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"You Can't Be Too Skinny. You Can't Be Too Fat. I Don't Know What You Are Supposed To Be.": A qualitative focus group study exploring body image experiences of South Asian women in the UK

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ABSTRACT

British South Asian women may experience unique appearance pressures associated with their intersecting (racialised and gendered) identities; yet qualitative investigations of intersectional understandings of their body image are scarce. The aim of this study was to explore sociocultural factors influencing British South Asian women's body image using an intersectional framework. Seven focus groups were conducted with 22 women of South Asian heritage living in the UK between the age of 18 and 48 years old who were comfortable speaking in English. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. We generated four themes (1) navigating (often marriage-related) appearance pressures from South Asian elders and aunties (2) negotiating cultural and societal standards across different aspects of one's identity (3) representation of South Asian women in the wider context and (4) forms of healing from the pressures imposed on South Asian women. The findings have important implications for the body image experiences of South Asian women by acknowledging the need for tailored and nuanced responses to their complex needs in the sociocultural, political and relational context such as family, peers, education, health, media and the wider consumer landscape.

1. Introduction

South Asian women – i.e., women descended from Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and/or the Maldives – are under-represented in the body image literature (Goel et al., 2021). Cross-sectional studies conducted in countries such as India and Pakistan indicate that young South Asian women experience body dissatisfaction and a desire for a slimmer body shape (Ganesan et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2011; Srinivas et al., 2017) as well as skin shade dissatisfaction and a desire for a lighter skin shade (Harper & Choma, 2019). Colourism – i.e., skin shade prejudice and discrimination that disadvantages People of the Global Majority with dark skin, is pervasive in South Asia (Hussein, 2010). Studies highlight that colourist pressure to have lighter skin from friends, family, the media, as well as from the skin lightening industry in South Asia negatively affects women's body image and self-esteem (Hussein, 2010; Peltzer et al., 2015; Sharda, 2020; Shroff et al., 2018). Research also indicates that pressure to marry is highly salient when considering appearance pressures and concerns among South Asian women living in South Asian countries (Sharda, 2020). Yet, less is known about how South Asian women living in the diaspora experience and negotiate their relationship with their appearance. Importantly, in this paper, we use an expansive definition of the term 'body image' to include thoughts and feelings about all aspects of appearance, not just weight and shape.

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South Asian women living in western (white dominant) contexts (e.g., the U.K., Europe, Australia) may have unique body image experiences compared with their peers living in South Asia and compared with both white people and those of other racialised Minority around them. Research conducted in the U.S. found that South Asian women had conflicting cultural values from the 'mainstream' western context and their ethnic cultural context (Reddy & Crowther, 2007) and internalised different cultural appearance norms, which had positive and negative impacts on their body image (Brady et al., 2017). Some of the appearance ideals from their ethnic cultural context were related to finding a proper partner for marriage for women, and this pressure was perceived to be promoted by maternal encouragement and the media by reinforcing traditional gender roles (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011). Furthermore, South Asian women felt pressured to possess qualities associated with the South Asian female ideal (e.g., light skin, long hair, thin body) based on familial and community pressures to be desirable to a South Asian man (Bhatti, 2018). At the same time, they felt obliged to meet Eurocentric appearance ideals in an effort to assimilate into the western culture (Goel et al., 2021). This can be understood as a strategy to counteract social marginalisation and increase belongingness, social currency, and safeness (Cheney, 2010).

Evidence also indicates that South Asian women living in the west (e.g., North America and UK) are subjected to appearance-related racial teasing and colourist comments (Chan & Hurst, 2022; Craddock et al., 2022; Reddy & Crowther, 2007). In a recent study with a multi-ethnic sample of People of the Global Majority living in the UK, Craddock and colleagues (2022) found South Asian participants reported higher levels of perceived colourism from their racialised peers and from white people than participants from other Asian backgrounds. In another cross-sectional study focused on South Asian women living in the UK, Chan and Hurst (2022) found appearance-related teasing was associated with greater skin shade dissatisfaction which in turn was associated with greater body dissatisfaction. Taken together, South Asian women's body image is affected by external forces such as appearance-related comments and teasing directed at their skin shade, but there is a lack of qualitative research examining the nuances and complexities of how this is experienced by South Asian women living in the UK.

Despite recent research on South Asian women's body image concerns in North America (Bhatti, 2018; Goel et al., 2021), it is important to explore the British context because race, racialised perceptions, identity and performances tend to be highly context-specific (Lukate & Foster, 2022). Particularly for South Asian women in the UK, they are additionally positioned within a nuanced socio-historical and political context where centuries of British colonisation has pervaded Eurocentric appearance ideals into South Asian culture, values, systems and structures (Hasan., 2012). Additionally, the sociocultural and political context has been impacted by a number of waves of South Asian migration to the UK post-Second World War as well as the late 1960 s and early 1970 s, where British passport-holders of Indian origin who had been settled primarily in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania left for the UK, following direct expulsion from Uganda under Idi Amin, and came to be known as 'twice migrants' in the UK. (Peach, 2006). These colonial and socio-historical (e.g., migration) influences have led to the internalisation of colonial standards across generations of the South Asian community through culture, media, politics and economy (Robinson, 2005). Compared with South Asians living in other countries (i.e., USA, Canada or Australia), it is more pertinent to examine the experiences of South Asian women in the British context due to the long-standing history of colonialism spanning over four centuries and the migration patterns to the UK (Clarke et al., 1990). This long history of connection has impacted the heritage and experiences of the South Asian communities in the UK in varied and complex ways (Visram, 2002). Some of these influences are deep-rooted and have manifested in the form of internalised racism and belief in the superiority of the white skin and inferiority of the dark skin (Speight, 2007). The intergenerational transmission of such standards continues to dominate attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions towards appearance ideals within the community to date, affecting the body image of South Asian women in the UK in context-specific ways.

1.1. Theoretical underpinnings

The Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al., 1999) is an important sociocultural model theorising how external influences contribute to negative body image, which might be particularly useful in understanding how South Asian women navigate sociocultural influences within the context of the UK. The model posits that appearance pressures from peers, family, and the media lead to negative body image via two mechanisms: (1) internalisation of societal appearance ideals and (2) appearance comparisons (Thompson & Stice, 2001). Although the Tripartite Influence Model was initially developed and tested among primarily white samples, studies indicate the theory holds when examining racially and ethnically diverse populations (Burke et al., 2021; Nouri et al., 2011).

In the existing body image literature, the predominant focus on testing theoretical models with white women as the norm has oversimplified the complexity and distinctiveness of Minoritised women's experiences that are embedded in the interconnectedness of their multiple social categories (Brady et al., 2017). Therefore, we adopt an intersectional framework for the current exploration of British South Asian women's body image. Intersectionality posits that multiple social identity categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender) are interconnected and intersect at the micro level (i.e., individual experience) to reflect multiple interlocking systems of privilege and oppression at the macro level (i.e., sociocultural level; Crenshaw, 1989). This framework helps us to contextualise the complex and multifaceted patterns of inequalities and marginalisation experienced by Minoritised women due to its focus on the simultaneous intersecting nature of their identities (e.g., a South Asian woman). It recognises that these oppressions cannot be viewed by taking an additive model or framework where the inequality experienced with each of their identity (e.g., being a South Asian and being a woman) is simply added, further leading to an inability to assess and respond to the multiple marginalisation and erasure of the experiences and voices of Minoritised women (Crenshaw, 1989). In terms of body image, an intersectional framework provides a more nuanced understanding of appearance concerns in individuals with multiple socio-cultural identities (Lewis et al., 2017; Watson et al., 2019), such as South Asian women living in western cultures, due to its consideration of the unique intersection of their simultaneous experiences (e.g., gendered racial microaggressions). Given that no previous research in the UK context uses an intersectional lens to understand the unique body image experience of South Asian women, the current study challenges the problematic dominant 'single-axis' narratives of body image (focusing either on race or gender) by taking an intersectional perspective.

Another relevant framework developed by feminists working in body image is Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which highlights how cultural messages influence body image, placing particular focus on the impact of women's sexual objectification in mainstream culture. Objectification refers to the process by which individuals are socialised to internalise an observer's perspective of their own bodies as a result of sexual objectification in western society. For South Asian women, objectifying experiences might involve the devaluation of specific culturally relevant features (e.g., Goel et al., 2021). Further, in an extension of Objectification Theory, Moradi (2013) proposes a pan-theoretical model of dehumanisation which suggests that all manifestations of oppression (including racism) may be considered as a process of objectification in which a

person of any Minority status is reduced to an object and is perceived as a lesser human, or not human at all (i.e., is dehumanised). This model has been applied to theorising how Asian American women may experience body image concerns that are unique to them due to experiences of racial and sexual objectification (Cheng & Kim, 2018). In the context of the present study, objectification theory provides a framework to support a deeper exploration of the ways in which South Asian women may be objectified to varying extents due to their multiple social identities.

1.2. The present study

Given the importance of investigating sociocultural aspects of body image such as social identities of Minoritised groups (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015) and the recent call for intersectional approaches to body image scholarship (Burke et al., 2021) the present study aimed to explore sociocultural factors that influence South Asian women's body image from an intersectional lens. We employed an exploratory qualitative methodology to reveal a more in-depth picture of body image experienced by a specific group (Holmqvist and Frisén, 2010). Therefore, the current study specifically aimed to (a) explore UK-based South Asian women's body image and (b) examine the role of sociocultural experiences and factors in South Asian women's body image. We aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the meanings, perceptions, and experiences of body image of women from South Asian heritage in the UK.

2. Method

2.1. Design

Qualitative focus groups were conducted in the current study, as focus groups are a useful exploratory method appropriate for under-researched areas and under-represented groups (Wilkinson, 1999). Focus groups can be empowering for participants, as they provide an opportunity for participants to interact with people who share common experiences, rendering this method particularly valuable when working with Minority groups (Liamputtong, 2007). Although focus groups may pose challenges to disclosures due to power imbalance between the participants or due to potential peer pressures, they can provide an open and supportive space for participants to discuss a sensitive topic, particularly if facilitated skilfully (Sherriff et al., 2014). In line with previous research, we hoped that focus groups would result in 'consciousness raising' effects among the participants with shared experiences and could lead to more positive social change as participants discuss their perspectives and experiences (Chiu, 2003; Morgan, 1997).

With pragmatic considerations of time and resources (Braun & Clarke, 2020), we conducted a total of seven online focus groups on Google Meet with two-to-five participants in each group. This group size range allowed for a balance between rich discussions and sufficient opportunities for participants to contribute. Focus groups were conducted online to minimise risk in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2. Participants

The eligibility criteria for this study are as follows: (a) be aged ≥ 18 years, (b) self-identify as a woman, (c) identify as South Asian (any generation), (d) live in the UK, (e) comfortable speaking in English, (f) able to use an electronic device with a stable internet connection, (g) not have a current diagnosis of body dysmorphic disorder or any eating disorder.

Participants were 22 South Asian women living in the UK between the ages[1] of 18 and 48 years old (M = 30 years, SD =10.32), who were comfortable speaking in English. Participants identified as being of Indian (n = 10), Pakistani (n = 7), Bangladeshi (n = 2), Nepalese (n = 2), or Sri Lankan (n = 1) heritage. Almost half of the participants were born in the UK (n = 10). Regarding sexual orientation, 19 participants were straight/heterosexual, two were bisexual/pan-sexual, one participant preferred not to disclose. A total of 12 participants were single, five were married, four were in a relationship and one was divorced. To further understand participants' social background, their socioeconomic status (SES) were assessed using the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler et al., 2000) which is a single-item measure that assesses a person's perceived rank relative to others in their group. They were shown a picture of the ladder with 10 rungs and were asked to indicate where they stand in the ladder (between 1 at the bottom to 10 at the top), with the ladder representing where people position themselves in society in terms of access to education, money, jobs and the like. Participants rated themselves between 1 and 8, and the mean rating was 5.5. Full participant demographics are detailed in Table 1.

2.3. Procedure and materials

Ethical approval has been obtained from the Department of Psychology's University of Sheffield's Ethics Committee. Recruitment was carried out online using the University of Sheffield Psychology department online subject pool, University of Sheffield announcement system and online advertisements including mail groups and social media (i.e., Twitter, Facebook), women's centres or community centres engaging minorities women (e.g, Roshni South Asian Women's Centre in Sheffield), charities working with South Asian women in the community (e.g., Humraaz in Blackburn). We also used a snowball sampling strategy by requesting those who expressed an interest to share any information about the study with their family and friends (Noy, 2008). After reviewing the recruitment advertisement and the participant information sheet, interested individuals completed a short expression of interest form, which consisted of questions on the inclusion/exclusion criteria. Those who expressed interest and met the criteria were contacted to confirm their place before being sent the consent form. Following consent, participants filled in the demographics questions (i.e., age, SES, heritage within South Asia, sexuality, relationship, educational, and employment status). Participants were invited to contact the researcher if they have had any further questions at this point; otherwise, their place in the focus group was guaranteed once their consent form was received.

Focus groups were conducted and recorded on Google Meet by the lead authors (AM and FT). Each focus group began with a brief greeting and an overview of the procedure. Participants were reminded of ground rules of the focus group (i.e., being considerate of other people's feelings and experiences, confidentiality of the group discussion) and were given the choice to either keep their cameras on or off based on their preference. All the participants chose to keep their cameras on to see each other during the discussion.

In total, we conducted seven focus groups, where participants were asked questions regarding experiences of their appearance and culture (see Table 2 for the focus group discussion guide). We planned for four to five women in each focus group; however, due to no-shows, we had: two groups with four participants, one group with five participants, one group with three participants, and three groups with just two participants. In cases where only two participants showed up, we asked whether participants were comfortable to continue or if they would rather reschedule. Two focus groups were rescheduled. After rescheduling, we had two participants each in those two focus group discussions.

[1] One participant did not report their age

Table 1
Participant demographics.

Focus group #	Pseudonym	Age	Heritage	Born in the UK?	Parents born in the UK?	Religion	Sexuality	Live with Parents?	Relationship Status	Highest educational qualification	SES (ladder: 1–10)	Employment Status
1	Sidrah	22	Pakistan	Yes	Yes	Muslim	Straight	Yes	Single	Undergraduate degree	8	Full-time employed
1	Salhaq	48	Pakistan	Yes	No	Muslim	Straight	No	Divorced	Undergraduate degree	6	Full-time employed
1	Shirmin	48	India	No (moved aged 17 years)	No	Muslim	Straight	No	Married	Undergraduate degree	7	Part-time employed
1	Paloma	46	India- Anglo-Indian	No (moved aged 32 years)	No	Christian and a mix of beliefs	Straight	No	Married	Undergraduate degree	5	Full-time employed
2	Mumtaz	19	Pakistan	Yes	Yes	Muslim	Straight	Yes	Single	A-Levels/ Equivalent	6	Part-time employed
2	Devika	40	India	Yes	No	Jain	Straight	Yes	Single	Undergraduate degree	3	Not employed, looking for work
3	Hansika	Did not report	Punjabi- India	Yes	No	Did not want to disclose	Did not want to disclose	Yes	Single	Postgraduate degree	8	Full-time employed
3	Ihana	19	Bangladesh - Bengali	Yes	No	Muslim	Straight	Yes	Single	A-Levels/ Equivalent	2	Looking for work
4	Sumaira	40	Pakistan	No (moved aged 10 years)	No	Muslim	Straight	Yes	Single	Postgraduate degree	5	Part-time employed
4	Jeevika	25	India- Punjabi	No, (moved aged 7 years)	No	Sikh	Straight	Yes	Single	Undergraduate degree	5	Full-time employed
4	Arshia	29	India	No, (moved aged 18 years)	No	Christian	Straight	Yes	In a relationship	Postgraduate degree	5	Full time employed
4	Aaira	32	India	Yes	No	Sikh	Straight	No	Married	Undergraduate degree	6	Full-time employed
4	Mehvish	20	Pakistan	No, (moved aged 17 years)	No	Muslim	Straight	Yes	Single	A-Levels/ Equivalent	4	Looking for work
5	Sharika	23	Pakistan	Yes	No	Muslim	Straight	No	Single	A-Levels/ Equivalent	1	Student
5	Nilisha	38	India	No, (moved aged 19 years)	No	Did not want to disclose	Straight	No	Married	Postgraduate degree	6	Part-time employed
6	Mishi	19	Pakistan	No, (moved aged 18 years)	No	Muslim	Straight	No	Single	A-Levels/ Equivalent	8	Student
6	Nitika	27	Nepal	No, (moved aged 25 years)	No	Hindu	Straight	Yes	In a relationship	Undergraduate degree	7	Looking for work
6	Kiara	19	India	Yes	No	Hindu	Bi/Pan Sexual	Yes	Single	A-Levels/ Equivalent	6	Looking for work
6	Sakshi	18	India	No, (moved aged 17 years)	No	Atheist	Bi/Pan Sexual	No	Single	A-Levels/ Equivalent	7	Looking for work
7	Quresha	39	Bangladesh	No, (moved aged 37 years)	No	Muslim	Straight	No	Married	Postgraduate degree	7	Looking for work
7	Dilakshana	30	Sri Lanka	Yes	No	Buddhist	Straight	No	In a relationship	Postgraduate degree	5	Full-time employed
7	Ardra	29	Nepal	No (moved aged 25 years)	No	Hindu	Straight	No	In a relationship	Postgraduate degree	5	Full-time employed

Table 2
Focus group topic guide.

Process	Prompts
Opening	Introduction of the facilitator & participants Setting the ground rules Brief idea about leaving the session
Appearance concerns	Would you like to start by sharing your experience and feelings about your body? How would you describe your feelings about appearance and body image concerns you may have?
Culture	Can you explain some of the cultural expectations that South Asian women have about their appearance? Where do these expectations come from? How do you think your cultural identity influences your appearance related concerns? What do you think needs to be done to tackle these appearance pressures South Asian women face?
Closing	Do you have any other thoughts or views you would like to share? Provide debrief

At the end of the discussion for each of the focus groups, there was an opportunity for participants to debrief with the facilitator(s) if required. The focus groups lasted between 1 h 20 min and 2 h 15 min (M = 1 h 26 min; 12.5 h in total) with the variation in the duration of the groups attributed to the number of participants present in each group (e.g., focus group with two participants was shorter than the one with five); the participants were each given a £ 10 shopping voucher as a token of thanks. In the participant information sheet, the authors had notified that the focus group discussions could last up to two hours. Transcription was conducted by study authors (RE, WT, AM, FT). Once transcripts were anonymised and allocated a pseudonym, video recordings were deleted.

2.4. Data analysis

We used inductive reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) to identify patterns of experience and generate themes from the participants' point of view. We developed both latent and semantic codes. Braun and Clarke (2020) define reflexive thematic analysis as an approach that "fully embraces qualitative research values and the subjective skills the researcher brings to the process" (p. 6). The analysis was underpinned by a critical realist ontology (understanding of truth) and contextualist epistemology (ways of knowing), assuming the existence of a meaningful reality and simultaneously recognising the role of context, language, and culture on participants' experience (Ussher, 1999).

Transcripts were read and re-read, and notes were made to facilitate familiarisation with the data. The lead authors met once every week for a prolonged engagement with the data. Initial coding was done (AM, FT, NC, RE, WT) in which we first individually coded each anonymised transcript. The analysis team (FT, AM, NC, JC, RE) read all the coded transcripts, met to discuss the codes, and engaged in peer debriefing. Next, codes were collaboratively refined and developed as the authors revisited the transcripts. The analysis team met again to co-create themes by reviewing the codes and identifying larger patterns across the transcripts. The team had ongoing discussions about our own understanding of the data and reflected upon how our positionalities, personal and professional experiences, and research interests were informing our analysis. In total, the analysis team met five times to discuss code and theme generation. To ensure methodological integrity, we did not opt to quantify our themes. This implies that we captured the complexity of experiences shared by the participants by tuning into their diverse voices. We would, otherwise, have risked oversimplification and inconsistency in our analysis if we had taken quantification based on the frequency of participant responses. Rather, we prioritised themes that worked together to form a coherent analytic story which provided more richness in response to our research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Four members of the analysis team wrote up the themes (NC, JC, AM, FT), which was an integral part of the analysis as it helped to finalise theme boundaries. Finally, the full dataset was reviewed by the analysis team to ensure that the themes represented a coherent data-driven narrative. Although we have tried to provide our comprehensive understanding of the phenomena, we acknowledge that our analysis is never fully done or complete (Trainor & Bundon, 2020).

Drawing on intersectionality, the current work acknowledges the interlocking systems of power and oppression in shaping the participants' body image experiences as they simultaneously belong to multiple social groups and helps us understand their identities as multidimensional. We further draw upon Black and Global feminist thought (a field of knowledge that demonstrates a fundamental shift in how we understand oppression and agency of women from racially Minoritised groups by considering them as agents of knowledge and power, thus giving us new possibilities of social transformation and empowerment) which has influenced our interpretation of the data in our discussions of capitalist exploitation and imposition of Eurocentric appearance ideals, the need for decolonisation (process through which we break away from the way the dominant culture is shaped which values whiteness and being able to redefine and restore our reality and our own experience the way we are, not in reference to whiteness, not from the white gaze), resistance and solidarity as strategies of feminist struggle and work (Ahmed, 2014). Black and Global feminist thought (eg, Cooper, 2018; Luna & Pirtle, 2021; Mohanty, 2013) has also influenced our idea behind capitalising Minoritised, Minority, People of the Global Majority as it is the same as capitalising white racialised identities in most places reflecting them as the 'norm' and with power. The communities which are not white have been 'Othered' by the dominant societal structures and are therefore Minoritised by them. The so-called Minority groups are People of the Global Majority who have been oppressed for centuries under the dominant white supremacist regime. In line with Black and Global feminist thought, we are trying to make our point of resisting these inherent power imbalances and reclaiming our identity by capitalising Minority and Minoritised to acknowledge that we have been Othered and we are in fact People of the Global Majority and for the same reasons, we are keeping white in lower case (Appiah, 2020). It is also to reaffirm what our research shows, which is the need to explore the experiences of Minoritised women in their own right and not view their experiences as a deviance from white norms or use the problematic white supremacist lens.

Trustworthiness was established by following guidance outlined by Nowell et al. (2017). Specifically, the analysis team ensured that we (i) deeply familiarised ourselves with the data through prolonged engagement and documented reflective notes and ideas for themes, (ii) engaged in peer debriefing and carefully documented minutes from our analysis team meetings, (iii) collaboratively created thematic maps to explore possibilities our candidate themes and subthemes, and (iv) once we had our candidate themes and subthemes, we revisited the raw data. In addition, we ensured that (v) we included a range of lived experiences and expertise within the research team and provided transparent information concerning the team's positionality, which aided in the naming of themes. We also

(vi) sent a summary of our themes to each participant, to which two replied confirming that the themes resonated with them and were accurate to their experiences.

2.5. Positionality statement

As qualitative research is a co-production between researchers and participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), it is important to acknowledge the various positionalities of the research team for transparency and interpretation of findings (Yardley, 2000). Starting with the first and last author who facilitated the focus groups: AM is a cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, South Asian woman who has grown up in the Global Majority and is deep-rooted within the South Asian culture. AM's work centres on racial and gender justice and she identifies as an intersectional feminist. FT identifies as a cisgender bisexual woman, who is able-bodied, and belongs to a non-white Minoritised ethnic group (Turkish) in the UK. FT identifies as an intersectional feminist. FT has lived experience of having had a negative body image and developing a positive body image. FT's work focuses on body image and eating disorders.

The additional authors involved in the data analysis (NC, JC, RE and WT) include a Mixed-Race (South Asian-white) woman (NC), two Southeast Asian women (JC and WT), and a white non-binary femme (RE), all of whom live within western, white-dominant contexts (i.e., the UK and Australia), and work in the field of body image and eating disorder research. The identities and experiences of the authors involved in data collection and analysis helped in understanding and interpreting the participants' experiences. During both the data collection and analysis, members of the team were positioned along a spectrum of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (Braun & Clarke, 2013) on the basis of their racialised and gendered group identifications. Occupying partial insider and outsider statuses, as well as some space across the research team afforded opportunities for centring voices of individuals from marginalised communities, helped form deeper connection, openness and trust with participants (due to insider status), in addition to opportunities for reflexivity (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). As researchers, we acknowledge the inherent power imbalance in our interactions with the community rendered by the social capital due to our academic backgrounds. The diversity within the analytic team facilitated data analysis through an intersectional lens; thus, providing a rich and in-depth interpretation.

3. Results

We generated four main themes from our analysis: (1) navigating (often marriage-related) appearance pressures from South Asian elders and aunties (2) negotiating cultural and societal standards across different aspects of one's identity (3) representation of South Asian women in the wider context and (4) forms of healing from the pressures imposed on South Asian women. All participants' 'names' used in this section are pseudonyms. Table 3 presents the themes, subthemes, and provides some example quotes.

3.1. Theme 1: navigating (often marriage-related) appearance pressures from South Asian elders and aunties

This theme highlights the varied and explicit appearance pressures that participants receive from their family and members of the South Asian community - often from other women: mothers or 'aunties'. For context, 'aunties' is a vernacular that primarily refers to South Asian women of the older generation, regardless of whether they are blood relatives or not (Tincknell, 2019). Participants in our study discussed pressures from the South Asian community regarding women's bodies in relation to marriage. Although participants found this pressure challenging and frustrating, some acknowledged that appearance-related pressures from older women within their communities were often well-intended and the result of deeply internalised (colonial) appearance ideals.

3.1.1. Subtheme 1.1 "People are never satisfied with how you look" - appearance ideals imposed on South Asian women

Participants noted that within South Asian communities, older women had particular liberties in making appearance-based comments directed at them as children or young people, as highlighted by Shirmin (FG1) who was called "'*fatty fatso' anytime you went to visit, you know, uncle's, auntie's or friends*". These judgments were also often verbalised directly at them regardless of occasions or contexts by older South Asian family or community members "*at wedding ceremonies, this was at dinners, this was whenever I saw people*" (Mehvish, FG4). Particularly for South Asian women, the intersectionality of their gender identity and ethnic identity meant that the consistent surveillance of, and comments on, their appearance by members of their community was often centred around their preparedness for marriage. Aaira (FG4), who was married at the time of the interview, described how this shaped the course of South Asian women's lives, including their body image:

> You go from a girl to a woman through marriage. So, before you're married, you're a young girl, and then when you're married, you're a woman. And it's almost like this massive divide, and it's based purely on according that you've married a man. And that's how some girls are made to feel that when they're younger, they're really ugly. And they're only beautiful when they get married.

In line with this, Devika (FG3), offered her perspective, as a single woman, on appearance pressures that South Asian women experience as a function of marriage:

> For example, if you're married, then you've got to look at also look a certain way compared to like [...] if you're single. If you're single, then you've got to look up to a certain way - that you're pretty enough that people will want to marry you, but not too pretty, that, you know, you can go off and do your own little things. And a lot of the thing is like the appearances does play a role in that if you've got someone who's like, I know in their 40 s and is married and is doing like, you know, I don't know this, they're gonna get judged because they're not looking like the way that you're traditionally supposed to, to look.

These quotes suggest that the appearance ideals imposed on South Asian women are unattainable regardless of marriage status, despite the emphasis on marriageability because they are subjected to specific *and* different appearance pressures pre-marriage and post-marriage. Echoing this, Paloma (FG1), who was married at the time of the interview, reflected on her past relationship with her former Indian husband:

> I think that's happened when I split with my, my Indian husband. Because the expectations that I should be slim, or I shouldn't have that. I think the problem started when my white hair started showing, and, you know, kind of was like, all those expectations that I should be evergreen.

This illustrates the differences in appearance pressures that married South Asian women experienced to *keep* their husbands, as compared to those experienced by single South Asian women to *find* a husband.

Further, our participants shared how much of the appearance pressure they experienced was from older members of their family. These pressures were focused on body size and shape, which were often framed in relation to what a South Asian woman could provide for her husband. This was evidenced in the following discussion between two single women in FG3:

Table 3
Themes, subthemes and example quotes.

Themes	Subthemes	Example quotes
Navigating (often marriage-related) appearance pressures from South Asian elders and aunties	Appearance ideals imposed on South Asian women	Nitika, FG6: "everyone's just expected to look kind of perfect before you get married. then, doesn't matter you know, after you have a kid"
	Making sense of within-community appearance pressures	Sidrah, FG1: "Like it's our own people putting white figures on a pedestal, and then sort of, and making us feel like we're the inferior race."
Negotiating cultural and societal standards across different aspects of one's identity	Balancing the two standards	Jeevika, FG4: "South Asian women have it really hard. you're kind of constantly like, in a battle. trying to handle that situation with two versions of you."
	Conflicting feelings	Mumtaz, FG2: "while I was quite embarrassed of wearing South Asian clothes, I guess, because I just I wanted to fit in a bit more."
	Journey of acceptance	Mehvish, FG4: "And I think it's easier to to sort of, it's easier to sort of accept yourself, because and accept the way you dress, accept the way you talk, the way you look."
Representation of South Asian women in the wider context	Lack of representation	Dilakshana, FG7: "I think western media's representation of diversity, is there is a lack of representation of people from different backgrounds when they are making western shows and there's or there's a very typical representation."
	Moving towards 'universalising' appearance standards	Salhaq, FG1: "So there is a universal sort of standard of beauty, these days. And it's more instant, you can see what the universe is looking at. And everybody looks similar."
Forms of healing from the pressures imposed on South Asian women	Resistance against appearance ideals	Arshia, FG4: "I think it has empowered me to challenge these unrealistic standards being exposed to two different cultural identities."
	Solidarity and sense of connection	Hansika, FG3: "I feel like I've talked about something that was probably inside and that never had this space to talk about things, so I feel relieved, so thank you for listening to me"

> You always have to be at this, like, this child bearing weight, so it's like you can have like - you're big enough to have kids, but you're not skinny enough, or you're malnourished. It's like, is this like this happy medium that you'll never get? (Ihana, FG3)

> You have to be thin or skinny, but not skinny, as you said malnourished, but well-toned, perhaps or healthy – healthy enough to have a child but also raise a child. But also to take care of your man. (Hansika, FG3)

In addition to appearance pressure focused on weight, participants discussed pressures on having the 'perfect' (i.e., "*a small, thin, like European nose*" [Sharika, FG5]) nose. They described practices and behaviours adopted by South Asian parents to try and ensure their child matches up to a certain aesthetic. For example, Sharika (FG5) said: "*when babies are born in my culture, they literally squeeze their baby's nose. That's like a thing – so that they grow up with a thinner nose.*" Such behaviours illustrate the importance of possessing Eurocentric features for South Asian women.

Having fair skin was also highlighted as an appearance ideal that was important to South Asian women. For example, Sharika (FG5) described having fair skin as being imposed "*from a young age - it's ingrained that being any shade of Brown and not looking white and European is like, a sin*". In particular, Nilisha (FG5)–a married South Asian woman–offered a potential explanation whereby having fair skin was related to marriage prospects: "*It's all about like, you know if you're dark, no - then like, you know, 'how do we get you married?*'. Similarly, Mehvish (FG4), who was a single South Asian woman, had been socialised to understand that: "*you need to be fair, because then you're going to be attractive to men*".

These pressures might be due to the emphasis ingrained within South Asian women that they should prioritise the needs and expectations of others, including others' expectations of how they should look - this was expressed by Salhaq (FG1), who was a divorced South Asian woman:

> I mean, like, it was almost as if looking after yourself was not just secondary, it was like it took third, fourth, fifth place to everybody else in your in your life…. And but my generation, I think grew up on a lot of that. And then all your aunties tell you that is how you're meant to be…..as a woman, it's not about nothing's about you. It's all about other people. Make them all happy.

Taken together, having the 'perfect' body was paramount for South Asian women as a function of marriage because they have been socialised to view their appearance as a form of capital that attracts and/or maintains heterosexual relationships.

3.1.2. Subtheme 1.2: "Like it's our own people putting white figures on a pedestal, and then sort of, and making us feel like we're the inferior race" - making sense of within-community appearance pressures

Participants frequently reflected upon how much of the appearance pressures that they were subjected to from the South Asian community were transmitted via the generations. While appearance pressures were centred on being perceived as attractive to men and related to marriage prospects, participants felt much of this generational pressure was from older South Asian women. Aaira (FG4) discussed how they had internalised her mother's ideas of how they should look growing up:

> A lot of the time when I was growing up, my feelings about my body were probably not my own, but my mum's, so because it was coming through her lens of what my body should look like, because those were what was probably forced onto her.

In the quote above, Aaira (FG4) demonstrated an awareness of the effects of internalising her mother's appearance ideals while growing up, and an understanding of how these pressures might have been passed down from previous generations.

Given the history of colonisation and oppression of the South Asian community, it is possible that colonial appearance ideals internalised by the older generations are being reproduced through cycles of the following generations:

> [Our parents] have also, over the course of generations internalised this. So subconsciously, I think they also kind of, like mould you into this kind of this person who is succumbing to all of these standards. And I think, you, you just fall into a cycle, essentially. And you're not, you can't really get out of it" …. it was to make sure that my mother was pleased with how I looked, again, with the standards that she'd set for herself. And then, over generations, that have been set for a lot of others. (Mehvish, FG4)

This reproduction of pressure and shame has made it difficult for some participants to talk to members of their community about

their appearance "*because they've been set unrealistic standards as well by their grandmothers, great grandmothers, men, as well, in society*" (Arshia, FG4). However, others demonstrated compassion and an understanding towards the intention beneath the pressures exerted by their elderlies, as they recognise that these pressures meant that their elders cared about them, despite the problematic content and expression:

> A lot of the time, a lot of what's said and a lot of what they do, they do it because they care. Like, when they, you know, tell you that you should look a certain way or that you should be a certain way, [it] is because they want you to look whatever the best is. But, like, I think it'd be more if in some way, communicating with them that just because you were told that for so long, that there's only one version of pretty there's only one version of what's acceptable doesn't mean that it's true. (Mumtaz, FG2).

Taking onboard Mumtaz's (FG2) suggestion, open conversations and having an understanding of the older generations may be valuable moving forward in terms of reducing appearance pressures experienced by South Asian women.

3.2. Theme 2: negotiating cultural and societal standards across different aspects of one's identity

This theme explores how appearance is intertwined with participants' sense of cultural belonging. They conveyed a sense of conflict navigating expectations from both cultures and that their identities are misaligned with any singular cultural identities. We found that this often resulted in feelings of being lost, being an imposter, and embarrassment. However, these initial negative feelings that stemmed from a lack of belonging eventually transformed into self-acceptance. They viewed this process as a journey that led to feelings of appreciation of their different (cultural and intersecting) identities, thus embracing their uniqueness over time.

3.2.1. Subtheme 2.1: "South Asian women have it really hard trying to handle that situation with two versions of you" - balancing the two standards

South Asian women discussed the relationship between their appearance and what it meant in terms of their cultural belonging (to South Asian culture, British culture, and/or both). The participants in our study were aware that the different appearance norms are culture-dependent and described how similar cultural identification at times fosters an understanding around embodying specific physical features, such as body hair - Sharika (FG5) mentioned that if she was: "*surrounded by Asians, Asians understand though you can get a bit more hairy*".

Nevertheless, most participants mentioned the need to simultaneously navigate two different sets of cultural appearance ideals. They discussed the dual appearance-related pressures that they experience from either side of their families, particularly when they are from different cultural backgrounds, where they were subjected not only to white beauty ideals (e.g., thinness) but also influenced by South Asian appearance ideals (e.g., curvaceous 'childbearing' body). Mumtaz (FG2) described the conflicting appearance ideals maintained within both the cultural identities that she embodies:

> It was kind of conflicting because like that side of the family, which isn't Asian, for them being tall is considered prettier. And so sometimes it's balancing the two standards. That one side, one would want you to look more like one thing and sometimes the other side wants you to look completely the opposite.

Participants also discussed how appearance functions as a tool that facilitated fitting in and fostered a sense of belonging. For instance, Sharika (FG5) described how skin colour played a role in gaining acceptance from their South Asian cultural groups: "*And I think yeah, a lot of it comes down to like the western gaze and aspiring to be English for some reason or aspiring to be white. And it's like, 'Oh, if you're fairer, you'll be more acceptable*". However, as Sharika (FG5) continued, she described a trade-off between maintaining the appearance ideals prescribed by the South Asian culture and those by the mainstream British culture, particularly as the ideals are conflicting:

> Then you come here, it's like, 'you're too dark'. But then if you tan and try and get darker, than like, - girls at my school, fake tan white girls, would put their arms next to mine and be like, 'Oh my God I'm not as dark as you yet'.

This trade-off detailed above meant that participants constantly struggled to fit into at least one of their cultural groups. Ardra (FG 7) described how this conflict to fit into one group might entail behaviours or appearance features that contradict the norms of the other group: '*Like, yeah, like, it's, it's really difficult, don't you think? Like, you can't be too skinny? You can't be too fat. I don't know what you are supposed to be.*' This struggle also impacted participants' sense of belonging and familial relationships; for instance, Ihana (FG3) described the indirect rejections that she received from her family and the resulting distance that she had created between herself and her family:

> I got called a coconut like whitewashed, like you name it. And even from like my extended family that say, "Oh, she's such a 'gori'" [a colloquial term used in South Asia typically used to describe white people as foreigners]. "She's so white". And I used to think what does that even mean? And that pushed me further and further away.

Further, participants indicated that they felt othered and objectified as a Minoritised ethnic group in the UK based on their South Asian appearance. In particular, Devika, FG2 noted the types of objectification that she had experienced:

> It's like, "oh, my God, you've got to, you're this sort of beautiful Brown thing with your Bambi eyes and all that crap", or it's like, "oh, you are completely just gross and revolting". Because you're, you know, you're part of a mass, I don't see you. Because you're part of that mass, you're just like every other Brown woman person that's out there.

The quote above suggests that 'looking different' held different values - varying between being one *of* a million versus being one *in* a million. However, despite being aware that the fetishisation of South Asian women is problematic, some participants also discussed the value in embodying the South Asian stereotype as a capital that garners acceptance from mainstream society, as Jeevika (FG4) noted that her strategy was to "*exaggerate it too much*". She felt like she had to "*fit this like ideal of like, Oh yeah, I'm Asian. So, I have to have that long, dark hair and, you know, fit this like, what people stereotypically think an Asian or exotic woman should look like"* because "*by playing into it, like, yeah, you'll get, you'll be more accepted.*" Evidently, the role of appearance is essential in shaping participants' feelings of acceptance and belonging within both the South Asian community and the wider British society.

3.2.2. Subtheme 2.2: "It's like feeling like an impostor" - conflicting feelings

There are multiple challenges in navigating conflicting appearance ideals prescribed by the different cultural identities that participants embody. These challenges have had an impact on the way participants were understood by others and the way they understood themselves. For example, Sidrah, FG1 said that she "*was so embarrassed to have like darker like be a darker toned*" and Mumtaz, FG2 described how she had strategically engaged her cultural visibility as she felt embarrassed wearing South Asian clothing in

predominantly white settings, such as at school, to avoid appearing differently from others:

> When it comes to wearing like, more Asian style clothes, I think I was quite embarrassed to do that for a really long time. My primary, my secondary school were like mostly white. And I think I'd make an effort to wear more sort of Western sort of English clothes because I didn't, I didn't want to seem different. I mean, I've worn the headscarf since I was, like 11. And that, I don't know why, but that wasn't as much of a problem maybe because it's not like, specifically South Asian.

As seen in the quote above, fitting in was an important aspect of participants' appearance maintenance behaviours and decisions. This was particularly significant when participants navigated spaces where the dual appearance pressures were salient. Sidrah (FG1) described how she neither fitted in with the mainstream appearance ideals in her school: "*I went to like mostly white middle-class school. So, it was really difficult, difficult, difficult like seeing that contrast and knowing physically I am different. I don't belong*", nor her South Asian community: "*even the standard that my own community has set, because I am slightly darker toned, or I have big nose or like from the side or anything*". In line with this, Sidrah (FG1) described her feelings of insecurity from a lack of belonging:

> I noticed that one of the bigger things was all my white female friends would get the attention, whereas I wouldn't and like not that male validation or anything is justifies my entire existence, but seeing that growing up really made me feel insecure. (Sidrah, FG1).

Participants also described "*feeling like an imposter*" (Jeevika, FG4), as they felt simultaneously British and South Asian, while also considering other cultural and religious aspects of their identities, such as family honour: "*You're always scared what it's (their appearance) gonna do to the reputation of your family, reputation of your family*" (Ihana, FG3). Therefore, the challenges faced by participants in navigating dual cultural pressures had an impact on participants' sense of self and body image.

3.2.3. Subtheme 2.3: "You can have both the cultures in your life. It's just how you choose to interpret it and embrace it" - journey of acceptance

Despite the challenges in navigating dual appearance pressures and expectations from different cultural groups, participants described their relationship with their bodies as a journey that started with conflict but eventually moved towards acceptance. This was described as a process of growth, rather than a function of age. Jeevika (FG4), who was 25 years old, described her journey of getting older: "*I've sort of like, tried to find that balance more*" and "*that kind of gives you the confidence as I've gotten older*". Mehvish (FG4)– a-20-year-old South Asian woman–also mentioned that she now embraced parts of her appearance that were different from others, as she said that she has reached a point where she is "*not afraid, to, you know, go out in (their) ethnic wear or to or to flaunt it*" despite never having done that when growing up. This suggests that South Asian women's journey toward acceptance could begin at a young age.

Further, some participants who described their appearance as being more western also mentioned that they were more willing to embody their South Asian appearance. For example, Jeevika (FG4) discussed how she had created a sense of connectedness to her South Asian heritage through her appearance, which helped in combating any internal conflicts before:

> I got my nose pierced when I was very young. And I always used to be, like, quite shy about it, because people just were like, oh, you've got piercing and they didn't understand the cultural side of it. Whereas now, like, I have a massive nose ring, and I don't care whether I'm at work or whatever, like, it's something that for me, although maybe looking at me it will really draw much attention. […] I've learned to kind of highlight things that I feel like, tie me with my culture more, even though the overall thing looks quite western.

Another participant (Salhaq, FG1), who was 48 years old, described that in addition to age, the role of being exposed to diverse cultures was a significant influence in her own journey of acceptance:

> I didn't like being Brown when I was younger, because I stood out a little bit in the school that I was at, and I like it, I wanted to be like the others. And I wanted to be like somebody with blonde hair, because see life seemed easier for them. It just life just seemed to be easier, doors opened a lot quicker and wider for them. That's what I wanted. And but when I went to university, and I lived at university, it was a whole another world because we're people from all over the world there. And I realised that they were proud of who they were. So I became, over the years I've become proud of being Brown. And I'm glad that I was I was I was born into this skin. I was glad that I was born into the family, the culture.

Further, the emergence of the South Asian British subculture in recent years was also important in making South Asian women feel more comfortable in the way they dress. To Mehvish (FG4) this has meant that there is an emerging recognition that there are more people who are like her:

> The conflict now doesn't feel as much, as big as it used to, I think, because I think South Asian British is now a subculture in itself. You know, and we've sort of made a name of, in terms of our clothing, in terms of the way we dress, and everything. And I think it's easier to sort of, it's easier to sort of accept yourself, because and accept the way you dress, accept the way you talk, the way you look. Because you, there are so many more like you, you know, and I think social media has fed into that and helped with that as well.

This quote suggests that the acceptance that came from mainstream society has also influenced participants' self-acceptance. All in all, participants described their journey towards embracing their identities and accepting their appearance based on internal (e.g., growth and personal experiences) and external factors (i.e., societal cultural acceptance).

3.3. Theme 3: representation of South Asian women in a wider context

This theme contextualises participants' relationships with their appearance and body within the wider societal context. Participants expressed their discontent on how cultural and capitalistic forces create and normalise 'globalised' ideals that centre whiteness whilst co-opting ideals from the Global Majority; thus, indicating the significance of pushing towards making space for different bodies and decolonising appearance ideals.

3.3.1. Subtheme 3.1: "… there is a lack of representation of people from different backgrounds…. or there's a very typical representation"- lack of representation

Participants discussed the lack of South Asian representation in mainstream media and felt that media continues to focus on "*slimmed and trimmed down versions [of South Asian women] who have reached the perfect ideal*" and "*there are no TV shows which have more people who look like us*" (Nilisha, FG5). This distorted representation of their cultural ideals and beauty standards in media has, thus, impacted the way that they have constructed their appearance-based identities throughout their lives. For Devika (FG2),

the media was a source that highlighted appearance-based discrepancies between herself and the normative: "*The media definitely does play a role in, in the impressions that, you know, of what's common, or, you know, what's represented.*"

The lack of media representation, including in children's media, also meant that participants were influenced from a young age. For example, Mumtaz (FG2) struggled to identify with cartoon characters in the mainstream media when she was younger, including characters that looked similar to her.

> So, like, you know, I grew up with like classic Disney like, Belle, Jasmine, Cinderella. And Jasmine was the one that like me and all my friends had always like held on to because she was the Brown one. Because like, I think for us, because it was like, if you want to be like a pretty Disney Princess, you have to be like, pale and like blond or Brown hair and like, like eyes and stuff like that.

As such, the limited representation, even in children's media, meant that she had no choice but to see herself through the lens of the *only* Brown character portrayed in mainstream media.

Additionally, participants also expressed their annoyance at the lack of realism in current portrayals of South Asian women in the media:

> And I think one thing that like, annoys me, and I think it has definitely impacted how I see that ideal South Asian woman is like, I've never seen a South Asian Indian actress in the UK with like, an Asian nose, like, you know, I mean, to me, that's such a defining feature that like South Asian women should be proud of, but you never actually see it. And so, you start to like, when you do see representation of what is your culture is actually not your culture, because it's like the perfected version of it. (Jeevika, FG4)

The above quote suggests that the limited portrayals of South Asian women in the media are not realistically representative of South Asian bodies and/or appearance, but rather, the perfected versions of them. This further perpetuates unrealistic and unattainable ideals amongst South Asian women.

Further, the extension of the politics of 'who' or 'what' is represented to the broader consumer landscape (i.e., beyond diversity in the media and social media) in terms of technology, computer and/or phone applications; all of which dictates the availability of the types of clothes, food, and cosmetics, amongst others. These reflect how larger contexts have continued to pervade the choices available to South Asian women, the appearance pressures that they navigate, and the ways that are available to navigate these pressures in their everyday lives. For example, Sharika (FG5) described how her usually positive body image is easily affected by the lack of choices in clothing sizes in mainstream shops: "*I can be so good with, like seeing my body differently, and treating my body healthier, and it just takes to go clothes shopping. and seeing one size outfits or seeing like, barely any larges, barely any extra larges.*"

This suggests that a lack of representation excludes people who do not consume mainstream choices. Further, cultural specificities were only important and brought to (the mainstream) light when it presented an opportunity to be capitalised; otherwise, the realistic narratives of Minoritised groups were almost invisible in everyday life.

3.3.2. Subtheme 3.2: "When we wear it we're mocked, and when the white community does it that is appreciated" - moving towards 'universalising' appearance ideals

South Asian women expressed their feelings of exasperation when observing the co-opting of ideals from Minoritised cultures. Salhaq (FG1) expressed that the "*universal sort of standard of beauty*" is in fact "*the western standard (that) is what is shown throughout and made universal*". In particular, Sidrah (FG1) discussed and unpacked the modern-day proprietary of Eurocentric appearance ideals in terms of its relations to Minoritised appearance ideals:

> I think our ideals initially, like they're being claimed as like the western standard now, like, I think I've even noticed now, about wearing your Asian clothes proudly, I feel like, and this has been the case so many times when we wear it we're mocked, and when we eat the food we eat, we're mocked. When, when the white when white, like the white community does it that it's appreciated (Sidrah, FG1).

She has further exemplified this:

> Have you seen the present trend of gold latte, that's literally just *haldi wala doodh* (turmeric and saffron infused milk- a traditional drink in South Asia) which has been in our cultures for centuries but it's more fancy as a drink when the west brands it as gold latte!

Similarly, Sharika, FG5 described the acceptability of the 'fox eye' trend when embodied by and/or viewed through the white, Eurocentric lens:

> I don't know if you guys have seen the whole fox eye trend now? Like East Asians have been bullied for years because of their 'fox eyes'. Well now it's like, trendy, so people literally get like sort of fillers here [pointing to the end of her left eyebrow] and here [pointing to the end of her right eyebrow]. And like or, they get their hairline surgically done like this - so their eyebrows are lifted and their ears, or their eyes are like this [pointing to a more lifted or elongated upper eyelid creating an almond eye shape].

These seem to suggest that what is acceptable and what is not in terms of appearance is dictated by wider socio-political and socio-cultural contexts.

3.4. Theme 4: forms of healing from the pressures imposed on South Asian women

This theme illustrates participants' perspectives on bringing about social change by challenging hegemonic standards of appearance ideals and pressures. South Asian women expressed how they resisted appearance pressures (e.g., actively pushing back appearance-based stereotypes) and challenged Eurocentric standards (e.g., rethinking existing structures and systems). The importance of solidarity was frequently highlighted by South Asian women; for example, support between those with shared experiences. In addition, having conversations with those who are not part of the South Asian community was deemed valuable and necessary for social change.

3.4.1. Subtheme 4.1: "I have to kind of reverse all the things that I was taught" - resistance against appearance ideals

Participants across the focus groups described how they actively and consciously resisted against white beauty ideals and challenged appearance-based pressures. Jeevika (FG4) referred to her unlearning of internalised appearance ideals as a way of reducing such pressures: "*It's only now that I started to realise you actually you can just wear and be the size, you know, you like want, you don't have to fit one or the other*".

South Asian women also mentioned taking steps to resist pressures to conform to white beauty ideals. Devika (FG2) said: "*Like I don't even do my eyebrows*" and she continued to report that engaging in a personal process of decolonisation has helped her heal from the pressures: "*…and technically, I probably should, but I just can't be bothered, it basically boils down to my laziness, if I could really be bothered with it, because I want to feel comfortable with it, then I do it, I feel comfortable, I feel comfortable with the way that I look*". Similarly, a participant expressed that: "*you know, actually those are unrealistic*

standards, we can change them, we can modify them" (Arshia, FG4). She continued to explain how being exposed to a different culture helped her challenge the unrealistic standards set for her: "*So, I do feel like moving here and being exposed to a different culture has actually helped me challenge those unrealistic standards.*"

Participants repeatedly noted reimagining the existing structures and systems to create alternatives to the white, Eurocentric appearance ideals. South Asian women described reconstructing the existing social structures (e.g., media, technology) to be more inclusive. For example, Devika (FG2) identified herself as a *'Londoner'* (indicating the multicultural and diverse nature of the city) and mentioned: "*that is what guides me in terms of the way that I look or what I do*". She described how being a Londoner influenced her actions and looks:

> I love putting like really bright lipstick on my eyes just because I thought I'd experiment because to see like whether, you know, you can like do two for one, sometimes you get something from, and I'd be like that's what a Londoner does. Because we didn't you can just experiment because we're allowed to experiment in London.

Participant Nitika (FG6) described herself as being *"a little rebellious"* because she felt responsible for having conversations and speaking up about body image issues with the older generations. She highlighted the importance of reflecting on how her family's comments regarding her appearance as *"chubby"* had affected her self-confidence. The participant emphasised making the commenters aware of the adverse impacts of their comments. In this way, she hoped to reduce the frequency of appearance-based comments.

Taken together, it seems that South Asian women across focus groups had found their own ways to resist pressures surrounding Eurocentric beauty ideals. This might then foster a sense of active resistance and resilience against appearance-related pressures.

3.4.2. Subtheme 4.2: "you're not alone struggling with it" - solidarity and sense of connection

South Asian women often reported the importance of establishing social connections. Participants described how the solidarity that was developed among women who share their stories and experience had supported them in dealing with appearance-based pressure. In particular, Dilakshana (FG7) explained:

> Having friends and people that you can talk to about this sort of stuff with, I think, and sort of creating more positive relationships with people and having those conversations and, yeah, I think like a lot is done on like, shows and things are starting to talk about these issues. And I think people are bringing them to light. And that's actually really helped me as well.

Another participant, Mehvish (FG4) reported that such conversations can be used as a tool to change the appearance-related stereotypes that are imposed on South Asian women:

> whatever standards are set onto us and are put onto us are too much and are too pressurising and I think being like having that and having gone through that means that for like, you know, we can break generational trauma. And over time, we can, have these conversations so that we are able to break this stereotype and break this cycle essentially…

Some participants also described feeling a sense of solidarity and reassurance when seeing other women of colour within their surrounding area, suggesting that broader shared identities and experiences were also a source of comfort, which provided an increased sense of connection. Similarly, Jeevika (FG4) explained:

> Even if you don't know that person, I always just feel very reassured when I see another like South Asian woman, like some of the friends that I have my closest friends I've met in situations like that, where we've been, like the only Asian woman or the only like, woman of colour, and that there's something about that community and shared experience that is really positive.

In particular, participants often emphasised the need for allyship outside of the South Asian community. Jeevika (FG4) noted that: "*I think creating conversations where if you feel empowered to do so [talk about body image issues ingrained in South Asian culture], like talking about it, like, both within the community, and outside of the community.*" Similarly, Devika (FG2) articulated the importance of having conversations those with outside of the community on the topic of body perception and body image:

> There needs to be a lot more white person education. Like you can't just be on Black people or Brown people to have to take on the labour because it is labour [it] is emotional labour, like, you know, in the start of this conversation you did talk about, like, if you feel uncomfortable if there's like traumas or whatever. And yeah, then there are uncomfortable feelings that come up, because a lot of stuff you end up thinking, you end up pushing aside.

This subtheme extended to the current project's focus groups as a place for the development of solidarity and for the participants' voices to be heard. They expressed that the focus group provided them with a space where they could voice their struggles, conflicts, and concerns. Ardra (FG7) described this as: "*it felt really nice for me, like listening to, like, similar stories. It makes you feel like you're not alone. And you're not alone struggling with it. So yeah, it feels nice.*" Similarly, Shirmin (FG1) described:

> I think it's been absolutely brilliant that I can be part of this and help to hopefully, bring some changes for the future. And I just want to say all of you, thank you for your support and making it such an open forum for us to be completely at one with you and be open about how we feel.

Positive peer influence might also have had a positive impact on South Asian women's affirmations about their appearance-related concerns. Participants emphasised the usefulness of these focus groups as spaces to discuss, express and digest their shared body image experiences and develop solidarity, rather than feeling isolated and ashamed of their own emotions. By contesting neoliberal developments in appearance ideals and sharing struggles of body image experiences, their participation in the focus groups became sites of feminist resistance and solidarity through a sense of community and connection.

4. Discussion

The current study aimed to explore sociocultural factors that influenced British South Asian women's body image using an intersectional framework. Overall, our findings align with the Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al., 1999) by illustrating that body image in South Asian women is influenced by peers, family, and media; while at the same time continuing to elucidate the nuanced experiences of South Asian women living in the UK. Further, our findings also shed light on the objectification of South Asian women within predominantly white contexts, in line with the pan-theoretical model of dehumanisation proposed by Moradi (2013). Findings from this study will help to inform the development and evaluation of body image interventions for South Asian women living in the UK. Theme One centres on appearance pressures from family and South Asian community peers, with findings indicating these were heightened for South Asian women surrounding marriage. Theme Two contextualises the role of the multidimensional identities and appearance concerns of South Asian women. Theme Three is concerned

with the influence of media and the lack of South Asian representation in the UK context. Theme Four elucidates the role of connection and solidarity with family and peers as ways to deal with body image and appearance pressures. Each of these themes will be discussed below in relation to existing theories and research.

Previous research suggests that marriage is a significant life goal for South Asian women (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011) and that South Asian women's bodies primarily exist as capital to secure an appropriate marriage; thus, needing to conform to the wants of a man (Sharda, 2020). Similarly, our findings suggest that the appearance pressures that South Asian women experienced were closely related to the notion of marriage (Theme One). In particular, there was an emphasis on achieving the 'perfect' body to prepare South Asian women for marriage; for instance, having fair skin was an important appearance ideal that increases marriage prospects, which was in line with previous findings (e.g., Jha & Adelman, 2009; Nagar, 2018). As the fair skin ideal is rooted in colonialism (Hussein, 2010), it is particularly important to consider the context within which our study was situated, as this ideal might be more salient given the history of British colonisation in South Asia (Chen et al., 2020). Additionally, our findings illustrate a continuity of appearance pressures experienced by South Asian women transitioning from being single to being married, despite the focus of these pressures being different. For example, having the perfect childbearing body was important to single women to enhance marriageability, whereas having a youthful appearance was important to married women to maintain their marriage. These findings highlight the subservient (gendered) role of South Asian women, where their bodies are objectified and valued based on their ability to maintain and attract heterosexual relationships, which might result in self-objectification for South Asian women to achieve these goals.

Consistent with existing literature focused on South Asian women (e.g., Goel et al., 2021) and the Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al., 1999), our participants also shared how much of the appearance pressures they experienced were from older members of their family. Situating this within the historical context of colonialism, South Asian women have been exposed to colonialist and sexist ideals that have evolved through generations of oppressions (Singh, 2021). For instance, previous findings suggest that body shame, including hair shame, may be a function of colonisation-based internalised racism (Mason, 2015). As such, given the history of colonisation and oppression of the South Asian community, it is possible that this could extend to our study, such that colonial appearance ideals internalised by the older generations, are being reproduced through cycles of following generations (Boveda, 2017). Nevertheless, our findings highlight the value of having open conversations with older generations as being vital moving forward. In particular, this might be useful when South Asian families choose to take different approaches with their children, as opposed to those that they have been subjected to (Sadika et al., 2020).

In Theme Two, we found that South Asian women viewed appearance as a tool that garners acceptance into their cultural groups (i.e., either their ethnic culture, the mainstream culture, and/or both; Bakhshi, 2011; Cheney, 2010), but also, simultaneously as a reason for being othered (i.e., a lack of belonging). Consistent with previous research (e.g., Reddy & Crowther, 2007), participants were often conflicted when navigating appearance expectations dictated by each of their cultural identities. For example, Eurocentric ideals might dictate thinness as the ideal body shape (Hurst et al., 2016), whereas the South Asian culture might favour a more curvaceous body shape for its 'childbearing' properties. This is in line with the dehumanisation model (Moradi, 2013), as participants were subjected not only to white appearance ideals but also influenced by South Asian appearance standards and their adherence to these ideals were constantly policed (e.g., through body surveillance behaviours) as a measure of acceptance into groups (Moradi, 2010).

Our findings also highlighted South Asian women's constant struggle to fit into at least one of their cultural groups, which suggests a trade-off, as fitting into one group might entail behaviours or appearance features that contradicted the norms of the other group. This might result in them feeling like an outsider in the presence of others who do not share their cultural identity within specific contexts (Choi-Misailidis, 2010). This lack of belonging could negatively impact body image (Sahi Iyer & Haslam, 2003), including feelings of body shame. However, from a different perspective, some of our participants who were aware of the fetishisation of South Asian women, also mentioned deliberately participating in self-objectification behaviours (i.e., engaging in exaggeration of stereotypical Asian features, such as Bambi eyes, long dark hair, colourful Asian clothing) that made them stand out and appealed to being fetishised for their appearance, which was then used as a strategy to fit in. Indeed, the fetishisation and exploitation of people from Minoritised backgrounds under the guise of admiration and/or infatuation is an emerging feature of the white heteropatriarchal society (Fellows et al., 2022; Stacey & Forbes, 2022) that maintains the objectification and dehumanisation of South Asian women.

Despite the conflicting pressures experienced by South Asian women and the aforementioned trade-off, we found that body image was experienced as a journey, supporting existing literature (e.g., Gattario & Frisén, 2019; Ramseyer Winter et al., 2019). The women in our sample referred to this 'journey' as a continual process of growth in terms of fostering acceptance and developing a more positive body image at the time of the focus group relative to a younger time in their lives, and this was regardless of age. It is worth emphasising that their journey towards acceptance is continual and continuous in nature, rather than an achievement of absolute positive (or negative) body image at the end (or start) of their journey. In addition, we also found that their journey towards acceptance was influenced by both personal factors (e.g., personal growth) and societal factors (e.g., societal acceptance), supporting suggestions made by Chan and Hurst (2022), whereby South Asian women's body image might be shaped by internal as well as external processes.

Referring to our findings from Theme Three, we found that South Asian women were situated within particular socio-political and socioeconomic contexts, where appearance ideals and practices are commodified through capitalism and consumerism (Das & Sharma, 2016), such as the inaccurate representations of Minoritised cultural ideals and appearance standards (or the lack thereof) in the media (Ahn et al., 2022; Liao et al., 2020;). Notably, there is a lack of South Asian representation in mainstream media, as even media focusing on people from Minoritised groups tended to centre and adopt whiteness as the normative (Banjo & Jennings, 2016). The limited presentations of South Asian women are also not realistically representative, but rather, reflect an objectified and perfected version of them that are constructed through the white lens (i.e., women embodying white, Eurocentric ideals while co-opting ideals from the Global Majority; see Osuri, 2008; Mehta & Pandharipande, 2011).

More importantly, what this meant is that South Asian women might construct their identities based on whitewashed versions of characters of colour that are portrayed in the media (Kennedy et al., 2017). The visibility of People of the Global Majority in the media is generally through the hegemony of whiteness (Castañeda, 2018) and can be problematic as young individuals construct their identities and sense of self based on such 'normalised' representations (Spettigue & Henderson, 2004), further perpetuating manifestations of oppression, where racialised appearances are objectified (i.e., South Asian-ness is devalued and whiteness is superior). For instance, this may result in women fitting in with such unrealistic representations by engaging in eating disorder symptoms (e.g., thin idealizations or body shape concerns), and such 'normalisation' could influence their decisions to seek care. This suggests that a lack of representation is inadvertently and inevitably exclusionary

(Cathcart et al., 2022), as it excludes people who are different from mainstream portrayals.

Further, global appearance ideals are constantly shifting, where combinations of the social structures (i.e., market forces, the media, technology, etc.) are complicit in representing 'globalised' ideals – ideals which centre 'whiteness', but in essence, are co-opted from Global Majority cultures, such as rounded bodies from the pre-colonial South Asian cultures (Kaur, 2022). Similarly, despite ideas of 'clean girl' existing in Black and Brown cultures for decades, such trends of clean girl aesthetic have only become popular after being co-opted by the white majority (Randall, 2022). As such, the co-opting of ideals from Minoritised cultures further propagates white supremacy and implies that acceptability is contingent upon the symbolic value of whiteness (Gram, 2007); that is, it is acceptable when it is embodied by white bodies.

Consistent with previous literature, each woman in the study engaged in resistance somewhat differently to deal with such pressures (Twamley & Davis, 1999). Our study offered a safe space for South Asian women to discuss their shared body image experiences and their understanding of appearance pressures (Theme Four), which seemed to be somewhat cathartic to some of them. Our participants also noted the necessity of having spaces to talk, which could potentially foster connections with others and create spaces for women's empowerment and growth (Miller & Stiver, 1991). Further, this also highlights the potential benefits of qualitative research as an avenue to foster resistance against societal pressures, as our participants experienced during their participation in the focus groups which transformed as sites of resistance. As suggested previously, fostering resistance may provide a means to at least minimise white-dominant pressure that South Asian women experience (Ando et al., 2021). However, it is worth noting that internalising appearance ideals and resistance do not form opposite ends of a single spectrum (Meadows & Higgs, 2022), as it is possible that individuals may still have ambivalent feelings regarding internalisation versus resistance.

4.1. Limitations and future directions

Despite the many strengths within our study, such as the 'consciousness raising' effects of focus group discussions and the collaborative, reflexive coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2019), there are a number of limitations. First, given participants' multiple and diverse social positionings, it is likely that some aspects of their social location such as religious or faith affiliation, age, and place of birth, have not been attended to in great detail in the current analysis. Second, focus groups were conducted online to avoid the spread of the COVID-19 infection during the winter and spring months of 2022. While this was viewed as the most ethical and pragmatic approach, and allowed for participants from different regions of the UK to be involved, it is plausible that conducting focus groups via video conferencing software may have reduced opportunities for fully reading body language cues as well as understanding participants' contexts (Howlett, 2022). Conducting the research online also biassed the sample to internet users (Pocock et al., 2021). Third, three of the focus groups were unexpectedly small (i.e., with only two participants) due to no-shows. General recommendations for focus group size are between 6 and 10 participants (Morgan, 1997), though this recommendation may not translate directly to an online context (Abrams & Gaiser, 2017; Poynter, 2010). Having just two participants may have limited opportunities for sharing heterogeneous experiences and viewpoints, and may have placed additional pressure on participants to speak. However, in each scenario, participants said they were happy to continue with the focus group despite the small group size.

It is also important to emphasise that qualitative research does not intend to be generalisable, rather it intends to understand the subjective experiences of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Fossey et al., 2002). Therefore, the study findings must be considered in light of (i) the study sample, (ii) how data was generated between the participants and members of research team, and (iii) how data was interpreted by the research team, in addition to the specific social contexts in which the study was conducted. First, the study sample consisted of all cisgender women, and most women (86%) identified as straight. Second, reflective of the demographics of South Asian people living in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2021[2]), the study sample included more women from India and Pakistan than other regions in South Asia (e.g., Sri Lanka, Nepal). Third, focus groups were held in English, and so required participants to be fluent in English.

For future research on this issue, it would also be interesting to consider inequalities in power dynamics (e.g., social class, urbanity, sexual orientation) to examine any other possible effects on South Asian women's body image. Additionally, it would be beneficial to explore the experiences of South Asian women who are not fluent in English, as their experiences within an English-speaking context might be different; thus, shaping their experiences of belonging and acceptance.

4.2. Implications

The current study has deepened our understanding of the ways in which South Asian women's intersecting gender, racialised and cultural identities shape their body image experiences. The findings also illuminate potential risk and protective factors for South Asian women's body image and have implications for body image interventions that include South Asian women as the target group. First, the significance of cultural identity, history, and political contexts should be recognised within the contexts of body image interventions among South Asian women in the future, as intergenerational transmission of appearance ideals seemed to be a common concept. Second, our findings point towards specific appearance features and pressures that are important to South Asian women. In line with the recent development of a culturally-sensitive body image measure for Black women – the Double Consciousness Body Image Scale (Wilfred & Lundgren, 2021) – findings of the present study highlight the value of having a specific measure focused upon body image among South Asian women that includes nose, skin shade, body and hair ideals, and related pressures. Third, it is important to recognise the power that consumerist industries hold in shaping the type and accuracy of representation of South Asian women in the media, as this impacts their body image. Improving the diverse and *'realistic'* cultural representation in media communication can shift public perceptions (O'Hara & Smith, 2007) and ease help-seeking behaviours for appearance and body image concerns in South Asian women. Future research that builds on this area should acknowledge the *external* interlocking systems and values of oppression within the socio-cultural-political environment (i.e., systems of white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy), and recognise that these are not problems to be resolved within the women themselves (Cheng et al., 2017; Cummins & Lehman, 2007).

4.3. Conclusion

Findings from the current study suggest that South Asian women living in the UK have unique body image concerns as shaped by their intersecting identities, when contextualised within the wider socio-political landscape. From within the South Asian community, they experienced appearance-related pressures from women and elders

[2] Asian/Asian British- Indian: just above 3%; Asian/Asian British- Pakistani: between 2% and 3%; Other Asian/ Asian British: less than 2%

based on marriageability. From the wider white British society, they experienced appearance-related pressures in terms of acceptance and belonging. These pressures occurred simultaneously, which often resulted in them having to negotiate and reconcile different aspects of their cultural identities. Our findings further suggest that the co-opting of appearance ideals while centring whiteness produced inaccurate representations of South Asian women in the media; thus, negatively affecting the way they see themselves. However, there were instances where South Asian women actively resisted against these appearance-related pressures and acted in solidarity for one another.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Both AM and FT equally contributed and led this project. Conceptualisation (AM, FT); Data curation (AM, FT); Formal analysis (AM, FT, NC, JC, RE, WT); Methodology (AM, FT, NC, JC, RE); Project administration (AM, FT); Resources (AM, FT, HH, JC, NC, WT); Supervision of student (AM, FT); Writing - original draft (AM, FT, JC, NC, RE, SC, WT, HH); Writing - review & editing (AM, FT, NC, JC, WT, RE, SC, HH); Revision (AM, FT, JC, NC).

Data Availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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