''Thank God we are like this here'': A qualitative investigation of televisual media influence on women's body image in an ethnically diverse rural Nicaraguan population

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ABSTRACT

Abundant published literature evidences the harmful effects of appearance-idealized media imagery on women's body image in predominantly Western populations. Most countries in Latin America (LA) have received little empirical attention. The current study qualitatively explored Nicaraguan women's ideas about appearance, and the role of televisual media in shaping their body image. A total of 24 women of Creole and Mestizo ethnicities from small communities on the rural Caribbean coast of Nicaragua took part in 4 focus groups. A semi-inductive thematic analysis was used to interpret the women's transcribed conversations. Findings suggest that local cultural appearance ideals for women are relatively loosely defined and center on a curvy body shape and other aspects of appearance rather than a low body weight. Most women reported being satisfied with their 'God-given' bodies and showed little desire to modify them, although Mestizo women tended to diet more. Television (TV) was seen as both a positive and a negative influence on women's attitudes towards and behaviours around their appearance and their bodies. Our findings contribute to the scant literature on media influence on body image in under researched contexts and could provide evidence for alternative approaches to preventative work in ethnically diverse Latin American populations.

1. Introduction

Substantial literature already documents the harmful effects of internalisation of media's idealised body types on body image in Western populations (i.e., North America, Western Europe and Australia; see e.g., Paterna et al., 2021; Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019 for discussion). Increasingly, research carried out in Latin America (LA: defined as all countries in the Americas except North America and Canada, plus the Caribbean Islands) suggests similar negative impacts of media influence on body image, particularly in urban middle-class student populations in Mexico and Brazil (Andres et al., 2024). Even findings from limited research among rural and relatively lower socioeconomic groups within LA populations indicate similar effects. For example, our research in rural Caribbean coast Nicaragua found that watching more TV (includes both English-language and Spanish-language media content –predominantly from the U.S.A and LA respectively) predicted preferences for slimmer bodies (Boothroyd et al.,

2016; 2020; Thornborrow et al., 2018) and greater likelihood of dieting (Boothroyd et al., 2016). Additionally, across time, internalisation of media ideals predicted body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviours among young Nicaraguan women (Thornborrow et al., 2022).

While this literature does suggest similar impacts on body image from media influence in LA generally and Nicaragua more specifically, our understanding is far from complete. For example, in our prior studies we had hypothesised, based on limited prior research in similar contexts (i.e., Becker et al., 2002), that the 'traditional' Nicaraguan body ideal for women would be 'robust'. We had also hypothesised, based on sociocultural models (Tripartite influence model: Thompson et al., 1999, Dual pathway model: Stice, 2001), that watching more TV would be associated with a preference for slimmer bodies due to exposure to and internalisation of the 'thin ideal' body type that predominates Western mass media. Our hypotheses appeared to be supported in those studies where we employed photographic stimuli to assess body size preferences (Boothroyd et al., 2016, 2020; Jucker et al., 2017). However, in a later

study where we used 3d figure modelling software - which allowed participants to manipulate both body shape and size, women who watched little to no TV desired a body size that was overall just as slim as their compatriots who watched TV regularly (Thornborrow et al., 2022). Furthermore, although media internalisation predicted disordered eating behaviours via body dissatisfaction in this sample, these factors were affected by ethnicity as well as media access (i.e., women in villages with and without electricity).

In summary, findings from our quantitative studies left unanswered questions; a) What were the local cultural appearance standards for women and of different ethnicities, b) Was women's body image dependent on their physical appearance, and c) Did media actually play a role in shaping women's ideas about appearance and subsequently their body image? Therefore, the current study qualitatively explored these questions among women in the same rural Nicaraguan population, with the aim of identifying local cultural ideas around women's appearance and exploring the potential influence of televisual media on women's body image.

Multiple qualitative studies have sampled women both from minoritized ethnic groups in Western populations (Schooler, 2008; Viladrich et al., 2009; Webb et al., 2013) and in non-Western populations (Becker et al., 2002; Becker, 2004). These studies have yielded rich and nuanced data and contributed to our understanding of how sociocultural factors - including media influence, shape appearance ideals and ultimately women's body image in different cultural contexts. For example, a study that avoided using thinness as an index for investigating appearance ideals found that for African American women hair was the most valued appearance trait, followed by a toned physique, flat stomach, clear skin and a big butt (Capodilupo, 2015). Women in Ecuador and men in Nicaragua talked about women's attractiveness in terms of lower body shape (i.e., body shape below the waist) rather than body size (De Casanova, 2004; Thornborrow et al., 2018), and in Chile, participants described an ideal appearance with light eyes and an hourglass curviness (Cortez et al., 2016). In a recent systematic review of studies examining media influence on appearance ideals and body image in Latin American populations, only two qualitative studies from Brazil and one from Chile reported that their participants experienced appearance pressure from the media (Andres et al., 2024). However, as far as we are aware, the present study is the first qualitative research investigating Nicaraguan women's ideas about appearance, their body image and the potential role of media influence.

The population on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua is ethnically diverse; the predominant ethnic groups are (in alphabetical order); Creole and Garifuna people are predominantly of Black Caribbean / Black African descent; Mestizo people are mostly mixed Spanish European descent and indigenous (Mestizos in this region usually refer to themselves as *Españoles*), and Miskitu people are indigenous to Central America. We know there are often differences in Latina women's and Black women's ideas about appearance and their susceptibility to body image concerns (Anderson-Fye & Brewis 2017; Pearce-Dunbar & Bateman, 2020; Viladrich et al., 2009). Indeed, our own previous findings from Nicaragua suggest this to be the case, as discussed above. Therefore, in the current study we recruited women from Creole and Mestizo communities and analysed the data with a view to determining if there were any ethnic differences in ideas around women's appearance, body image and media influence.

1.1. Positionality statement

It is important to acknowledge and situate the presence of the authors in the research. All qualitative data were gathered in person by the lead author who was a qualified anthropologist and a doctoral candidate in psychology at the time of data collection and analysis. As a white, middle-aged, childless 'extranjera' (foreigner), whose native language differed from local languages, she was initially about as strange to local people as is possible to be. As an anthropologist, the lead author

understands the value of ethnographic approaches - particularly in previously unresearched contexts, and so spent extended periods of time living in the communities, often staying in local people's own homes, getting familiar with local ways of being and doing. This will have helped to some degree to reduce 'disruption' due to the researcher's 'outsider' status and presence, however, the researcher and their subjectivity will always be intertwined with the people and the research process (including resulting data and interpretation), particularly in qualitative, ethnographically contextualised research (Olmos Vega et al., 2023). Although indeed, all research is to some degree subjective, the lead author acknowledges, reflects upon, and values her subjectivity in and throughout the research.

At the time of data collection, the second author was an early-mid career academic and a mother of young children, while the third author was and is a senior male academic; both are White British and both have long term research experience in appearance ideals and body image. They had formulated the broad qualitative goals of the first author's Ph.D. while seeking research funding, through rounds of detailed discussions with a British anthropologist of mixed White-African heritage with extensive fieldwork experience and family through marriage in the target population. The first author revised these goals during her fieldwork in response to observations and emerging quantitative results as discussed above. The second author also spent a shorter period of time in the field later in the research period. Her observations alongside broader academic literature, also fed into how the first author was supported in interpretation of data.

2. Method and materials

2.1. Field site and participants

The research was carried out in small communities around the Pearl Lagoon Basin in the Southern Autonomous Region of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua in Central America. For more general information about the field site, see Thornborrow et al. (2022).

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling and snowballing. The only inclusion criterion for participation was self-identification as a woman. Throughout our research we did not exclude individuals younger than 16 as many men and women at this age are already parents and / or working full time, so it would be culturally insensitive to apply Eurocentric definitions of what age constitutes adult. We aimed to recruit women in three villages that varied by degree of media access (i.e., with and without regular supply of electricity) as we had done in the quantitative studies, however, no women in the village with low media access (i.e., without a regular electricity supply) volunteered to take part. During the period of data collection (2016–2017), very few people had smart phones or regular internet access, so television was the predominant medium by which local people accessed visual media content.

The sample size and number of focus groups was determined through consultation with an expert in qualitative methods, as in our previous qualitative work with men in the region (Thornborrow et al., 2018). A total of 24 women volunteered to participate in the study.

2.2. Procedure

Two focus groups were held in a large, predominantly Creole community (groups referred to hereafter as C1 and C2) and two in a large, predominantly Mestizo community (M1 and M2). All participants in C1 and C2 self-identified as Creole and all those in M1 and M2 as Mestizo or *Española* (Spanish). Six women attended each session and their ages ranged from 15 to 45 years. All women in each focus group knew each other to varying degrees (communities sampled had populations of c. 1000 – 2000 adults at the time of data collection).

To avoid making whitened assumptions about what women from different ethnic groups might think or experience, we used a semi-

structured design: The focus groups were guided by a set of 'starter' questions (see Table 1) which were intended to tap into the areas of research interest (i.e., cultural appearance ideals, body image, TV influence) but left enough scope so that local women could talk about what was relevant for them, allowing the conversations to be predominantly participant-directed. After each 'starter' question, conversation was left to flow in any direction until the discussion naturally subsided, at which point the researcher would pose another of the starter questions.

All focus group sessions were led by the lead author. Sessions C1 and C2 were conducted in English Creole. The researcher was sufficiently proficient in the language to be able to understand and be understood by the English Creole speaking participants. Sessions M1 and M2 were conducted in Spanish, where a bilingual local woman fluent in both Spanish and English Creole was available to assist the Spanish-speaking researcher where necessary (i.e., where local Spanish terms were unfamiliar). A short introduction was given to participants at the beginning of each session explaining that we were researchers from the UK interested in finding out about Nicaraguan women's opinions on appearance, the body and television. The women were informed that they were free to leave at any point during the session and were not obligated to answer any questions. They consented to take part verbally. The self-identified women participants provided only their age and ethnic identity.

All sessions were video recorded with the verbal consent of all participants. The camera was placed at some distance behind the group so as not to be distracting to the participants and not focus on their faces. Using video recording aided transcription and captured additional non-verbal information such as hand gestures and nods. Each session ran for about an hour. Participants were reimbursed 50 Cordobas (approximately $1.50 US) for their time and provided with light refreshments during the focus groups.

The research was given full ethical approval by The Faculty of Medical Sciences Ethics Committee, Newcastle University (Application No: 00756/2014).

2.3. Data analysis

The qualitative data were interpreted using a semi-inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; a process now termed reflexive thematic analysis as per Braun & Clarke, 2022, 2023) as we had broad research questions to explore but wanted to leave space for participant-directed discussion about their lived experiences as they developed in the discussions. Drawing on her experience as an anthropologist and knowledge of social psychology, the lead author took a critical realist epistemological stance, foregrounding women's own lived experiences while aiming to gain an understanding of the sociocultural factors, including televisual influence, that shape local beliefs about women's appearance and women's own body image. Women's statements were treated as reflecting their own lived experiences; when the women discussed their perceptions of others, we treat those views as reflecting how the women viewed them in relation to themselves, and

not necessarily reflective of the lived experiences and perceptions of those others.

All the video recordings were transcribed verbatim and then translated from Spanish to English where necessary by the lead author manually (i.e., not using AI software). In addition to conducting the focus groups, this manual process of transcription enabled her to gain a deep familiarity with the data. On the few occasions that there was any ambiguity about what participants were saying or communicating, the lead author sought clarification, either from the participant where possible, or from a bilingual Creole woman who was a local informant. In the transcripts each participant was given a unique code consisting of their ethnicity, the session number and a random letter (e.g., C1A). The transcribed data were then organized and coded using NVivo 11 software. Context was maintained by coding sentences or small paragraphs of the dialogue into categories. If a piece of dialogue related to more than one category it was placed in both. As stated by Braun and Clarke (2006), data extracts can be coded into more than once, as necessary, to fully describe and thus interpret the data. When new topics arose, new categories or sub-categories were created. These categories were then interpreted into themes. Coding and organizing of the data were discussed with a co-author to reach consensus regarding the study's main themes. Finally, in the early stages of drafting the manuscript, we invited two participants to review it to assess if they could see themselves in our interpretation of the themeing and if they wanted to give any feedback. The 5 main themes interpreted were: Theme 1 - individual and cultural ideas about women's appearance; Theme 2 - women's appearance satisfaction; Theme 3 – Ddieting and appearance related behaviours; Theme 4 – local cultural influences on women's appearance and body image; Theme 5 – influence of televisual media.

See supplementary materials for a table showing the categories and subcategories initially created in NVivo.

3. Description of women's responses within main themes and subthemes

In the quotations, words or phrases in curved parentheses represent translations for Creole or Spanish words that have been retained in the quotes, those in square parentheses contain extra information (e.g., body language, context to increase clarity, etc.).

3.1. Theme 1: individual and cultural ideas about women's appearance

The first theme encompasses women's ideas about and attitudes towards their own appearance, their opinions relating to the appearance standards for women in their communities, and among community men in particular. The distinction between these elements has been reflected in three subthemes which are described here.

3.1.1. Subtheme 1:1 women's ideas around their own appearance
Most women began by talking about the importance of their hair and clothes to their appearance and how they felt about themselves. In C1, one young participant commented that she liked to wear her hair in a curly ponytail because that was how she felt most comfortable. A participant in M1 also discussed first the importance of how her hair looked, however the emphasis was on how she might appear to others rather than how she felt about her hair herself: '*When I leave the house I have to do my hair right, check everything and see if the hairstyle suits me well or not because if it looks bad I'd rather not leave*'. M1M.

Clothing was frequently discussed and was clearly an important aspect of the women's appearance. Some women wore clothing that allowed them to feel comfortable and thus 'as themselves'; '[what] *I consider important is the way I dress, I always like to dress feeling comfortable and to myself (to suit me) …just feel comfortable.*' C2V; while others were more focused on how clothing made their body look; '*I like clothes tight … I don't know … show my shape or something, I don't like slack (loose) clothes*'. C1Z.

Table 1
'Starter' questions used to begin discussions across all groups.

Women's appearance	Can you talk about the aspects of your appearance or body that are important for you?
	Can you talk about what is considered the perfect female body in your culture?
	What kind of woman is a man attracted to?
Women's body image	Are you always happy with your appearance or body?
	Have you ever done something to change your appearance, if so can you tell me about it?
TV influence	When did you start watching TV?
	What do you like to watch on TV?
	Does TV reflect reality?
	What kind of women do you see on TV?
	What is the use of TV?

Clothing had the potential to change women's feelings about or experience of their body size. In C2, two women agreed that they did not like wearing 'slack' clothes not because of how they made their bodies look to others, but because of how it made them feel inside their own body. One woman was very large, and the other one was very slim, but both experienced similar feelings when they wore loose fitting clothing:

C2D – 'I like to dress in clothes that are very tight, I don't like clothes that fit me slack'

Researcher – 'and why do you like tight clothes and not slack clothes?'

C2D – 'because I don't feel comfortable in slack clothes'

Researcher – 'but what do you feel when you're in slack clothes, what do they make you feel like?'

C2D – 'like I'm too big…I'm too big'

C2T – [nodding and agreeing] 'I use tight clothes because if I use like big clothes I just… it just make me feel like fat…I don't like that feeling'

Conversely, in M1, a woman in her forties commented that she did not like to wear tight clothing, not because it made her feel uncomfortable in her own self, but because it would make her feel 'socially' uncomfortable by not reflecting her social identity:

'I feel good like this, dressing in long and loose clothing … I don't like tight fitted clothing, because I have to show what I am… I don't like to pretend or dress like someone else does… each person and her opinion'. M1J.

3.1.2. Subtheme 1:2 local cultural ideas about women's appearance

When asked to describe the 'ideal' or 'perfect' appearance for women in their culture, Creole women in C1 and C2 did not mention body weight specifically but used the terms 'thick' and 'solid'. In general, Creole women focused more on the shape of the body when discussing their opinions of local cultural appearance ideals for women. As the women explained:

C2S - 'Like here we would say a coca-cola shape, and spaghetti shape … spaghetti waist (very slim waist)'

C2V – [nodding and agreeing] 'What we call switchy (slim-waisted)'

C2S- 'Coca-cola shape because your waist are small and the hips wide'

Mestizo women however, tended to refer to body weight first in their descriptions of the ideal female body; '[a body] *which is not very fat… but a normal body, slim like that'*. M2A. Shape was also clearly important to their ideas about how women's bodies should look, although the buttocks were mentioned less than in the Creole community sessions. Breasts featured in Mestizo women's discussions frequently and some also mentioned the need to have a toned, gym-worked body; *'Slim waist, flat stomach, hips, nice breasts, toned arms and shoulders that's the ideal woman'*. M1J; *'Alsadita (tall-ish) … has muscles, toned'*. M1R; *'that's how a good body looks'*. M1J.

Ethnic diversity in local women's appearance was acknowledged by the participants themselves. Several Mestizo women in M1 described - in somewhat derogatory if not racist terms - how '*los morenos*' (*Moreno* is a widely used Latin American term for people of afro-descent: here, the term was used by Mestizo women to refer to local Creole and Garifuna people) have a distinctly different physical appearance from themselves, including their facial features and body shape:

M1R – 'Morenas, some have nothing up front but have hips … they look more or less ok from here downwards …but from here upwards [indicates the chest] they don't have anything'

Researcher – 'So you think there are differences in the body shape of morenas and Mestizo women?'

M1R - 'Exactly, for example most morenas have a good body … they have breasts and hips and a slim body the only thing is their faces are not very pretty, but sometimes they do have'

M1J – 'Even if they are very black in their colour, their bodies are nearly always elegant'

M1R – 'I don't know why the moreno race have a big boonkah (butt) in women and men … sometimes the men have more than the women … sometimes it happens that when a Black man is walking he looks like a woman from behind … but most morenas have a good body, even if the face is strange the body is good'.

Most women in the Creole groups and several in the Mestizo groups made references to famous singers and media celebrities including Beyonce, Rihanna, Kim Kardashian, Nikki Minaj and Jennifer Lopez to illustrate the kind of body they thought was attractive; *'Well, she* [Jennifer Lopez] *has quite a curvy body, nice buttocks, she is not skinny, she has a beautiful body'.* M2G. *'Becky G* [Latin American singer] *I like see she (I like how she looks) in her shape… She not exaggerating because she no put silicone, just her natural beauty and I love it.'* C1H.

3.1.3. Subtheme 1:3 what women think men like

In C1, the young women described the type of girls the men in their community were attracted to: *'some like tit girls (girls with large breasts) because they're strong!'* Several girls agreed that guys prefer heavier girls *'girl with skin, not bony'*, because *'when him want touch, him want feel'*. Another girl suggested that guys like the *'big body girl'* because they look older and that slim girls like herself look too young and immature. In C2, several women commented that men don't like women to have *'too much breast'* or be *'too heavy'*. Most women believed that the butt was key in men's judgments of female attractiveness - although they couldn't explain why:

'Well really I don't know neither why the men them like women with big butts but that's really what the men them here like. When the woman, the girls them, that have big butt have on like a tight jeans or something men are just wow, look at that ass going there!' C2V.

However, the women went on to state that in reality men in their community will go with a woman of any size or shape: they recounted how men they knew had left an attractive partner to go with another women who was not as attractive in their opinion, or had left a slim woman for an overweight woman or vice versa.

'You really cannot say specifically here in [community name] what really attract man, if it's the appearance, if it's the way my body looks, if it's the way my face looks, if it's the way I go about myself (how I behave), if I am a professional or not, you cannot see that. They are just how they are' C2V.

Women in M1 similarly acknowledged that men in their community were attracted to a woman's body but were somewhat perplexed by the inconsistencies in men's behaviour towards women's physical appearance; *'The body of women attracts men - tall, buxom, so that's how I see men … sometimes they too look at the character but they also look at the body, they like the body more'.* M1S. *'I've heard it sometimes, women say my husband does not like me because I have too much breasts or does not like me because I've got big hips'.* M1R. In M2 some participants spoke in a despairing tone about men's attitudes towards women, while others appeared to be more accepting of the perceived macho attitude of the men in their community. As in the other focus groups, there was some ambiguity around whether a woman's looks were important to men or not. While some women agreed that men were attracted to a 'beautiful body', most believed that for men, an attractive woman was someone who was well presented, dressed in the culturally acceptable way, rather than having a particular body type. One woman commented that while men might like to see a woman with an attractive body, if it is *'just for a fuck'*, then they will go with any woman if she is *'respectable'* regardless

of her body, adding *'that is how the majority of men are'*.

3.2. Theme 2 - women's appearance satisfaction

This theme reflects that overall, across the groups most women appeared quite satisfied with their appearance and their bodies.

Creole women seemed to have a sense of self-confidence in their appearance which was generated by how they felt about themselves as persons, which then determined how they related to their bodies; *'What's most important to me as I said before is the way how I feel about myself and feeling comfortable about my own self, how I am, that's* [what] *I feel* [is] *important about my appearance'*. C2V. The Mestizo women tended to discuss their appearance satisfaction through the lens of body size or shape to a greater extent than the Creole women; *'I feel good as I am, I am slim and I feel super good … I don't want to get skinnier or put on weight'*. M2G.

Several women in the Mestizo groups commented that although their body was not perfect they were happy or satisfied with it; *'…I was a little bit slimmer - now I'm a mother, I have a baby - and even though my body has grown a bit I feel satisfied with it'*. M1R.

> *'I feel good with my body, maybe it's not the most beautiful but I feel ok with it… the only thing perhaps that I would like to have had differently is to be a bit taller, and I would like my hair to be curly … these are the two [things] that perhaps sometimes I would like, but my body is good'*. M1S.

While most women were happy with their body, one or two participants expressed some desire to change their body size or shape. As one young lady in C1 stated; *'Well the onliest (only) thing what I no like is my shape. I want to get skinnier and have a nice body, but well this is just my nature'*. C1H. Another girl in the same group believed she was rather too slim and wanted to gain weight, to *'get a lickle more solid (to get a slightly fuller body)'*. However, she still valued her body shape as attractive, quickly adding *'… I slim yeh, but I no straight neither* [my body has shape]*!'*

There was also evidence that women's attitudes towards and feelings about their appearance could fluctuate daily, particularly for younger women in C1 as this conversation illustrates:

> C1S - *'In the morning when I wake up, well sometimes, I doesn't like to see myself and sometimes I will say ooh I look good!'*

> C1M - *'Just like sometimes I look in the glass (mirror) and I would say ah, this dry (afro) hair! Or something like that, or oh god, I'm getting fat!'*

> C1H - *'Some mornings I would get up and look in the mirror and I would say, I getting meagre (thin)! And the next morning, 'what I eat last night? Why I look so bloat (bloated) today?!''*

> C1Z - *'What I hate is when I get up and I find big pimples on my face, oh my god I just feel for dead (feel like dying)!'*

Some women were keen to tell about their community attitudes towards appearance, often speaking on behalf of all members as if they were all of the same mind:

> *'Here in [community name] I think everybody is like good with themselves … in other place[s] you have people always … they're not satisfied with something on the body, they want to make surgery on their nose, they want to make surgery on the somewhere of them, put big boobs or something, never satisfied with what they have. But here the womans (women) in our community they are much satisfied and comfortable with the way they are, the way they look. Some of us are skinny, some of us are not …' C2V.*

3.3. Theme 3 - dieting and appearance-related behaviours

This theme focuses on women's attitudes towards and behaviours around dieting and other appearance-related behaviours such exercising

or going to the gym.

While one young participant in C1 admitted to previously dieting because she was concerned with how her body looked, the others in the group insisted that they didn't diet, saying that dieting is for *'the old people'*. They saw no need to diet because they stayed slim by being active and thus *'keep sweating plenty'* which they understood as the way the body loses weight. However, when the younger participants talked about special occasions such as weddings, or going to the beach at Easter, they admitted that it was vital to look good in their outfit or swimsuit and would diet if needed for those occasions. Women in C2 however, didn't consider dieting as something they would engage in unless the doctor had told them to do so for health reasons; *'I wouldn't eat or go on strict diet I wouldn't feel good to myself, just to do things to please my friend or what someone say about me … but not pleasing my own self.'* C2V.

Most women in the Mestizo groups seemed very familiar with dieting and other techniques to keep their bodies in a certain way. Dieting methods mostly were based on eating less or simply skipping meals; *'My diet is simply not eating an evening meal'*. M1Z; *'I don't eat until midday - I don't eat anything for breakfast - at lunchtime I eat my meal and in the evening I don't eat anything, I don't eat much I eat little'*. M1J; *'I want to lose some weight, to do a diet to lose a little more because I get tired when I walk… I would like to lose weight in general to be slimmer.'* M2E; *'I have two mealtimes and nothing more… I have breakfast with bread and a cup of coffee at 8am… 11 am I have lunch …and at 2–3 pm I fast. If I ate three times I'd be fatter.'* M2D.

In general, women did not report changing the type of food they ate when dieting, although one participant who had lived for some time in the capital Managua suggested: *'for breakfast a glass of milk, a little something for lunch, and dinner a glass of oats without sugar. Your belly doesn't hang'*. The same woman also observed that in Managua it was already very popular to go to the gym and went on to describe the benefits of working out regularly:

> *'[when I lived in Managua] I would go to the gym but when you go your body hurts a lot and then you don't look wobbly, the body becomes muscular, and you have different legs so there are things that change and that's a bit like a diet '. M1R.*

Several other women in the Mestizo groups also knew about the dieting and exercising behaviours of women in Managua, because *'people don't want to see themselves fat in the city'*.

3.4. Theme 4 – local cultural influences on women's appearance and body image

This theme incorporated local influences (other than televisual media) that women identified during the focus group discussions. These have been interpreted into two subthemes as they reflect quite distinct sources. The first subtheme relates to influence of other people in the immediate social environment, while the second subtheme relates to the influence of a belief in God or the importance of religiosity.

3.4.1. Subtheme 4:1 Social comparison and the influence of others

While mothers were occasionally mentioned as role models and sources of information about appearance, many participants insisted that they did not compare themselves to other women, or pay any attention to what others thought about their appearance:

> *'I like the way I be (I am), how I shape, everything, I no matter what the people say you know, I just love the way I is, the way I am, I no matter (don't care) what people say about me, that's how I is'. C2K.*

> *'Because the truth to me what matters is the way how I feel, do things what make I feel like [says her name], not make I feel like someone else just to please what people say, what people think about me. I do things to please myself and to make myself happy and when I am happy I know I will live ooh! long, long, long!' C2V.*

However, one young woman in C1 compared herself to her peers when she explained why she wanted to lose weight; *'…when I see them* [indicates towards the other participants] *all of them are skinny and I would want to be like that but I can't* [slaps her thigh in a resigned way]. *I'm just big!'* C1H.

In the Mestizo focus groups, women frequently referred to the opinions of others when they spoke about their appearance while at the same time insisting that they didn't care about those opinions. Their comments however, implicitly suggested that they took them into account:

'There are times that I don't care if people think I look ugly or fat or however they see me. But if I feel good in myself that is all. Although I don't pay it any attention, I don't like to hear the whispers'. M1R.

One older woman described how her age necessitated changing her attitude towards her appearance: being perceived by others as an attractive woman was no longer socially appropriate:

'When I was young … I didn't dress like this [in loose clothes] because a young person has to maintain their appearance … mostly to look sexy to the men. For this you need to dress up … so that the men will see you as acceptable and the people say that you look good … but now with my age it's not fitting that I'll go about with tight clothes, sleeves to here, showing everything here, I would be embarrassed to show my body … I feel that now it's not the same as when I was young … my skin is wrinkled more than anything … the skin is sagging, it's not tight anymore and so I would be embarrassed to dress in that way … I don't have to give that example, now I have to be another example because now they don't see me as beautiful'. M1J.

3.4.2. Subtheme 4:2 the influence of religion and God

Across all the groups most of the women expressed a belief in the sanctity of the body that God had given them. Although women sometimes spoke about changing their bodies in non-permanent ways, such as dieting, changing their hairstyle, wearing make-up or shape-enhancing clothes, none of them endorsed any kind of cosmetic surgery, even though they acknowledged that many women in other places do:

'If God made me like this, this is how I am …if I had a huge backside with a chest out to here I would want to leave me like that because that's how I am … even if I had lots of money to fix up my body I wouldn't do it because like this is how God made me … I say thanks to God that I'm alive'. M1J.

'Maybe they [have plastic surgery] more for next (other) people to look on them … they are worried about what I would say about them, but we are not, we are thankful to God that he send us this way'. C2V.

'…a woman passes in front of me who has twice the buttocks that I have and I say ah I wish I was like her, am I going to have surgery … but if I have in my mind that God created me and he wanted me like this with my little breasts, he wanted me skinny, wanted me with little buttocks … I'm going to obey because God loves me, like this he made me …I don't need to love myself more than God does, because that is like I want to do more than God … If God left me like this I have to be like this … thank God in this place where we live religion is very influential'. M1R.

Women in M1 and M2 emphasized the importance of wearing certain types of clothing to church. Clothing that revealed the body too much was considered inappropriate for entering God's house and would result in other people in the community regarding a woman as '*vaga*' ('inhabits the street' rather than stays at home) and therefore not respectable. For these Mestizo women, dressing modestly and simply for church and for God was essential. Creole women in C1 and C2 also understood church to be a place where women needed to consider their appearance however the emphasis was rather more on 'dressing up', wearing your best clothes for these occasions, rather than dressing modestly.

3.5. Theme 5 – influence of televisual media

While all the participants in C1 and C2 reported having access to television their whole lives, the same was not the case for women in the Mestizo focus groups: some women had been watching TV for as little as 5 years. Across all groups, the majority of women reported watching some TV every day, although several women watched it much less frequently. In the Mestizo community, not all the participants had satellite television. In all focus groups, *novelas* (Latin American soap operas) were the preferred viewing content, particularly those from Colombia, Mexico and the *Telemundo* TV channel. In the Creole focus groups, favourite content mentioned included variety shows like '*Sabado Gigante',* cartoons, Beauty pageant reality show '*Nuestra Belleza Latina*', music channels, African films and Hollywood films. They also reported watching the Discovery Channel, news, crime shows and documentaries. A few of the younger women also liked to watch religious programmes with preaching, others thought those kinds of shows were awful. In the Mestizo groups women predominantly reported watching *novelas*, but also mentioned news, pseudo-reality courtroom show '*Caso Cerrado*', cartoons and Mexican Western cowboy films. When asked, a few women said they sometimes watched music channels and health programmes.

Theme 5 includes two subthemes that are closely related but nevertheless we interpret as being distinct. The first subtheme captures women's observations and opinions about how women's appearance is represented in the television content that they view and how it influences their own and other women's ideas about appearance. The second subtheme reflects how viewing people-centred tv content that is understood to represent reality (e.g., *novelas*) influences women's behaviour and by implication potentially their aspirations around appearance (i.e., independent, strong lead female characters also look good).

3.5.1. Subtheme 5:1 TV influence on women's ideas about appearance

Some participants stated that the women shown on TV *'always got good bodies, never anyone with a bad body'*, and people with *'fat'* bodies were hardly shown. Participants commented that attractive women could be seen in news programmes, reality TV shows, beauty pageants, and most of all in *novelas*. Most women agreed that the range of female body types shown in *novelas* was rather limited. Most female characters were 'skinny *modelos* (models)' or played by actresses with a *'pretty body'*. They commented that it was rare to see an overweight woman in a *novela*, especially in a leading role; *"The star girl (lead actress) it doesn't see that she's like someone who is fat, always you see someone who is skinny she look good, attractive with blue eyes'.* C2V; *'In the novelas, they are tall, slim, with boonkah (butt), nice faces, yes everything is good, I see that everything looks good'.* C1S.

Across all groups, women frequently referred to actresses in novelas when describing their appearance 'ideals'; *'You know who [I like]? Sofia, in Hasta El Fin Del Mundo, she have a nasty (good) body'.* C1M; *'…Like the one in the novela Woman of Steel, tall, good body, and her hair'.* M1R.

Television was perceived as having both a positive and a negative influence on women's appearance. Younger women in particular viewed TV as a good source of appearance information, discussing how they had learned to apply make-up, do hairstyles, and get ideas about what clothes to wear; *'We learn from people, but from the television now because there are many fashion shows whether it's shoes, clothes, whatever, but we have always learned like that'.* M1R; *'that's how a good body looks'.* M1J; *'… example, you know watching TV, you like see something, you could say well, that person look good…and well, you like this style so you try it for do it yourself'.* C1S.

'I did like see that video … 'Watch out for this', it's a Jamaican video with Busy Signal [a dancehall artist] … these girls had on these high-top tennis (trainers) and these high-waist pants… I was like wow, that looks good … and I went over there when they open a paquete (a package of second-

hand clothes) where they sell clothes over there and I find these pants look just like it and I had to buy it! C1Z.

However, several participants also commented that television, particularly the *novelas*, had the potential to make women feel less than happy about their appearance; *'They are woman* [on TV] *who are like plastic… So then women think they need to look like them'.* M2B; *'Few novelas you see with someone that* [is] *fat … most novela give you the impression or make you feel like I'm too fat I need to get … dunno, I need to look like her'.* C2V.

Women across the focus groups were aware of cosmetic surgery and frequently made remarks about how women in other places, particularly those they had seen on television, would have botox, breast or buttock silicone implants. Generally, cosmetic enhancements were perceived negatively and none of the women regarded cosmetic surgery as an option for themselves. However, several participants acknowledged that there were women in their country who had surgery and believed that if Nicaraguans had better economic resources it would be more prevalent.

3.5.2. Subtheme 5:2 TV influence on women's behaviour

While television was considered valuable for informing and entertaining people, many of the women talked about how television could potentially affect people's behaviour and the way they live their lives, often for the worse as one woman in M2 explained:

'I do not watch the news in my house because the news transmits programs that should not be broadcast. For example, if they cut off the head of a man they show it live and direct as how the facts happen. For me you shouldn't show that… children are watching and they are learning … If a man hits a woman and left her swollen they showed how the fact happened so I don't watch it.' M2B.

One woman in C2 predicted that television and the internet were likely to change how women in the region related to their bodies and their appearance:

'Well as for now most women are comfortable with the way they are… but with the tendency of internet and TV shows and everyone want to be in shape and this diet stuff …so maybe that will change a little the way how the young people, my age woman see the appearance'. C2V.

Female television characters, particularly those in the *novelas,* were frequently seen as sources for behavioural learning. Some women saw them as a bad influence on women's behaviour:

C1H – 'There was a girl we were talking about, like happened to her the same thing… the movies or the novela change her character yeh because like, maybe she have a favourite actress she want to be like so she acting like them'

Researcher – 'So it happened to someone you know? Was she nicer after she changed?'

C1H – [All shake their heads] 'she got worse'.

The lives of the characters in the *novelas* were generally considered by participants to reflect their own lives. One woman in M2 illustrated how *novelas* can be considered 'multi-purpose' viewing material, entertaining and informing women, but also supporting them by offering possible solutions to problems in their daily lives:

'Yes, I also watch novelas. In one way it entertains me because I dedicated an hour to watch the programme … let's say that watching novelas you are represented because sometimes there are men who maltreat women and you see that in the novelas too … and you see how to get out of that abuse … perhaps my husband is doing the same to me and I see that the women in the novelas get out of that life…' M2B.

Similarly, in C2 another woman recounted how what she had seen in a *novela* directly influenced the actions she took in her own life:

C2K – 'At times when you watch novela you see the relation between two people, at times you could [think] yeh I living that way, and I need to do something to change that, I need do what that person doing'

Researcher – 'Have you ever done that?'

C2K – 'Yeh! I leave somebody through that … yeh, because we [were] living the same life… so sometimes it helps'.

Another participant in the same group explained that the way in which women were represented in the *novelas* had the potential to be beneficial and dangerous to women at the same time. On one hand, the behaviours of the characters were understood as often immoral, cheating on their partners and having affairs: but on the other hand, female characters could be presented as strong, capable women who were in control of their lives, setting an aspirational example to real women; *'I like to see Kate del Castillo … that is, her life in the novelas and she is a very strong woman, affectionate… the truth is I admire her a lot'.* M2B.

'Something that's from Doña Barbara is that she give you that impression that woman … she can defend herself she's in control of any situation … if somehow you feel insecure [in] some kind of situation and when you watch that novela is like yep, woman can do a lot and we can take control of most situations, like, that can present to us'. C2V.

4. Discussion of findings

The current study qualitatively investigated rural Nicaraguan women's ideas about appearance, and the potential role of televisual media in shaping their body image. Overall, local cultural appearance ideals were relatively loosely defined by the women, although a curvy body shape and other aspects of appearance were more salient than a low body weight. Most participants were generally satisfied with their 'God-given' bodies and expressed little desire to change them, although Mestizo women were more familiar with dieting behaviours than the Creole women in our study. Many of the women commented that television, particularly *novelas*, can have both positive and negative influences on ideas around women's appearance and their behaviours.

4.1. Individual and local cultural ideas about women's appearance

Across the groups, women tended to mention aspects of their appearance other than body size or shape first in discussions. Clothes and dressing were seen as very important for both women's self-image and determining their appearance confidence, as has been identified in previous research in similar contexts (e.g., Anderson-Fye, 2004). We note that there appeared to be some differences in Mestizo and Creole perceptions of the 'role' and appropriateness of clothing: Mestizo women tended to be more concerned with modesty and respectability and Creole women focused more on 'feeling good' in their clothes. These differences in attitudes towards what the clothed body represents could arise from differing cultural attitudes towards women's place in society. Previous evidence suggests that in some Latinx (i.e., Latino and Latina) populations women are highly influenced by societal 'morals' and 'machismo' to dress modestly so as not to draw attention to their potential as attractive or sexual beings (Farfan, 2017). Other research suggests that clothing can operate as an expression of valued aspects of the internal self, potentially conferring benefits to women's body image (Stolovy, 2024). This could explain why Creole women in our study talked about how their clothes made them feel 'to themselves' rather than dressing to meet societal standards of appearance, however more research is needed to fully understand the role of the clothed body in local women's body image. Mentions specifically of body weight were rare, and women tended to talk more about body shape and other aspects of appearance, suggesting that a low body weight is not a central tenet of women's appearance 'schema' in this population, as has been observed among other Latinx and Black ethnic groups, albeit

predominantly in studies sampling U.S women (Capodilupo, 2015; Lowy et al., 2021; Rubin et al., 2003).

There were some ethnic differences in how women described the local cultural 'ideal' body for women. Mestizo women used words with the '*ita*' suffix ('*alsadita*' – tall-ish; '*cincenita*' - slim-waisted), implying slimness, and most mentioned dieting. Mestizo women described a curvy but lean body, with toned arms and legs and more emphasis on breasts – similarly to the 'hourglass' ideal of Latina adolescent girls in Chile (Cortez et al., 2016). Creole women on the other hand used descriptors such as 'thick', 'solid' which suggest a relatively larger body size, and framed dieting as 'doctor's orders only'. They also used terms such as 'a coca-cola shape' and 'guitar body', which describe a fuller lower body (i.e., hips and buttocks) relative to the upper body with a slim waist. This reflects the 'bootylicious' body type that Garifuna Nicaraguan men considered most attractive and the low waist-hip ratio of the bodies women tended to create for their 'ideal self' in our previous research (Thornborrow et al., 2018, 2022).

Several Mestizo women in our study also commented that *morenas* (afro-descended Creole and Garifuna women) were distinctly different from themselves because their bodies always had a '*big boonkah*' and usually '*nothing up front*' (i.e., small breasts). Furthermore, one Mestizo woman commented (and others agreed) that '…most *morenas* have a good body, even if the face is strange the body is good' suggesting the existence of colourism and implied degradation of certain physical features that are typical among afro-descended peoples, as has been evidenced in other ethnically diverse LA populations (De Casanova, 2004). We posit that such attitudes add to beliefs around certain aspects of a woman's physical appearance as being more (or less) desirable than others, in turn shaping local culturally valued appearance standards or 'ideals'.

We also found some subtle variation in Creole and Mestizo women's beliefs about what men in their community like to see in a woman's appearance; while they acknowledged men generally valued a curvaceous body, and Creole men particularly valued the *boonkah* (butt), in practice this did not determine men's attraction to or interactions with women. Creole women genuinely seemed at a loss to understand what men are attracted to in women and provided many examples of men's wide-ranging tastes in women. This finding is consistent with those from our previous qualitative work with men in this region (Thornborrow et al., 2018) and from other literature suggesting that men of some afro-descended ethnic groups do not show the same narrow preferences for women's bodies that many White men do (Webb et al., 2013). Mestizo women generally suggested that the respectability of a woman was more important in attracting a man than her actual body size or shape. These differences in Mestizo and Creole men's ideas and beliefs about women's bodies including their appearance may be related to broader differences in cultural values and norms. For example, in many Latinx populations, within the context of both family and religion, women's bodies are designated for reproduction and nurturing. Sex purely for a woman's pleasure is seen as undesirable (Santiago-Rivera et al., 2002, cited in Mendez, 2021) and so women's bodies need to be controlled: As some of our Mestizo participants discussed, a woman who spends time outside of the home is '*vaga*' and not considered by men to be a 'good woman'.

4.2. Women's body image

While our participants acknowledged and described culturally valued appearance 'ideals' for women, most of them expressed little drive or need to aspire to or achieve them personally. Most reported being satisfied with their appearance and their bodies, and explicitly stated that they felt good with their body just as it is, as has been previously found among ethnically diverse women in Belize in Central America (Anderson-Fye, 2004). Overall, there was a strong sense of acceptance among the women of the unique body that they each possessed, that it was perfectly positioned within their social world and

part of their embodied nature (Piran, 2017). This sense of embodiment appeared to negate any cognitive 'gap' between what women perceived themselves to be and what they thought they ought to be, and therefore women showed little drive to modify their body to achieve an 'ideal' appearance.

Discussions around cosmetic enhancements also reflected women's body satisfaction: none of the participants expressed an interest in any kind of surgical body modification to alter their appearance. Dieting and exercise were methods of appearance enhancement that were considered reasonable, particularly among Mestizo women, most of whom reported controlling their food intake in some way or talked about the importance of maintaining or working on the body. For Creole women dieting was generally considered necessary only for 'old people' or for health reasons. Our findings support previous research which found differences in the dietary behaviours of Latina and Black women, with Black women less likely to demonstrate body size dissatisfaction (Gordon et al., 2010; Sánchez-Johnsen et al., 2004), particularly Black women with a strong ethnic identity (Cotter et al., 2015). However, focusing only on size or weight may not fully measure appearance satisfaction among women of non-White ethnic groups where their appearance schema is more likely to incorporate body shape, hair texture, skin tone, and even non-physical elements such as style and attitude (Capodilupo, 2015; Kelch-Oliver & Ancis, 2011). Certainly, some women in the current research spoke about other aspects of their appearance that gave them concern, for example their hair texture and body shape.

Participants often spoke on behalf of all women in their community when discussing how they felt about their bodies. While few women reported being directly influenced by friends or family when it came to their appearance, it was implicitly inferred: at church or on the beach for example, women would modify their appearance to 'fit in' with the social context or to minimize the chance of negative social comment. Social identity and values may be shared and symbolically expressed through bodily appearance, both in small scale 'traditional' societies (Turner, 1995) and in populous nations such as Mexico (Wentzell, 2020). Here then, rather than a 'Western' concept of body image in which the individual's body is their responsibility, community women's bodies appeared to be sites of shared community values that are characteristic of 'sociocentric' societies (Anderson-Fye, 2012).

The differences we found between Mestizo and Creole women's attitudes towards their bodies could also be attributed to differences in gender relations. We observed Mestizo families in this region tend to be patrifocal – women move to the man's home and the man is the head of the household. By contrast, local Creole family structure tends to be matrifocal, typically with 2 or even 3 generations of women raising the children in one household. Men usually provide some form of income or resources to one or more households, however women are rarely economically dependent wholly on their men (ethnographic observations). As such, there appeared to be little sense of men's 'ownership' of women. We suggest this feeds into women's sense of self, shaping their body image; just as Creole women were not subject to men's expectations regarding their behaviour (as discussed in the previous section), neither would they consider themselves subject to men's expectations regarding their appearance.

4.3. Media influences on women's appearance

Participants frequently referred to women they had seen on television to describe their 'ideal' body types, illustrating that viewing television contributed in some way to their ideas about appearance. While all the admired women mentioned were Latinas or women of colour, many of them wear Euro-textured hair and have relatively lighter skin tones (e.g., Jennifer Lopez, Beyoncé), appearance characteristics that may have helped them to 'cross over' and become accepted in Hollywood's 'star system' (Beltran, 2002). Although the Mestizo women in this study may not be truly represented by media's versions of *Latinidad*

('Latin-ness'; Rubin et al., 2003), the Creole women may feel even more disenfranchised by the lack of representation: models and actors with afro-centric features barely exist on television (Capodilupo, 2015). However, unlike African American women in the U.S (Kelch-Oliver & Ancis, 2011) women in the present study did not comment directly about their ethnic identity relative to the women they saw on television, so we offer these interpretations tentatively. Studies are needed to understand media representation and the impact thereof in diverse ethnic groups, including in Nicaragua and other LA countries.

Novelas were referred to frequently across discussion groups, both with respect to women's appearance ideals and as sources of behavioural information for dealing with daily life. While participants often remarked upon the narrow range of female body types portrayed in *novelas*, equally, many commented on and appreciated the attractiveness of the main female protagonists. Again, no mention was made of the narrow range of ethnic identities reflected among the characters (see Rivadeneyra, 2011). Overall, *novelas* were regarded positively by women, providing both ideas on fashion and style and good role models of strong independent women. However, the often-paradoxical nature of *novelas* was not lost on the women. On one hand women frequently identified with the lives of the characters and felt supported or justified to take action to improve their own lives: on the other hand, participants acknowledged their potentially dangerous influence, especially with regard to relationships, seeming to condone extra-marital affairs and encourage sexual promiscuity. Interestingly, the negative aspects of *novela* influence tended to be discussed as impacting upon *other* women, while participants generally spoke about the perceived positive aspects in relation to their own lives and experiences. As such, *novelas* appeared to provide women with a visual diet of media-idealised appearance standards in the form of strong, aspirational lead female characters, who portray 'realities' that they identify with or aspire towards, potentially influencing their appearance and their behaviours. Research with Western samples shows that portraying a body type as aspirational can lead to increased preferences for that body type (Boothroyd et al., 2012) and social comparison with media (and social media) figures has been identified as an important component in internalisation of appearance ideals (Jarman et al., 2021; Tiggemann &McGill, 2004). However, the focus of viewers may modulate this process. For instance, women viewing 'idealised' imagery while engaged in self-evaluation were more likely to be impacted by the idealised imagery, while those viewing with a 'self-improvement' prompt seemed more resilient to the idealised images (Halliwell &Dittmar, 2005). Nicaraguan women's combined identification but also scepticism of the lessons from *novelas* may explain in part their ambiguous internalization of their appearance norms.

While our participants in general believed that women in their communities were happy with their appearance and their bodies, several admitted that this could change over time if increased exposure to media's appearance ideals exerts greater pressure on Nicaraguan women to conform to 'globalised' (read Westernized) standards of beauty. Furthermore, the few incidences of body shape dissatisfaction and dieting behaviours among the women appeared to be related to influence of other women in the community, rather than purely televisual influence as was suggested by our previous quantitative findings with women in the region (Thornborrow et al., 2022). It is worth noting that we did not consider social media influence in the current study as this was not widely available in the region at the time of data collection. Interactive visual-based social media platforms have the potential to be more harmful to body image than traditional passive media exposure (Vandenbosch et al., 2022). Few studies have explored this in Latin American contexts (Andres et al., 2024) so further research is warranted.

4.4. The protective power of a belief in a 'God-given' body

The belief in a 'God given' body appeared to offer a great deal of protection to the women's body image: participants across the groups stated that they were happy with and accepting of the body that God had

given them, reflecting findings from previous research (Anderson-Fye, 2004). Many women explicitly expressed their gratitude that they were believers in God as this is what gave them such confidence in themselves and their bodies. Previous studies have found that having a positive relationship with God is associated with less body image concerns, fewer disordered eating symptoms (Akrawi et al., 2015), and greater acceptance of 'who you are' particularly among Black ethnic groups (Pope et al., 2014). Similarly to Latina and Black women in the U.S (Rubin et al., 2003), participants showed little interest in altering a body that was created by and given to them by God, which seemed to release them from feeling pressure to conform to any fixed or cultural appearance standard. Furthermore, among Mestizo women at least, there was no perceived conflict between accepting the body God had given them and dieting to change their body size, as this was understood to be maintaining the 'God-given' body, rather than a sign of unhappiness with it.

There appeared to be a conceptual 'distance' between the local cultural appearance 'ideals' that the women described to us and their own internal appearance schemas and sense of self. We posit that the current state of women's body image in this population is contingent upon two key factors; a cultural appearance ideal that is low in salience and a strong belief in God. Together, they appear to have a protective effect on women's body image in this population. Because men's perceptions of women's attractiveness are relatively ambiguous and flexible, women experience less pressure to conform to prescriptive appearance standards or 'ideals'. The belief in God similarly relieved women of pressure to change their bodies: a 'God-given' body still allowed women to care for it, for example maintaining a healthy weight, but enabled them to feel accepting of their own unique bodies and experience them in an embodied way rather than as objects to be manipulated. With these protective factors in place, potential outcomes due to negative effects of media influence seen in other populations (e.g., high levels of body dissatisfaction, unhealthy dieting, and eating disorders) thus far appear to be minimal in this group of women.

4.5. Study limitations and future directions

The current study is the first qualitative analysis of women's body image in Nicaragua, however there are some limitations due to the study design and our sample. While we can reflect on how women with life-long or recent access to televisual media conceptualize and relate to beauty and appearance, we acknowledge we were unable to recruit participants from communities with limited or no access to media.

Furthermore, we only interviewed women from two of the multiple ethnic groups in the region. Further research should include for instance, indigenous Miskitu and afro-descended Garifuna communities; in our quantitative research we often found that Miskitu participants showed results intermediate between Mestizo and both Garifuna and Creole participants. It would also be useful in future to look more closely at age stratification of appearance attitudes. Because transcripts were anonymised without age information immediately after data collection, we cannot determine how much age did or did not influence the perspectives of our participants.

Another limitation is that we only discussed women's use of televisual media and explored its potential influence on their body image. At the time of data collection, television was practically the only source of media imagery and access to it was highly variable across rural Nicaragua depending on electrification. Now, even very remote communities have solar panels and can download materials in larger communities. Mobile phone use is now widespread, meaning an exponential rise of access to media content via the internet and social media sites such as YouTube and TikTok. Experimental studies show that exposure to idealised appearance imagery on social media can increase body dissatisfaction but that this effect is often moderated by baseline risk levels (Fioravanti et al., 2022). As such there is a pressing need to investigate the ongoing communications revolution in Nicaragua and the impact this is or is not having on women and others their

communities.

We acknowledge that some of our 'starter questions' could be considered as unnecessarily heteronormative (i.e., 'what kind of woman is a man attracted to' assumes that attraction is always between men and women) and thus exclusionary of people with diverse gender and / or sexual orientation identities. At the time of our data collection, gender roles in this region of Nicaragua were 'traditional' – stereotypically binary and heterosexual. During our fieldwork, we did not come across any local person identifying as a gender other than woman or man or to openly indicate a non-heterosexual orientation. This may not be the case today. Our future research should consider people of diverse gender and sexual orientation identities.

Finally, our research raised two themes which had not been part of the initial planning and framing of the research but require further study to fully develop. Both religiosity and a focus on the community over the individual are potentially important moderators of how globalized media impact on women but we had no questions in our interview schedule to elaborate on these points. We believe further research into these may help gain more understanding of how community-oriented body image may differ from individualistic perspectives.

This gap in our interview schedule likely arose as we are White, Western researchers collecting and interpreting data drawn from a different cultural context. As such, we cannot negate the possibility that our viewpoint has not captured a fully nuanced understanding of body image as a construct in this context - in the analysis as well as at the planning stage. We acknowledge and reflect on this and call for more research by, or alongside local researchers to reduce ethnocentric biases in approaches, methods, and interpretations.

4.6. Conclusion

To conclude, this study explored local cultural appearance ideals, women's body image and televisual media influence among Creole and Mestizo women in a rural Nicaraguan population. Insights gained expand and support findings from our previous work and contribute to the knowledge about media influence on body image among people of diverse ethnicities and in non-Western contexts. However, further research is still needed to enable a greater understanding of Nicaraguan women's appearance schemas to fully identify what aspects of their appearance relate to their body image, and which sociocultural factors, including the media, might shape or influence them. Lastly, evidence that ethnic group identity and religious affiliation appeared to offer protective effects for the women in this study could provide alternative angles from which to approach intervention strategies aimed at building positive body image and preventing body dissatisfaction in rural Nicaragua and other populations.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Tracey Thornborrow: Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Lynda G Boothroyd:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Martin J Tovee:** Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

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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Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:10.1016/j.bodyim.2024.101817.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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