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Research Article

The Body as a Social Construct: The Kosovan Context on 'Beauty' and 'Look' from the Perspective of Women and Girls in Kosovo

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Abstract

The inclusion of the study of the human 'body' in sociology abandoned the view that 'nature' constitutes the absolute premise that explains human interactions and social phenomena. The sociological perspective offered a new project of conceptualising the body, which enabled its reshaping and modification. In the new context of understanding the body, "the life of the body" was transformed from a technical and reproductive mechanism into a way of living, as well as an identity. This paper will address the main theoretical approaches to the study of the body, which at the same time reveals the context of the social realities that built the epistemology of sociological and gender studies in researches related to the body. Further, the paper introduces the results of an empirical research carried out with women and girls in Kosovo regarding the understanding and appreciation of the body, including their position about the image of the body that will help deconstruct the standard of the idolised body of women and girls in Kosovo. The research methodology applied is focused in two main parts: the online survey with 350 women and girls aged between 16 and 65 coming from both urban and rural areas, through a structured questionnaire technique compose of three parts with a total of 42 questions. Data collection and processing were done through the application of the SPSS program No. 24 and Excel. The second part of the research included the qualitative approach, by utilization of two focus groups with 14 girls of different ages and coming from different geographical areas of Kosovo. The research will highlight their attention and sensitivity towards 'beauty' as predefined by social, cultural, and the economic context. The overall results of the research show that 55.5 percent of the respondents agree that beauty plays a roles in the success of a woman/girl's life in Kosovo, whereas 22 percent neither agree nor disagree with this, whilst 33 percent do not agree that beauty plays any role. Additionally, approximately 55 percent of the respondents indicated that beauty influences a woman/girl's success in life, 60 percent believe that beautiful women/girls find it much easier to get hired, and about 70 percent stated that beauty affects self-esteem in both women and girls.

Keywords: body, sexuality, patriarchy, beauty, moral, Kosovo

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1. Introduction

The concept of 'beauty' and of the 'ideal body' varies across cultures and changes over time. Beauty standards have evolved throughout history and were influenced by various factors such as cultural beliefs, societal norms, and media representation. Body image is a multidimensional construct that refers to one's perception of, and attitudes about, the size and shape of one's body. It has both a perceptual component that refers to how we see our body size, shape, weight, physical characteristics, performance and movement, as well as an evaluative component, which refers to how we feel about these attributes and how those feelings influence our behavior's (Mills et al., 2017). However, "the concept of a beautiful body has often changed over the years with fashion magazine covers, celebrities, social media being the prominent influence. Fat or overweight bodies have always been unacceptable for society. Although weight management is a personal activity, the personal failure to achieve it and comply with the terms of a healthy person in societal context face social stigma. Those who don't qualify the societal norms of desirable weight and a beautiful body often face body shaming, mockery, social rejection. Such instances often lead to social exclusion and social isolation" (Dutta, 2020, p. 2791).

In the Kosovan context the 'body' and the 'beauty' have a dynamic relationship, which has influenced change in the attitudes and behaviors of women and girls' life. Traditional media and social networks in Kosovo are the main carriers of the promotion of a standardized body image. Given this specific context, traditional media, and social networks in particular, have become some of the most powerful means of mass communication in Kosovo. Images and messages conveyed through such platforms reflect and create the economic, social, and cultural realities. Although media may not be directly responsible for individual actions, attitudes or behaviours, they are nonetheless powerful in shaping one's views and behaviors, but also highlighting issues or perspectives that may be subjects of public debate. Having determined and defined 'beautiful' in the body of girls and women in Kosovo, they have also undergone a series of interventions to adapt to the actual 'standard of beauty'. Therefore, results of the study show clear indications that girls and women do indeed feel the pressure from the society, and peers in particular, to look beautiful. The fact that the main source of reinforcement of such pressure is primarily caused by the influence of the media and the Internet, social networks in particular, is worth mentioning.

It is precisely this social reality that has influenced an increase in the number of body modifications. In Kosovo, the trend of aesthetic interventions is constantly increasing. Aesthetic interventions are not necessarily a luxury, instead they seem to have become a lifestyle. Today, regardless of the monthly income, women and girls undergo aesthetic interventions. Currently, the biggest trend of interventions are eyebrow tattoos, and the modification of the nose, ears, and lips. On the other hand, nails and body maintenance are not a topic of discussion any more, for it is a given. Aesthetic interventions refer to procedures that affect the appearance of the face and body. There are a number of safe procedures that men and women can choose from to create an image that makes them feel more confident and comfortable with their appearance (ACI, 2022).

Women as subjects, and aesthetic surgeries are study topics that provide for an understanding of the ways surgery intertwines with an array of social and cultural forces, such as gender, neoliberalism, popular culture, and health and medical discourses. The interrelation of 'feminized' practices of health, beauty and gender inequality have been continuously criticized. The studies place aesthetic surgery mainly in the context of specific historical, cultural and social conditions related to neoliberalism. Sociocultural theory suggests that people learn beauty standards within the social and cultural context. People judge their own appearance based on the beauty standards defined by the society in which they live (Walker, et al., 2021). Despite the consideration of surgical interventions as patterns of oppression and capitalist patriarchy by Second and Third Wave feminists, postfeminist theory comes as a criticism to the comprehension of the relationship between feminism, popular culture and femininity promoted by their predecessors. The postfeminist theory describes women as autonomous individuals who choose to improve themselves. A woman who chooses to intervene in

her body is a powerful woman with an advanced position in society. Sociologists Kathy Davis and Debra Gimlin address aesthetic surgical interventions in the framework of centralization of beauty and the need for aesthetic surgical interventions as a choice to increase a woman's satisfaction with her body. According to them, beauty is a means to achieve psychological, social, and material rewards. Women use beauty, for instance, to renegotiate their relationship with their bodies and construct a certain sense of self. Schools, media and society in general have not yet challenged the hegemonic norms of beauty to create and direct another parallel standard – that of preserving the individuality of the girls and saving them from the standardization of their worldviews. This standard has started to have a negative impact on the lives of teenage girls. In the Kosovan context girls suffer low self-esteem, due to their efforts to come closer to the standard promoted by the culture of consumerism, influenced by the media and social networks, despite the fact that in Kosovo there is hardly any talk about issues related to the body, femininity and sexuality of the girls. Even in school, sex education in Kosovo does not have any tradition, so the practical implementation of these contents continues to have problems from the teachers' side but also from the family itself. The lack of communication that exists in the family makes it even more difficult to deal with at school, considering the cultural barriers that exist even among the teachers themselves (MESTI, 2023). Therefore, the paper tries to introduces the results of an empirical research carried out with women and girls in Kosovo regarding the understanding and appreciation of the body; their position about the body image that will help deconstruct the standard of the idolised body of women and girls in Kosovo. Issues related to the body, discipline and the control of the body, reconstruction through alterations and medical interventions, and the portrayal of bodies in the mass communication culture compose the four central aspects that will be addressed in this paper in order to find out the views of the Kosovar women and girls regarding the understanding of the body and of the social construct of the 'ideal body'.

2. Literature Review

"Every society, throughout history, has had standards of beauty, but it has never happened that such intense bombardments have come from the media to tell us how we should look. Magazine covers, movies, television shows and billboards circulate with images that constantly reinforce the idea that 'beauty' is everything" (W4W, 2002).

Carol Gilligan conducts "an analysis of gender-based differences based on perceptions that adult women and men have about themselves and their achievements. The role of women in men's lives is traditionally that of helper and caregiver. However, the skills developed within these roles are often undervalued by men, who emphasize individual achievements as the sole form of success" (Giddens, 2004). On other hand, Susan Faludi has argued that "although women are still far from equality with men, feminist demands have provoked a strong reaction from men. It is said that women, although have achieved most of the ideals that feminists sought, but as a result, they are miserable. Analyzing newspapers, films, and television, Faludi shows that these themes are well emphasized, having as a counterweight a large amount of material that proves the opposite" (Giddens, 2004, p. 186). On this point, we notice that the analysis of the 'look' and the 'beauty' produced different theoretical, sociological and feminist views. The study of these two concepts is an integral part of an array of changes produced mainly by the modern social organization of individual living and lifestyle.

The interest in the Psychology and Sociology of body image originated in the work of Paul Schilder in the 1920s. In 'The Image and Appearance of the Human Body' (1950) Paul Schilder argues that body image is not just a cognitive construct, but also a reflection of attitudes and interactions with others. He defined body image as "The picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say, the way in which the body appears to ourselves" (Poorani, 2012, p.12). However, in a wider theoretical context, the knowledge to conceive the beautiful is expressed through two different theoretical perspectives. Namely, while the first defines beauty as oppression, the second view

considers it as a cultural discourse, though dealing with power relations and the question of how practices of beauty serve to control or discipline the body are central to both theoretical perspectives. But what is 'the look'? According to sociological definitions, it means "the way we present ourselves to the world. We make deliberate choices (whether conscious or not) every day as to how we will present ourselves in the society – from basic acts of personal care to choosing to change, surgically, aspects of our look" (Cregan, 2012). Hence, "beauty" is closely related to the social norms interpreting it, "a factor that affects the formation of oneself, and people even change their look to adapt to these social norms" (Cregan, 2012, p. 16).

"Look" and "Beauty" being produced by a certain social and cultural context, became part of the study by social sciences. In fact, vis-à-vis gender studies, these two concepts were as important as the development of the look and beauty into norms that contributed to the creation and the shaping of worldviews about the body and the position of women in the society. Today, with the advancement in technology, the veil of the 'beautiful ' female body cannot be analysed beyond the influence of the mass media through which there is a reinforcement of the standardization of beauty, in the background of which cosmetic industries, fashion and medical ones that promote and guide women towards a remaking their bodies, are very developed and very successful, despite the cost and pain caused by aesthetic surgical interventions. As Andrea Dworkin writes, "that in our culture, not one part of a woman's body is left untouched, unaltered. No feature or extremity is spared from the art or pain of improvement; from head to toes, every feature of a woman's face, every part of her body, is subject to modification, change. From the age of 11 or 12 to her death, a woman will spend a great deal of her time, money and energy in changing herself. This change is an ongoing, iterative process" (Bordo, 2001, p.17).

Women and girls hardly escape the influence of such developed industries of presenting a standardized image of beauty. Therefore, women's endeavours in making their bodies more beautiful seem to be much more problematic than a static definition implied only as a projection of how the opposite sex wants to see a woman's body. Therefore, based on such a complex issue of interrelation between the body and beauty, the history of feminist theory marks an early discussion of ideals of beauty and women's engagement in beauty practices in a certain political and social context. Kathy Davis, Susan Bordo and Naomi Wolf have primarily argued that in a gender stratified social order, beauty is integral to the construction of femininity. In this context, given the role and position of the women, their body is idealized through beauty. The approach to beauty in women is a resumption of the construction of perception about women as inferior and in constant need of improvement. However, despite the fact that dealing with the beauty among women is seen as a 'sneaky' way of society to discipline the woman's body, feminist studies show a reluctance and sensitivity to deal with it on an individual basis, especially when women remake their bodies because of a certain suffering in order to adapt to the standardization of beauty. According to Wolf, (cited in Cregan 2012, p.16) the construction of the 'standard of beauty' is an influence of patriarchal culture that was passed down through generations. Furthermore, according to Wolf, the embodiment of the standard of beauty consists of two elements: the external beauty, which could be seen physically, and the internal beauty, which resembles goodness and virtue. However, the 'standard of beauty' is not only a product that is influenced by patriarchal culture, but also a social construction that responds to social, economic and political changes. Through the study of the body, social changes can also be analysed. In this context, the body is also an essential manifestation through which a society follows the change. In "The Beauty Myth", Wolf argues that women are involved in the discourse about the beauty, adhering to stereotypical standards of beauty promoted by cosmetic industries, not only for themselves, but for all women" (cited in Cregan 2012, p.16).

Figure 1: Illustration from the presentation of women and girls in beauty salons in social networks" (Revista Kosovarja, 2022) & brosbymira.studio & browsbymarigona.

Conceiving beauty as an imposed social construct, Susan Bordo, in her famous work entitled "Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body" analyses the relationship between culture and mental disorders by emphasizing the fact that disorders like anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa cannot be defined simply from a medical and psychological point of view, but must be viewed within a cultural context, as "complex crystallizations of culture." (Bordo, 2001). Further according to her, "the rules of femininity have been increasingly culturally transmitted through the promotion of standardized visual images" and cultural broadcasters like television and print media work insidiously to "impose models of bodily beauty that are interpreted as cheap options chosen by women who are essentially victimized by them" (Bordo, 2001, p. 17). However, by adapting to the standard of beauty in the manner it is established by the society, under the guise of such a conceptualisation, women also create the perception of themselves and project their freedom. In her book "Ethical Topicality of the Ideal Beauty", researcher Simona Chiodo writes that "beauty standards describe, in precise terms, the relationship that an individual will have with his own body. They describe her mobility, spontaneity, attitude, walking, the uses to which she can put her body. They precisely define the dimensions of her physical freedom." (Chiodo, 2015). The relationship created with the body and the perception of beauty constitutes the fundamental basis of her being. It can therefore be argued that the remaking of the body and the various interventions on the body nowadays constitutes an attempt to create freedom by taking physical freedom as a starting point to building the inner freedom. Based on this, this study focuses on questions such as: Does beauty affect a woman's/girl's success in life in Kosovo? Do beautiful women and girls find it much easier to get hired? Does beauty affect self-esteem in girls and women? Girls who are not beautiful, do they have problems with depression and anxiety? Teenage girls who do not look good, are they [easily] accepted by society or are they instead bullied and excluded from social circles?

3. Data and Methodology

Research is aimed at discovering some fact through careful examination or study (Mathews, 2010). The preferred and most appropriate research methodology for this research paper was deemed to be a combined quantitative and qualitative approach, although more attention was given to qualitative approach, due to reasons which will be obvious in the following sections of this research. While research methods in general are tools that that are used in a variety of ways to achieve a variety of goals (DeKeseredy 2011, p.12), qualitative research, however, in particular is typically considered to be a more beneficial approach when doing social science" (Tewksbury, 2009). An online survey with 315 women and girls aged between 16 and 65 years, which utilizes a standardized questionnaire, was the key research tool in obtaining necessary information for this research. The questionnaire was composed of three central parts with a total of 42 questions. This target group was chosen because this age corresponds to aesthetic and more 'beautiful' interventions, according to the authors. Whilst

the first part was focused on the demographic data of women and girls, in the second part, respondents were asked about their attitudes regarding beauty and appearance, the importance of the beauty of women and girls, main sources of social mechanism that influenced women and girls into paying attention to appearance, practices applied to control or alter the body (i.e. diet, exercise, plastic surgery), and the attitudes towards these practices. The third part of the research looked at the influence of the mass media in the creation of the "ideal type" of the body of women and girls, and their adaptation to this standard, including the potential pressure women and girls might feel against this continuous imposition.

Focus Groups with teenage girls – "as a research strategy, serve the purpose of intensive discussion and interviewing of small groups of individuals with a specific focus, typically several times within a certain time period" (Pajiziti, 2010). Therefore, the purpose of the focus group with teenage girls was to study their attitudes about the body, beauty and appearance. Fourteen (14) girls were included in the (two) focus groups, where selection criteria, besides age also ensured an equal representation of urban and rural areas. The girls were selected through a sample, but it was also deemed as rational to include beauty salons, considering the importance of these venues for this research. The girls were asked to reveal the models from showbiz that they would like to resemble most.

In-depth and semi-standardized interviews – This research tool was utilized to interview women who had plastic surgery anywhere in their bodies. Five interviews were conducted, where women discussed their experiences and their need to undergo surgical/aesthetic operations.

4. Result and Discussion

The dynamic relationship between biological and social environments in which the individual is found has a powerful impact on the perception and creation of self-image and self-respect. Understanding women and girls' praise of and attitudes on body image helps deconstruct the standard of idealized women bodies in Kosovo, though body image and praise thereof are ever-changing concepts and have a profound effect on our everyday lives and the way we live in general.

4.1 The Kosovar context on 'beauty' and 'look' in the eyes of women and girls in Kosovo

The research conducted with women and girls in Kosovo reveals their attentiveness and sensitivity regarding beauty predetermined by the social, cultural and economic contexts. In total, 42.8 percent of them agree with the stance that beauty is a social, cultural and economic construct. Society reveals itself through the body of women and girls.
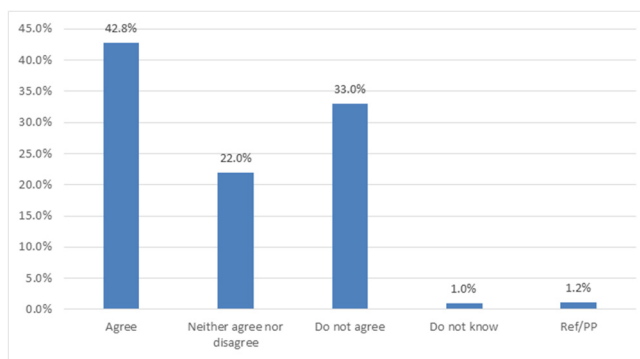

Chart 1: Beauty is a social, cultural and economic construct. Society reveals itself through the body of women and girls (Source: Authors' research)

Further, 55.5 percent of the same research respondents agree that in Kosovo beauty affects the success of a woman/girl in life. Consequently, beautiful women and girls find it easier to find employment (60 percent). Hence, beauty being important, women and girls adapt by using all mechanisms at their disposal to alter and remake their bodies. Nonetheless, women and girls, for various reasons, do not manage to adapt to the established standard. A total of 70.7 percent of the respondents agree that beauty affects self-esteem in girls and women. However, women, highlight why women are really so devoted to the look and the beauty. As much as 90 percent of the respondents agree about the source of the creation of such a standard, namely the exposure to images on social networks, which have a tremendous influence on girls, making them pay more attention to beauty. "Unfortunately, a woman's beauty nowadays is defined by perfect body shapes; thick lips and small nose. If you do not meet these standards, you are not considered beautiful in this society."[2] The conceptualization of beauty by women and girls in Kosovo seems to be divided into several dimensions. Beauty as self-confidence, which includes the dominant and powerful nature of woman's personality; inner beauty, which reveals itself through kindness and care for others; natural beauty of the body, which is mostly natural and not modified by surgical interventions; undefined beauty or definition of beauty as relative/subjective, according to which women cannot define what is really beautiful; and lastly, the specification of beauty in body parts, which means the exact definition of beauty through the description of body features like the nose, ears, lips, etc.

When it comes to beauty, as indicated in chart 2, 38 percent of respondents, are focused on inner beauty, described in clear stereotypical terms; attributes that are typical for women and girls when it comes to 'behaviour', 'gentleness' and 'education'. On the other hand, 27 percent of them think that natural beauty is equally important. However, what is worth emphasizing is that the respondents are aware that women's commitment to the look and beauty is a hidden social demand, since being "beautiful" renders their inclusion and integration in the society easier. To me, "beauty personifies the beauty of the soul, that is, the inner beauty. However, in these times in which we are living, being beautiful opens many paths. That is, a beauty admired by everyone gives you advantages in many fields of life." (Interview with a teacher from Faik Konica School, Prishtina, 2022). Having said that, the respondents, cognisant of social reality in which women and girls in Kosovo find themselves, when they speak in the first person, they seem to make a significant detachment from reality. Being asked "How do you evaluate yourself in terms of looks/appearance: Are you beautiful?" A total of 77 percent of them feel beautiful, and 22 percent express doubts. However, if they could make changes to their bodies, 36 percent would intervene, and 65 percent would not change anything in their bodies. Yet, as results shows, women and girls are still interested in making some kind of alterations, despite stating that they feel good about how they look currently.

The research also shows the alignment of their demands for change with the well-known definition of the standard of being beautiful in Kosovo. The most common element referred to by the research population was weight, weight change respectively, which was categorized as the first problem that women and girls face, and which they would change it if they had the slightest possibility. Married women argued by claiming that because of giving birth, they ended up gaining weight and having a belly: "because of the births, I have ended up with a big belly and gained weight" stated one of the interviewees.

It was interesting to find how the research highlighted contradictions between women and girls when it came to higher self-esteem about being beautiful and the expression of desire to intervene or modify some parts of their bodies.

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[2] *In order to study women and girls' views of the look, a survey with a standardized questionnaire named "Appearance, aesthetic interventions and social construct for the 'beauty' of women and girls in Kosovo" was used as a research tool. The aim of the survey was to study the sources of influence for the creation of the worldview about the body. Another aim was to also analyses how these worldviews make women and girls undertake practices such as diet, exercise and surgical/aesthetic operations.*
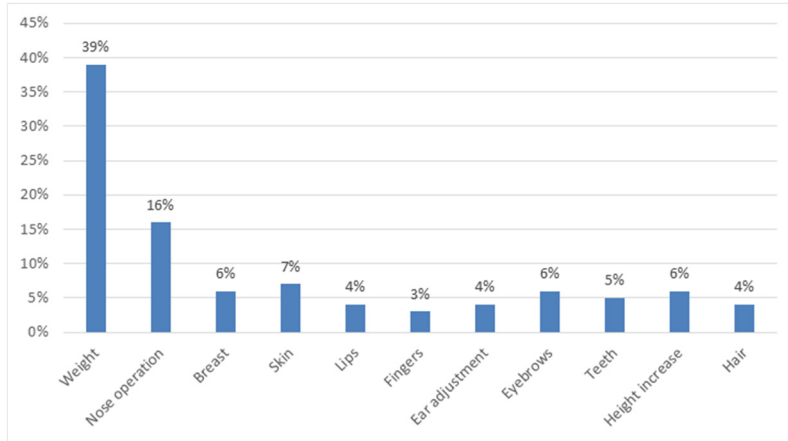
Chart 2: The interventions 'desired' by surveyed women and girls (Source: Authors' research)

One of the questions asked was "If you could have plastic surgery to "correct" a certain part of your body, would you do it?" The highest percentage of women and girls who responded positively were between the ages of 16-25, totaling at 48 percent, whereas the highest percentage of those who would not undergo any interventions in their bodies was more present among the 36-45 age group, with 77,3 percent of responses. Looking at this cross-sectionally by age, girls have a higher inclination to make changes to their bodies than older women. "I wish I had a more beautiful body, but this is how I was born and I don't want to transform myself artificially. I try to take care of my look in a natural manner, as much as I have time and I can. I'm not worried that I have fat legs or soft, shapeless breasts." (Interview with a teacher from Faik Konica School, Prishtina, 2022). However, due to lack of debates in the public discourse about the body and social prejudices and modifications that the body is undergoing, the remake of the body seems to be an issue not related to their own reality, but rather the expectations and the life of the others. Therefore, women and girls find it easier to discuss the phenomenon in general terms, which they believe is increasing evermore, than to speak about it in the first person. "I'm often told I shouldn't be so honest and say that I am constantly doing liftings on my forehead and around the eyes" (Interview with a professor at the University of Pristina, 2023).

As Chart 3 indicates, women know very clearly that 'beauty' has now become an important tool to become included in the labour market. In fact, according to them, there are some positions for which being beautiful seems to be a necessity. A total of 60.8 percent of women and girls believe that it is much easier for beautiful women and girls to find employment in Kosovo, and this attitude is almost similar to the one about the success that women and girls can achieve in general if they are beautiful and devoted to it [beauty] (55.4 percent). On that note, as emphasized by one research respondent: It is enough "to go to a shopping centre and you will clearly see what is required of girls. You can see beautiful girls, with all their body parts exposed, in most of the stores..." (Author's research). Indeed, living in such a social environment related to the idealization of the female body and the high appreciation of being beautiful, this standardization also affects girls' and women's self-esteem, as 70.7 percent of them agree with the idea that beauty is also related to mental and emotional health.
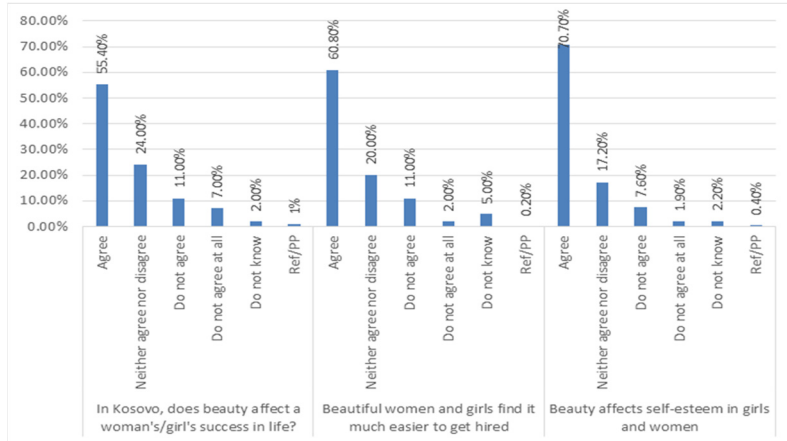
Chart 3, 4 and 5: In Kosovo, does beauty affect a woman's/girl's success in life, beautiful women and girls find it much easier to get hired and Beauty affects self-esteem in girls and women.
Source: Authors' research

4.2   Culture of consumerism objectification of body image

The everyday life of women and girls is filled with stories and actions about the body and its 'remake', as witnessed in traditional media and social networks. We are all witnesses of social networks being full of adverts, pictures and images of women who have altered their lips, noses, breasts, weight and so on. There is a variety of TV shows where the emotional state of women is imposed by their positions "before" and "after" surgical interventions, "successful" presentations of radical transformations of their bodies respectively. I am very happy, "because I have set an appointment to modify my nose in December", says a 41-year-old woman, who after several interventions on the wrinkles of her face, decided to continue with some "other flaws", as she said. "The weight loss intervention in Turkey raised my self-esteem; no price would have compensated me for my suffering because of my obesity", points out a 38-year-old woman, who had decided to pay around 6,000 euros just to lose her body weight.

Figure 2: Objectification of women's bodies in advertising in the streets in Kosovo (Photo by authors).

Despite an increased 'remaking' of the body, the debate about the emergence of a new social norm is poor, to say the least, or inexistent. The body politics, in such a social context, continues to be a silent topic – the body simply exists, and its alteration moves to a new dimension of adaptation to the new social, economic and cultural dynamics. The history of feminist criticism was oriented towards the 'body', i.e. the return of its control, by dealing with reproduction and sexuality. The "beauty", built on the foundations of women as subjects, the conceptualisation of the feminine based on imposed patterns of beauty, were strongly opposed by the feminist movement. On the other hand, no one should forget women's "aesthetic discipline", with an entire medical structure having been put to its service, promoting "beauty" for profit, thus contributing to the "remake" of women's bodies.

In developed countries, sex reassignment surgical interventions for transgender and intersex people are successful, but come at a very high cost. The price for such interventions pending their completion is between 40 and 60 thousand euros. On the other hand, interventions for trans men are more expensive, because they are more complex. The reason "why they do not deal with the body of transgender and intersex people in Kosovo is related to the patriarchal and religious viewpoints. Such surgical interventions are unacceptable, especially if such interventions are performed to reassign the gender of trans women. So, a male person by biological sex who reassigns his sex (genital organs) through surgical intervention from male to female" (Interview with Arbër Nuhiu, leader of the Center for Social Group Development - CSGD organization in Kosovo, 2022).

Prejudice, gender-based discrimination and preservation of patriarchal standards towards the body through medicine in Kosovo remains at a misogynist and not at all at an emancipatory level, where they are utterly "friendly" to aesthetic interventions, which one could argue have already become a social norm. The echo of aesthetic campaigns has dominated the 'body remake' market, regardless of health and financial costs. However, how can this new conceptualisation of body be defined? The study of the body in today's context, especially including the lifestyle and the everyday life, helps us understand more clearly that there are no social and cultural changes that are not expressed through the body, nor any economic practice that is not applied on it.

Accordingly, the Image and Body idiom has turned the understanding of the life of women and girls' bodies into central concepts. However, its basic conceptualisation is "a subjective approach to one's physical appearance, generated by both self-observation and observation of others' reactions" (Cregan, 2012, p. 17). As Katharine Philips writes in "The Broken Mirror: Understanding and Treating Body Dysmorphic Disorder", regardless of definition used, body image is unique to all individuals and is a complex and uncatchable construct. Given this specific context, traditional media, and social networks in particular, have become some of the most powerful means of mass communication in Kosovo. Images and messages conveyed through and by them reflect and create the economic, social and cultural realities. Although media may not be directly responsible for individual actions, attitudes or behaviours, they are nonetheless powerful in shaping worldviews and behaviours, as well as highlighting issues or perspectives that may be subjects of public debate. In the context of the body, traditional media and social networks in Kosovo are the main carriers of promotion of standardized body image. Related with this, a psychologist from Prishtina emphasizes that "the exposure of the thin body in the mass media can be closely related to dissatisfaction with their own body, due to the discrepancy that is created between the ideal self and the real self (personal interview). People start to see themselves quite far away from the desired dimensions and start to use unhealthy methods to achieve the ideal figure, which in turn can result in the loss of self-confidence and even despair. When we talk about unhealthy ways, we are talking about diets and diet products that contribute to poor psychological health and eating disorders" (Rexhahmetaj, 2019).

The media "simply do not deliver specific messages to passive audiences. Instead, through news, marketing, and entertainment, they produce and distribute various information, ideas, ways of thinking, assumptions, frameworks, beliefs, values, and descriptions which humans use constantly in order to understand and think about the world, the others, relationships and themselves. Clearly, the media can play an important role in achieving social change and promoting gender equality" (Kafiris, 2005). Therefore, as Kafiris rightfully maintains, the media have transformed men and women into

separate subjects with completely different roles (Kafiris, 2005).

The role of media in portraying young people (girls and boys) is of primary importance, as it depends on them whether these roles will be analysed in a complete and critical manner, or whether they will be tackled based on stereotypes inherited from the past. In general, based on gender studies, one thing is certain – that media have a powerful impact on the creation of the image of the body of both girls and boys. Similarly, the image of girls and women in the media affects their role and status in the society, and this image changes the way they are perceived by others.

Eliminating gender stereotypes leading to violence against women and girls is, in fact, an obligation that stems from human rights, in order to have a fair and equal representation of women and men. Accordingly, it is as a primary precondition to a democratic society, as well as an economic and social development of a country like Kosovo. Consequently, if the media do not promote gender sensitivity, it then promotes gender discrimination, and thus hinders the development process (Gender Alliance for Development, 2015). According to feminist researchers, power, domination and men's sense of entitlement are the key elements, which have to be investigated in order to achieve a sound understanding of male intimate partner violence against women" (Podreka, 2019). This is also evident in other areas of life, where the marginalization of women in peacebuilding work, even as the definition of the work has broadened, reflects the larger field of international relations, which has historically been male dominated in theory and practice" (Štante, 2020). Despite the important contribution that media have in prevention of various social phenomena, and in raising public awareness about them, in terms of dealing with these issues in public debates, there still remains a lot to be done when it comes to including the gender perspective [in the media]. In most cases, the media in Kosovo reveal the prejudices that the society attributes to girls and women. They are described as dependent on men, weak, unable to perform certain professional activities, sexual objects, and only capable of doing housework. In addition, they are presented as unstable, similar to other social stereotypes that Kosovar society reserves for women and girls in general. As much as 91.7 percent of women and girls are convinced that the exposure of images on social networks has a powerful impact on girls' higher attention to beauty.
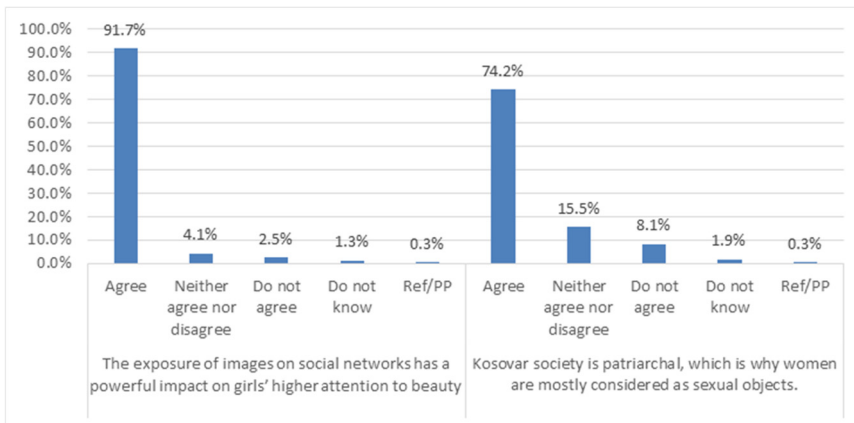

Chart 6 and 7: The exposure of images on social networks has a powerful impact on girls' higher attention to beauty and Kosovar society is patriarchal, which is why women are mostly considered as sexual objects.
Source: Authors' research

However, there is a fine line of interpretation between cultural models that have brought the 'beautiful body' back into the limelight. While, on one hand, we have an approach according to which, owing to modernity, the body has returned to the individual decision-making autonomy, on the other we have a line of interpretation suggesting that the objectification of woman's body in itself is a continuation of patriarchal thinking against the body.
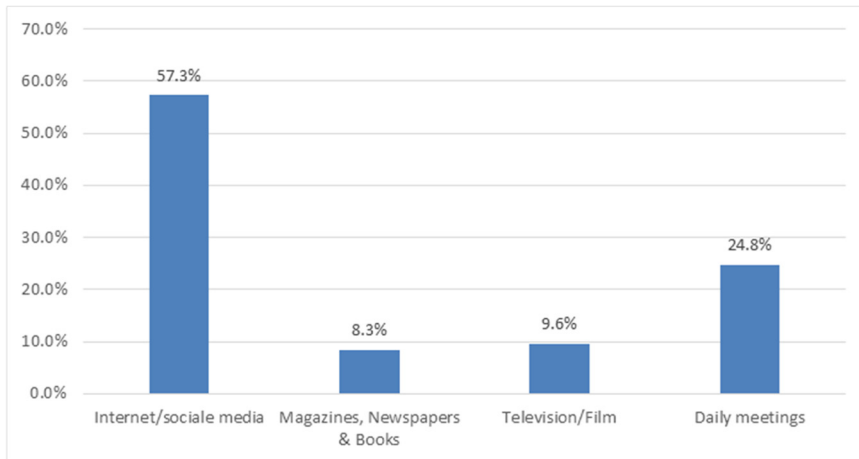

Chart 8: Do you think that the media has a powerful influence on the way you should [?] look??
Source: Authors' research

The youngest age group (16-25) feel more pressure than young women, with 58 percent of them stating that they feel under pressure. The study results show clear indications that girls and women do indeed feel the pressure from the society to look beautiful. The study found that the main source of reinforcement of such pressure mostly comes as a result of the influence of media and the Internet, social networks in particular. As the following chart 8 indicates, 57.3 percent of women have declared that the pressure comes from social networks, followed by daily meetings between women and girls, 24.8 percent.

5. Feeling Foreign in your Own Body - Teenage Girl Attitudes about 'Body', 'Beauty' and 'Appearance'

Nowadays, almost all social mechanisms have been put to the service of the body – starting from pharmacies, medicine, fashion, to clothing stores and media. Usually, "teenage girls engage in online self-presentation of posting selfies and sharing their outfit of the day pictures, to differentiate themselves from their peers. Media images of ideal beauty standards influence the content and sharing of pictures teenage girls' post" (Henriques, 2020). In social context, we can say that "many studies across the world carried out by various researchers prove that men and women are victims of stereotyped portrayal of body images. Studies reveal that women are portrayed as abnormally slim in the media, whereas men are portrayed as of standard weight, thereby increasing the normative standards of thinness" (Poorani, 2012, p. 3). With regards to the latter, the image of the ideal body of girls is the slimness, transformed to the point of the creation of a new myth, while the shops are filled with plastic models that depict women and girls with enlarged breasts, big bottoms and thin waists. Likewise, elevators have turned into mirrors of final confirmation of bodies, giving them a 'presence' and 'existence' outside their homes.

Schools, media, and society in general have not yet challenged the hegemonic norms of beauty to

create and direct another standard – that of preserving the individuality of the girls and saveg them from the standardization of their worldviews. This standard has started to have a negative impact on the lives of teenage girls. Therefore, it is not by chance that in industrialized societies girls suffer from anorexia and low self-esteem, due to their efforts to come closer to the standard promoted by the culture of consumerism, influenced by the media and social networks, despite the fact that in Kosovo there is no talk about issues related to the body, femininity and sexuality of the girls. "We find it difficult to discuss the issue of the body with female students, maybe because our educational system remains traditional in the way it is organised. In order to institutionalize such a debate, we need to include such topics in Kosovo's curriculum of education. Until now, the discussion of the topics of body and sexuality in general remains dependent on teacher's personal will." (Interview with a teacher in a secondary school, 2022).

Girls from elementary school ages and onwards in Kosovo are susceptible to cultural pressures to conform to a limited range of acceptable body shapes. The attitudes expressed in the Focus Group with teenage girls highlight clear patterns that they follow. The images of singers in Kosovo and other countries are their main models, because the beauty and the look are very important in their lives. In fact, they almost unanimously expressed the opinion that if they don't care about their looks, as the girls describe it, they are not "in", trendy respectively.

The concept of beauty for girls is visualized herein. A total of 78 percent of them affirmed height and slim body as crucial elements. However, according to them, beauty is not enough if it is not accompanied by a clothing style. According to one respondent "I know many girls who are beautiful, but because of the way they look and how they dress, their beauty does not stand out" (Attitude expressed by a 15-year-old girl at the Focus Group organized, 2002).

In the Kosovar society, there is also a tendency to level social pressure with the values of patriarchy and a culture of consumerism. The best illustrator of this situation is the occurrence of the "Dubai" effect in the media. In one of relevant sketches produced by a group of comedians, a girl returning from Dubai and handing a large amount of money to her family is portrayed. On the other hand, another woman is also portrayed, she seems to be upset at her house with her daughter who, while holding a notebook in her hands, insists on additional explanations about her homework. The excited mother fails to answer her daughter completely. She even asks her daughter to follow the example of the woman who had returned from Dubai and abandon school altogether, because it does not pay the bills. One could argue that such a show can be considered ironic and sarcastic, but both cases are symptoms of a new social norm, a pale imitation of capitalism served by the media, which is influencing the creation of the beauty myth among teenage girls, by instrumentalizing their bodies, age and social and economic status.

In a modern society, "In recent years, the idea that women should be prepared for profitable professions, which can be exercised without much creative effort, but also when experiencing stressful conditions, is spreading widely. Most women need to prepare spiritually to face more stress than men" (Dervishi, 2011). Herbert Marcuse writes that capitalism values women's beauty, turning it into a commodity. Women "who do not consolidate or accept this figure are harmed and disparaged, until woman's sensuality will undermine the repressive ratio and work ethics of capitalism" (Halimi, 2012). Therefore, the concept of 'beauty' should be part of discussion in schools as well. This standard, which is in force, should have undergone a fundamental reassessment, which would correspond to girl's development beyond them as sexual objects. According to this research, 46.5 percent of women and girls have expressed the concern that a girl who is not beautiful is more likely to have problems with depression and anxiety.
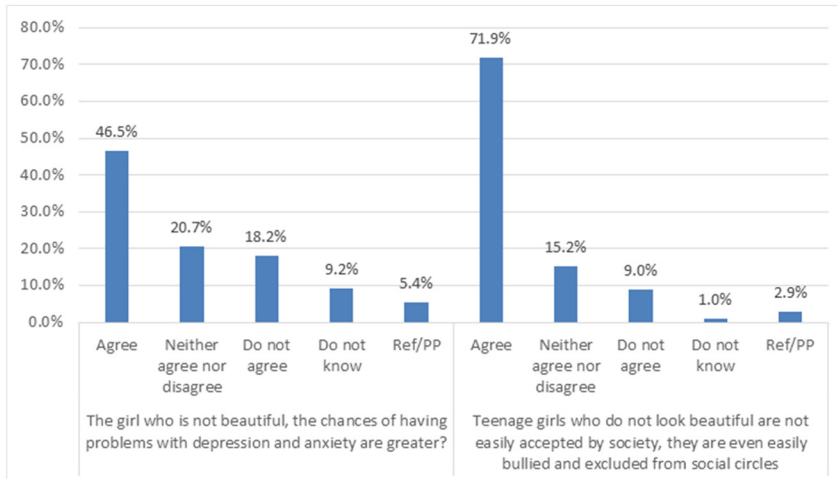
Chart 9 and 10: The girl who is not beautiful, the chances of having problems with depression and anxiety are greater? And Teenage girls who do not look beautiful are not easily accepted by society, they are even easily bullied and excluded from social circles.
Source: Authors' research

As a matter of fact, 71.9 percent of the respondents agreed with the position that teenage girls who are not beautiful are not easily accepted by the society. Consequently, in order to analyse the data obtained from the research, an additional focus group with teenage girls (ages 14 and 15) was organized to discuss the results and the main issues related to their bodies and the everyday life. Teenage girls seem to be very well informed about cosmetic surgical interventions in Kosovo and other developed countries. The main sources where they get their information are social networks; Tik-Tok and Instagram more specifically. Although they were reluctant to talk about issues related to body and beauty at first, during the discussion they managed to define how they understood beauty. "Beautiful to me means being tall, blonde, with blue or brown eyes, stated one respondent, whilst according to another one Girls with a thin waist look very attractive", said a 15-year-old girl. However, when asked "How do you rate yourself, do you feel beautiful, more than 55 percent of them responded positively, whilst 45 percent of them did not answer. When asked to name some of the most beautiful women in Kosovo and abroad, Kim Kardashian was the first they would mention in the discussion. Due to Kim Kardashian's prevalence in Kosovo media, most of the girls put her on the top of the list. According to them, the way she looks and the power she has showed that she is beautiful and rich. The perspective of one of the girls who said "She is beautiful, but she is also a mother and has it all" was quite interesting. The discussion about the role of being a mother is an attempt by the girls not to judge her subject only by being beautiful, as a sexual object, because the commitment to beauty in a patriarchal context like Kosovar society, cannot be rated positively.

Figure 3: Photographs shown to the respondent (teenage girls) that were selected by them expressing their opinion of what constitutes and how beautiful should look like"
Source: (Indeksonline, 2019), (Sarlija, 2023), (Limani, 2023), (Petrarca, 2022), (Rennert, 2018), (Benitz, 2021)

As seen from the selected images above, girls are completely influenced by one type of beauty, mainly imposed by the media and social networks. Therefore, the girls are convinced that in the school and places they visit, being beautiful is an enormous advantage, otherwise they believe that girls who are not beautiful are nervous and aggressive, and they do not want to be among them.

6. Conclusion

In the Kosovar society, the 'ideal body' of beauty among women and girls has been standardized. This research revealed that women and girls attentiveness and sensitivity to a beauty is predetermined by social, cultural and economic contexts. Living in such a social environment related to the idealization of the female body and its high appreciation of being 'beautiful', this standardization also affects women and girls self-esteem. The results of the research clearly show the pressure that women and girls feel from the society to present themselves as beautiful.

It is also important to mention the fact that the main source of amplification of such pressure relates mostly to the influence of the media, Internet/social networks in particular. As a consequence of being forced to adapt to the ideal body, the trend of aesthetic interventions is increasing in Kosovo.

Aesthetic interventions are not considered to be a luxury any longer but have, instead, developed into a lifestyle. At present, women and girls undergo aesthetic interventions, regardless of their monthly income. Currently, the biggest trends of interventions include eyebrow tattoos, modification of the nose, ears, lips, etc. Despite an increased 'remaking' of the body, the debate about the emergence of a new social norm is poor, or even inexistent. The body politics, in such a social context, continues to be a silent topic, the body simply exists, and its alteration shifts to new dimensions of adaptation to the new social, economic and cultural dynamics.

The "Beauty", built on the foundations of women as subjects, the conceptualization of the feminine based on imposed patterns of beauty, were strongly opposed by the feminist movement. In the context of the body, the mainstream media and social networks in Kosovo are the main promoters of the standardized body image. There is a fine line of interpretation between what are the cultural models that have brought the 'beautiful body' back into the limelight. While, on one hand, we have an approach according to which, owing to modernity, the body has returned to the individual decision-making autonomy, on the other we have an interpretation suggesting that the

objectification of woman's body in itself is a continuation of patriarchal thinking against the body. In fact, 70.7 percent of women and girls surveyed in this research agree with the stance that Kosovar society is patriarchal, so women are mostly perceived as sexual objects.

School, media, and society in general have not yet challenged the hegemonic norms of beauty to create and direct another standard – that of preserving the individuality of the girls and saving them from the standardization of their worldviews. Girls from the elementary school age onward are susceptible to cultural pressures to conform to a limited range of acceptable body shapes. Moreover, the findings from the focus groups highlight the necessity of including discussions about the concept of 'beauty' in schools. The existing standards should undergo a fundamental reassessment to better correspond to girls' development beyond being viewed solely as sexual objects. According to the research, 46.5 percent of women and girls expressed concern that those not considered beautiful are more prone to depression and anxiety. Additionally, about 71.9 percent of the respondents agreed that teenage girls who do not fit societal beauty standards face difficulties being accepted.

Teenage girls in Kosovo appear to be well-informed about cosmetic surgical interventions, both domestically and internationally. Social networks, particularly TikTok and Instagram, serve as the primary sources of information. Although initially hesitant to discuss body and beauty-related issues, they were able to articulate their understanding of beauty during the discussions. Over 55 percent responded positively, while 45% did not provide an answer.

These findings collectively indicate the influence of social media on young people in Kosovo, including the emergence of 'social dysmorphia' as a concept used by teenagers to model beauty standards. Moreover, the concept of beauty is perceived differently within the patriarchal background of Kosovar society.

Having said that, the body can be considered one of the main causes of bullying among girls, an issue that requires discussion in schools and the media, whilst always taking into account the manner of discussion, because, in the majority of cases, due to the fact that schools are conservative, its approach to girls' bodies could be just as harmful as the current trend itself, if not worse.

Adolescent girls' attitudes about the features of being beautiful are conceptualized. The images of singers in Kosovo and abroad are their main models, because the beauty and the look are very important in their lives. Almost unanimously, they expressed the opinion that if they don't care about their look, as the girls describe it, they are not "in", trendy respectively.

In general, these findings are important and have an impact on the development of public policies in education as there is a need to discuss the issue of gender, sexuality, and other problems of this nature. Furthermore, the impacts also extend to a framework of media influence, because the findings signal that social media should be careful with the portrayal of women and misogyny, while parents should monitor their children's use of social networks. Equally important is the aspect of economization, because the findings show that social marketing through social media has led to more young girls, but also older women, attending beauty salons and aesthetic intervention clinics.

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