video. So now there is no hiding the expectation and standard that is being sought after in Mexican media. It is no longer just the showing of beautiful, pale, Mexican women, it is now just white women being shown to an audience consisting of Mexican listeners and viewers. The shift to thin white women is abundant and clear. Now young Latinx women can’t even look to their own culture to see representation, even unreachable representation, since they have been completely taken out of the matter. Their culture is being taken over by the Western beauty standard, making them obsolete, where even their own country no longer sees them as desirable.

### **Limitations**

The literature specific to the topic at hand is hard to come by. Few publications specifically discuss young Latinx women and the conflicting beauty standards and how that negatively affects their self-esteem. Through different types of studies, studying eating disorders and psychological effects, we can see more evidence of the negative effects among young ethnic women. Studies focusing on only Latinx women are that much more sparse, showing a need for greater academic accessibility. Many young Mexican-American Women don’t know how academia works, due to coming from immigrant parents who haven’t attended higher education, making research studies harder to come by, even as participants. Self-esteem and self-perception

are hard to measure, there is no scale for it, a qualitative study can be difficult to prove its significance if there are no numbers or effects of low self-esteem recorded. While young girls can say they are unhappy with their bodies, to prove that is a bad thing can be difficult especially when trying to prove why that matters.

### **Conclusion**

I know I, along with many young Latinx women, have struggled to like my body. Our bodies are not a fashion choice and should not be. It is disappointing to see what goes in and out of style regarding the composition of a woman. We had just barely started showing more indigenous-looking women in Mexican media and it is disheartening to see that has subsided. I have come to the conclusion that my body will simply never look like that of a thin white woman, I am strong, and my body allows me to do many wonderful things. We each have to find something we like about our body, it doesn't have to be physical. Setting thin white women as the standard was something I thought was of the past, yet it seems we are cycling through body standards, just as we do clothing. As a final thought, there should be greater diversity of who is shown in media, the people consuming it are likely not going to look like the one person being portrayed. Young Latinx women deserve to feel seen and comfortable taking up space in their environment. This literature review proved hard to discuss and follow with how intersectional information can be. As a final thought, Western Media does have a negative effect on young Latinx women, and it does on many because of how unattainable it is.

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