| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Breaking the Mould: Redefining Asian-American Beauty Standards in Selected Digital Short Stories

Catharina Brameswari
English Letters Department, Faculty of Letters, Universitas Sanata Dharma Yogyakarta
Corresponding Author: Catharina Brameswari, E-mail: catharinabrameswari@usd.ac.id

| **ABSTRACT**

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the discourse surrounding the Asian-Americans' struggle has gained more prominence. Notably, the Asian-American diasporas in the United States confront multifaceted challenges, including stereotypes, discrimination, racism, and prejudice towards their physical appearance, contributing to a complex identity negotiation. Despite these multifaceted challenges, the researcher will focus on one central issue: the intricate dynamics of beauty standards in a white-dominated space. Western beauty standards are constantly idolized, fostering feelings of insecurity among Asian-American women. Media platforms, including television, entertainment, and online social media, play important roles in shaping these beauty standards. Additionally, cultural factors also contribute to the fluctuations in the perception and self-acceptance of Asian-American women. Motivated by the situation described above, this research aims to investigate how Asian-American women navigate their cultural identities and challenge mainstream beauty standards. Using a qualitative approach, the researcher will collect the data from selected digital short stories taken from the dearasianyouth.org website. The selected works are authentic data penned by Asian-American young adult female writers who represent how the main characters define beauty standards. The Asian-American characters find themselves trapped in a predicament and a process of identity negotiation. Through a postcolonial lens, the researcher scrutinizes how Western cultural beauty standards influence how the Asian-American characters define themselves and illustrate the pains of facing "standard" images of beauty. The first result of this study dismantles the aspects that shape beauty standards within the Asian-American characters, such as cultural hegemony, socio-historical context, and media influences. The second result highlights the impact of beauty standards on the characters' lives, such as body image and self-esteem, social and cultural alienation, identity crisis, and cultural disconnection. Finally, the study scrutinizes the struggle of Asian-American characters in dealing with the impacts of cultural representation and their identity formation, manifesting resistance to Western standards, negotiation of dual identities, redefinition of beauty, and empowerment through cultural pride. Furthermore, future studies may explore how the main characters pinpoint the difference between Western beauty standards and Asian beauty standards and the effects on their lives.

1. Introduction

This study explores how Asian-American characters resist stereotypes, redefine and reshape the prevailing beauty standard, and offer alternative perspectives on identity. Although most literature works have not been extensively explored, this topic is particularly significant to address from a postcolonial standpoint. This issue is important to discuss because the intertwining between colonial discourse and Western cultures has profoundly shaped beauty standards within Asian-American diasporas. Importantly, there is a gap that exists in the academic discussion, namely, the absence of postcolonial analysis, particularly in digital literature works. In addition, researchers in Indonesia give little consideration to Asian-American characters' unique

identity, especially those found in digital literature works. Therefore, to provide an authentic depiction of the predicament faced by Asian-Americans, a study on digital literature works penned by Asian-American women living in the United States is required. This research aligns with the third Jesuit Universal Apostolic Preferences (UAP), dedicated to helping young people find their true identity. Though the study focuses on the young people's experience in the United States, it is essential to recognize similar challenges and issues faced by young people across the globe. As highlighted by Brameswari et al. (2023), young people today still encounter challenges, discrimination, and predicaments in finding their true selves. Since digital literature work portrays the authentic issues young adults face, this research plays an essential role in shaping the paradigm of our future generation and the future of our world. Furthermore, as part of Universitas Sanata Dharma, which embraces UAP values, the researcher is committed to accompanying the youths in facing the challenges in this modern world. Importantly, this research aims to empower young people to cultivate their sense of empowerment and agency to confidently to face the future confidently.

Grogan (2002) and Lee (2016) show that the idealised Western beauty image in the media platforms may result in increased body dissatisfaction in Asian-American women and girls. Therefore, many Asian-American women decided to conduct cosmetic surgery as a way to escape from stereotypes and racial prejudice (Lee, 2016; Kaw, 1993). The Asian-American female characters in the selected digital stories also expose similar issues. In a space where diverse racial representation is lacking, the main characters do not feel satisfied with their skin complexion, the size of their eyes, or their hair colour. Undeniably, the depiction of Western beauty standards in the mainstream media and entertainment industry has substantially impacted global beauty standards (Mok, 1998). The prevalence of white female models in social media and film has established a beauty standard that values fair skin and Eurocentric facial traits. As a result, this norm contributes not just to inferiority but also to stereotypes, further marginalizing Asian-American individuals.

Based on the issues mentioned above, this research will be conducted with the goals: 1) to examine the aspects that shape beauty standard within the Asian-American characters; 2) to investigate the impact of beauty standard on the Asian-American characters' life; and 3) to scrutinize the struggle of the Asian-American characters in dealing with the impacts on cultural representation and their identity formation.

Various debates and arguments have been offered to unveil the issues experienced by the Asian-American diasporas. Nonetheless, the researcher will employ a postcolonial approach since the marginalization of Asian-American traits and the exhilaration of Westernised beauty standards are the results of colonial legacies that are deeply ingrained. Particularly, this study draws on Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence. Hybridity refers to the mix of two different culture to develop a new one. On the other hand, mimicry is the act of imitating the dominant culture in order to get the approval from it. Moreover, ambivalence is the predicament towards the dominant culture. This concept highlights the issue of identity formation in relation to Western beauty standards from a postcolonial lens. Moreover, this approach may reveal how Western beauty standards signify women's oppression through the use of binary opposition. On the other hand, it will unveil the ambivalence felt by the main characters in the seven digital short stories, and how they confront the hegemony of Western beauty standards to embrace their identity. Significantly, Western beauty has been utilized as one of the weapons to maintain Western superiority and dominance over Eastern inferiority (Leela Gandhi,1998; Ashcroft et al., 2013). White Americans have to maintain the Western beauty concept by contrasting their complexion and facial traits with those of Asian-Americans. Consequently, the binary creates an in-between feeling depicted by the Asian-American writers in their works.

Indeed, female characters in the digital literary works often find themselves colonized by stereotypes, particularly when their physical appearance does not fit the dominant beauty standards. In this case, any characteristics that deviate from the Western beauty standards are classified as ugly, terrible, and unattractive. It is claimed that technology also encourages the "growth of skin bleaching globally, and cosmetic surgery designed to make the features of people of colour, and particularly women, look more white and European" (Lee, 2026; Phoenix, 2014). Consequently, the Asian-American female characters become the subject of repression since their traits depicted in the digital short stories do not fit the binary opposition. In line with Ashcroft et al. (2013), such binaries entail a hierarchy in which the Other is always dominant and the Self exists to confirm that dominance. Even though Western beauty standards influence perceptions of attractiveness among Asian-American characters, Asian beauty norms have also been resisted and reclaimed within the diaspora. Therefore, the postcolonial perspective will dismantle how individuals struggle against hegemonic standards and negotiate their identities by examining the complex intersection between Asian-American aesthetics and Western norms. Importantly, it may expose how the characters reclaim the Asian-American beauty standards and celebrate the diverse racial representation within the Asian-American community.

By analysing the works, the researcher will offer unique insight into how beauty ideals are transmitted, negotiated, and contested across generations. As a result, this research will fulfil a significant gap in the existing literature by examining the process of discovering authentic identity and deconstructing the Western ideals of beauty. The previous studies will also be the starting point for initiating the academic discussion and validating the findings. For young Indonesian readers, digital literature works will

help them learn the complexity of identity formation in a diverse and multicultural society. Additionally, the result of this research can be used by the young generations in Indonesia who are still struggling in their identity formation journey to combat stereotypes and empower themselves to share their stories. Lastly, the young generations may learn to embrace their cultural heritage and unique beauty, foster critical thinking, and promote solidarity beyond borders.

2. Literature Review

Mohácsi (2022) highlights the theme of identity and identity formation in the case of second-generation Korean-Americans in Chung's *Forgotten Country*. This research unveils how the main characters acknowledge their Korean heritage and embrace their identities. Another research by Chia (2023) explores how white beauty standards affect how Asian-American women compete in beauty pageants, how they feel about their cultural and racial identity, and how they show their Asian pride during the competition. This research reveals that Asian-American beauty contestants encounter challenges in meeting the standards set by the competition designed for white women, resulting in lower self-esteem when competing against the white contestants. Similarly, Cheng (2014) explores the issue related to the dominant white beauty standard among Asian-American women. In this research, Cheng finds that body image dissatisfaction affects Asian-American women's mental health. The last is Setyorini's (2016) study that examined the dichotomous contrast between the females of the West and the Others, which exclusively emphasizes the Western-imposed ideal of a beautiful figure.

Though the issue explored is related to Asian-American identity construction, the previous studies do not specifically problematize Western beauty standards through a postcolonial lens to unveil the impacts of the dominant beauty standard. The previous studies touched on the predicament Asian-American women faced concerning beauty standards. On the contrary, those studies did not interrogate how colonial discourses shape viewpoints of beauty through power dynamics, cultural hegemony, and resistance. Besides, none also show valuable contributions of digital literature works within the Asian-American diasporas that interact with and redefine beauty standards. Therefore, this study will make a valuable contribution to the literature field, especially in digital literature studies, by providing a postcolonial perspective on the binary between Asian beauty norms and Western beauty values. Furthermore, it is crucial to conduct thorough research into digital literature works that look into the intricate negotiation of beauty standards that the Asian-American young writers illustrated, as this can give new insights into the intersection of digital literature works and beauty standards.

3. Methodology

This research utilizes a qualitative method, which will use a close-reading method to depict the selected digital short stories. The researcher employed qualitative research to explore the experience of Asian-American diasporas in literary works. In collecting the data, the researcher used documentation to address beauty standards within the Asian-American context. Moreover, this study also investigates female characters' struggles in integrating their Asian identities with the conventional ideal of beauty standards. The primary sources of this research are "Comfortable in My Own Skin" by Yunseo Chung (2021), "Classic Ivory" by Như Lâm (2021), "Barbie, Why Don't I Look Like You?" by Danica Seto (2020), "It's the Little Thing" by Feileen Li (2020), "Psychodrama" by Suwon Kim (2021), "Not American Enough" by Tiffany Fang (2021), and "The Culture of My Hair" by Prerna Kulkarni (2021). All of them were taken from the Dear Asian Youth website. To support the primary data, the researcher collected the secondary data, which were taken from journal articles and related books.

This research was conducted in five stages to unveil the complexities of Asian-American female characters' predicaments in digital literature works. First, the researcher identified the issues and selected the digital literature works from dearasianyouth.org. Second, those digital short stories were read and examined while the researcher gathered some secondary data. Furthermore, the researcher formulated the problems and the goals of the study. Third, the researcher interpreted the data and explored the challenges faced by the Asian-American female characters by addressing a postcolonial perspective in the selected digital literature works. In the next step, the researcher highlighted the aspects that shaped the ideal beauty standard and illustrated their impacts on Asian-American characters. In addition, the related studies were employed to verify and evaluate the findings. Fifth, the researcher synthesized their insights, drew a comprehensive conclusion, provided a concise summary, and offered recommendations for future academic discussions.

4. Results and Discussion

The research result has three main parts. The first part explores the intricate factors that shape the construction of standards within the Asian-American characters. They focus on cultural hegemony, socio-historical context, and media influences that play important roles. The second section highlights the impact of beauty standards on the personal and social lives of the Asian-American characters. Those unveil how the standards influence their self-esteem, foster feelings of alienation, and create the predicament between their ethnic heritage and the desire to fit with the white societal norms. Finally, the last part discusses the ongoing struggles of the Asian-American characters to challenge the Western beauty standard and reconcile with their multi-layered identity, adding another layer of predicament to the issue.

4.1 Aspects that Shape Beauty Standards
Beauty standards are constructed through the intersection of several aspects, such as cultural hegemony, socio-historical context, and media influences. Each of the aspects shows the legitimation of the domination of Western ideals. In this section, the researcher analyses how these factors shaped the Western beauty standards experienced by the Asian-American characters in the selected digital short stories from Dear Asian Youth.

4.1.1 Cultural Hegemony
Western cultural dominance plays a significant role in shaping global beauty standards. A Western ideal of beauty, as portrayed in American media, is often depicted by "long hair, light skin, big eyes, a slender frame, and large breasts" (Yi, 2015). One striking example related to this research can be taken from the global popularity of the Barbie doll. As a symbol of women's beauty, Barbie represents Western culture, which is manifested in kids' toys (Anindya, 2013). Even though Barbie now has more than 170 variations, this toy still primarily represents one race—primarily white [as the symbol of beauty] (Seto, 2020). This quotation reflects the cultural hegemony of how the Western standard of physical beauty may construct women's ethnic identity (Yi, 2015). In the same tone, Gelles (2011) argues that beauty standards are shaped by culture, and the desire to improve one's appearance can be seen from the use of cosmetics that have existed for thousands of years. In the Asian context, porcelain-skinned women are seen as more beautiful compared to women with darker skin tone, who are devalued. This preference is further underpinned by Korean idols and Chinese actresses, who have indirectly promoted the popularity of skincare products for whitening purposes. Another example can be seen from the massive advertisement of cosmetic products that emphasizes fair complexion as the leading beauty indicator, thus normalizing colourism in non-Western societies.

4.1.2 Socio-Historical Context
The long and winding history of colonialism, along with the continuous stereotype of Asian communities in the United States, has shaped beauty standards in society. These standards can be traced back to European domination and imperialism during the colonial expansion in the 16th century. The binary opposition during this era drew a barrier and hierarchy between the colonizer and the colonized. Ashcroft et al. (2013) and Bhabha (1994) emphasize that the imperial mission has created a racial hierarchy, portraying the European colonizer as civilized and superior while enslaved Africans and other non-white European people as primitive and inferior. This racial hierarchy results in the feeling of ambivalence towards the dominant culture. This predicament is reflected by the main character in Chung's digital story, who feels insecure about her darker skin tone.

> At night whenever I was watching some Chinese soap opera or some Korean drama, I couldn't help but stare at the backs of my hands, thinking about the colour of my skin. Why can't I look like that? What is wrong with me?
> (Chung, 2021, lines 24-26)

From the excerpt above, the main character reveals her struggle with self-acceptance because she is influenced by the stereotype that is used by the dominant culture to define its dominance and maintain the binary (Bhabha, 1994). Moreover, in the selected digital short stories, the Asian-American characters also experience discrimination from their white American peers due to their physical appearances and features. Brameswari et al. (2022) also find that the Asian-American characters in the selected digital stories not only suffer from racial discrimination but are also subjected to racial slurs within educational institutions.

4.1.3 Media Influences
Western beauty standards are also manifested in social media and the entertainment industry, where Western features—such as fair skin, a pointed nose, double eyelids, and large eyes—are glorified (Chung, 2021; Li, 2020; Fang, 2021). The media portrayal of Asian-Americans in television and movies may affect public perception and create harmful stereotypes (Mok, 1998). It can be seen from the following quotation,

> Billboards and magazines featured many thin models, all with clear milky white skin, drawing a huge divide between South and Southeast Asian populations with generally darker complexions. I had an endless amount of aunts, cousins, and family friends who subscribed to it, constantly wanting to look like what they deemed perfection.
> (Chung, 2021, lines 15-19)

The main character in "Comfortable in My Own Skin" describes Western beauty standards as approving of girls who are "white, blonde, have big blue eyes, and with no monolids" (Chung, 2021, lines 39-40). Align with Kaw (1993), Asian-American women want to alter their facial features to escape from racial prejudice and stereotypes that are associated with negative traits, such as being passive and slow-witted. The lack of media representation in mainstream media and the lack of diverse and positive portrayals of Asian beauty and women of colour also contribute to the representation of superior Western features. Therefore, the media also plays a big role in shaping the standard image and stereotypes that define beauty (Mok, 1998; Snell & Tsai, 2017).

4.2 Impacts of Beauty Standards

The Western beauty standards have had many impacts on the lives of the main characters in the selected digital stories. The standards not only influence their self-esteem and foster feelings of alienation but also create the predicament between their ethnic heritage and their desire to fit into the white society. The preference for lighter skin tones, for instance, can be traced back to colonial times when whiteness was associated with power and superiority. Colourism and the lasting effects of colonialism have contributed to the prominence of Western beauty ideals in many cultures and societies. Light-skinned women often receive more privileges and benefits in the global beauty hierarchy. In contrast, women of colour may find themselves complicit in the very colourism that disadvantages them, even within their own families (Phoenix, 2014). Due to this standard and the pressure from society, the Eurocentric beauty standards that prevail in society have drowned the confidence of young Asian-Americans (Fang, 2021).

4.2.1 Low Self-Esteem

The experiences of growing up in a multicultural environment as Asian migrants in the United States may lead to feelings of ambivalence and the desire to fit in with the dominant culture. As a result, this can lead to the rejection of one's ethnic identity. In "Not American Enough," the main character reveals her feelings when her peers reject her because of her Asian traits. She highlights how Western beauty standards have created a burden, drained her self-confidence, and made her feel alienated. It can be seen in the following excerpt,

> Until we ourselves felt so isolated that we started to hate our faces, our country, and even our people. We hated ourselves for being different. But most of all, we hated that we could do nothing about the pain, fear and helplessness that we felt. (Fang, 2021, lines 54-57)

The main character, who is often rejected, experiences a sense of inadequacy as she struggles to fulfil these ideals. In addition, she is dissatisfied with her physical appearance and struggles with self-acceptance. Similarly, the Asian-American boys also express insecurities about their Asian physical features that are smaller and skinnier compared to the large, muscular bodies of white movie stars (Fang, 2021). Some also feel that "they can be prettier if they were not born Asian" (Li, 2020). As a result, many decided to "loathe, alter, and revise parts of their bodies that do not fit the body image produced by the dominant culture's racial ideology" (Kaw, 1993). Align with Kim's "Psychodrama" (2021), the symbolic act when the main character chooses to trade her "Asian identity" in the Psychodrama Marketplace with Western standards illustrates the character's internal struggle.

> N: My monolids in exchange for pretty and large Western eyes.
> T: My black eyes in exchange for blue eyes.
> I: My brown hair in exchange for blonde hair.
> (Kim, 2021, lines 86-88)

The quotation above shows how embracing and imitating the Western beauty standards often erodes one's ethnic identity. This condition shares the same tone, which Bhabha (1994) portrays as almost the same but not quite, revealing the longing for assimilation while at the same time also unveiling the superficiality of the Other. Similarly, Lâm (2021) highlights how Jackie, the main character, uses makeup to be like most white classmates and gain acceptance from the dominant culture. It is also narrated that she expresses her disappointment when she mistakenly took the wrong foundation shade, which makes her unable to conceal her mole, reflecting her beauty insecurity. Jackie also illustrates how her mom and aunt purposefully "buy makeup that is too light and does not fit their complexion" (Lâm, 2021, lines 40-41). It highlights societal pressure to fit into Western beauty standards.

4.2.2 Social and Cultural Alienation

Being caught between Asian and American cultures and negotiating a mix has put the main characters in the selected digital works in a constant predicament. Aligning with Said (1979), this binary opposition portrays the Asian migrants as traditional, backward, and inferior while depicting the White Americans as modern, progressive, and superior. Therefore, the Asian-American characters in the selected digital works are trapped in the predicament between rejecting the stereotypes or seeking acceptance in a white dominated society. In this context, the Asian-American teenagers often choose to embrace Western beauty standards, adopting the makeup style of their peers to conceal their Asian features and mimic the dominant standards.

> I snap my gaze back to the mirror, dark ebony eyes under hooded lids stare back at me, and I frown. It's a hard thing, to think that I'm pretty when all my life people have used my eyes, stretched and slanted and small, as an insult and a joke. (Li, 2020, Lines 87-89)

Li (2020) describes this experience as confusing, depressing, and emotionally painful for the main character. Throughout their life, they have to endure discrimination, mockery, and racial slurs directed at them. Moreover, the Asian-American characters not

only face systemic discrimination from the dominant White American society but also experience alienation from their ethnic community. This condition is in line with Bhabha's (1994) the third space as the main characters are in between the two cultures and that they are not fully accepted as Asian nor Americans. This double alienation, moreover, has shaped their views towards self-esteem and identity, leaving them in a painful state (Fang, 2021).

4.2.3 Identity Crisis and Cultural Disconnection

Brameswari et al. (2022) argue that Asian-American characters born and raised in the United States struggle with belonging and non-belonging, ambivalence, and predicament, as they live between the two cultures and identities. Furthermore, racial conflicts and discrimination that are experienced by the Asian-American characters can also make them hate their Asian identity and fall into an identity dilemma (Hang, 2020). Being rejected by the dominant culture and ethnic community leaves the Asian-American characters in the digital works with the feeling of disconnection and a loss of self-identity.

> The denigration of the female body as dirty, foul, and sinful causes women to deny their bodily core of self-respect, which then deprives them of the ability to reject the negative feelings projected onto their bodies confidently. As a result, many women come to hate their bodies and to punish them in many ways.
> (Tong & Botts, 2024, p. 278)

As Tong and Botts (2024) explain, the struggles depicted in the various digital literature works unveil the identity crisis experienced by many diasporic communities. Similarly, Quintairos-Soliño (2024) also highlights the struggle of the Asian-American diaspora who experience identity conflicts and cultural biases as they are caught between their culture and the dominant culture. The predicament also leads the main characters to feelings of cultural disconnection, as they find themselves caught between their ethnic heritage and the standardized, dominant white society. Media portrayal in television, social media, and magazines glorifies Western beauty standards, reinforcing the models' Western facial features and skin colour. This struggle is illustrated in "Not American Enough," where being struck between cultures has left them in isolation and made them question their identities.

> We as Asian Americans were introduced to American pop culture, American television, American food. We watched American shows, read American books, and listened to American music. In some ways, it was all we knew. In some ways, it is still all we know. The culture of our home country fades away with every year that we live in this new country, the country that we call our home; because for us, America has always been home.
> (Fang, 2021, lines 7-8)

The excerpt above highlights how cultural assimilation frequently leads to cultural disconnection, particularly as younger Asian-American generations face pressure to assimilate from both their peers and family expectations. Assimilation in this context is related to Bhabha's (1994) notion of mimicry, where the Asian-American characters imitate the dominant beauty standard to be accepted, yet they are still rejected despite their efforts. In support of this, Baek (2023) claims that cultural disconnection is a direct consequence of assimilation, highlighting the complex and often painful effects of this complexity.

4.3 The Struggle of the Asian-American Characters

The impact of Western beauty standards on the digital literature short stories has illuminated the struggles of the Asian-American characters to resist Western beauty ideals in the United States, negotiate dual identities, redefine beauty standards, and empower themselves through cultural pride.

4.3.1 Resist Western Beauty Standards

The struggles of the Asian-American characters are evident in their resistance to Western beauty standards. This resistance manifests in various ways, including embracing traditional beauty practices and celebrating their ethnic traits, or maintaining the negotiation between standards and keeping both. Frequently, the Asian-American characters are often caught between maintaining their Asian identity and surrendering to the pressure to embrace the dominant Western culture. As they negotiate between the desire to maintain a connection with their cultural roots while seeking acceptance in a society that values Western aesthetics, the main characters also experience the negotiation of identity formation. The struggle against Western beauty standards often leads to a redefinition of beauty within the Asian-American community. These digital short stories illustrate how the characters come to recognize and value the diversity of beauty within their own culture, challenging the universality of Western ideals and celebrating the uniqueness of their ethnic features.

> Reflecting upon this now with my shoulder-length hairstyle, I regret laughing at the derogatory jokes that people made about my hair, about my sexuality, and my identity. I wish I stood up for myself and prevented those comments from putting me down because now that I look back on it, I did look *really, really good* with short hair. Now that my hair is

longer, I don't have any intentions of cutting it again, but if I ever did cut it to a short length in the future, I know I wouldn't mind.
(Kulkarni, 2021, lines 49-54)

It can be seen from the main character's statement in "The Culture of my Hair" that she decided to accept the attributes of her identity as an Indian-American, such as her name, her stature, her skin colour, and her hair (Kulkarni, 2021). Ultimately, by rejecting imposed beauty norms, Asian-American characters can reclaim their identity and assert their self-worth, fostering a stronger connection to their heritage and a more positive self-image. The main character's resistance to follow the standards unveils the act of decolonizing beauty.

4.3.2 Redefine Beauty Standards
Redefining beauty standards is closely related to negotiating dual identities, where the Asian-American characters may navigate the predicament between the Asian culture and Western ideals. The selected digital stories also call for a critical question: whether the decision of some main characters to achieve the standard of beauty is their free choice or shaped by societal pressure. The evidence illustrates how hard it is to separate independent choice from societal pressure, especially when the White aesthetic values are glorified. As Chung (2021) in "Comfortable in My Own Skin" emphasizes that:

> You have control over how you perceive yourself, and you can choose to love your skin rather than hate it. This power is something that an outside influence, whether that be other people, societal standards, or the media, can never take away from you.
> Your skin is a part of your identity and you can view it in whatever way you want.
> (Chung, 2021, lines 71-74)

The excerpt above captures the process of reclaiming agency and redefining beauty standards not as White nor Asian aesthetic standards, but as uniquely Asian-American beauty values. Other main characters also challenge the dominant European standard by reconfirming that beauty is not universal but deeply rooted in our cultural identity. Chung's lines also in the same breath with Bhabha's (1994) hybridity that the new beauty standard values can emerge from the combination of Western and Asian beauty values, producing a mix between them.

4.3.3 Empower through Cultural Pride
The last struggle presented in the selected digital short stories is the characters' empowerment through cultural pride. After experiencing racial discrimination, cultural displacement, and predicament, the Asian-American characters eventually embrace their tradition, heritage, and values. Seto (2020) invites readers through the character in her digital short story to normalize diversity at a young age and as a continuous practice throughout their lives.

> Yet to genuinely embrace diversity and combat racism at an early age, representation targeting children is what's needed more than ever (Seto, 2020, lines 43-45).
> By making significantly more dolls that truthfully show what America looks like, it'd be much easier to understand broader concepts and answer questions that will eventually come (Seto, 2020, lines 48-50).

Similarly, Fang (2021)—at the end of her powerful short story—calls for young Asian-American readers to be proud of their Asian heritage and culture, and to respect their ancestors who paved the way for future generations. She also stresses that instead of rejecting the assimilation entirely, the Asian-American characters can embrace it while maintaining their Asian culture as a source of empowerment.

> And with the combinations of both our origins and our current home, we are Asian, but we are also American. And we must be loud and proud. In our hearts, even though we have been taunted and told out entire lives that we are or are not this and that, we know our core values and traditions. That will never change.
> (Fang, 2021, lines 164-167)

As it is also supported by Baek (2023) that "[cultural assimilation] should instead be understood as an adjustment that helps individuals flourish while maintaining strong links to their heritage and cultural roots." Notably, the selected digital stories depict how cultural pride for the Asian culture or the hybrid identity, which combines Asian and American ideals, can serve as a tool to resist and empower the Asian-American characters, enable them to negotiate dual identities, and connect both traditions.

5. Conclusion

This research highlights the influence of Western beauty standards on the lives and identities of Asian-American characters, unveiling the complex interplay between cultural hegemony, media representation, and historical legacies. The idealization of Eurocentric features has led to significant challenges for these characters, including body image dissatisfaction, social alienation, and identity crises. Despite these standards, the Asian-American characters also resist the dominance of Western standards and redefine what beauty means. Through this resistance, the Asian-American characters try to reclaim a sense of cultural pride and celebrate their unique cultural beauty and ethnic identity. Finally, this study illuminates the importance of diverse and positive representations of beauty in media and literature, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of beauty that honours the richness of cultural differences. The findings suggest that embracing and promoting diverse beauty standards can play a crucial role in supporting the identity formation and well-being of Asian-Americans, while also challenging the lingering effects of colonialism and cultural imperialism in the lives of the Asian-American diasporas.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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