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Beauty, Insecurity, and Female Identity in Global Wattpad Romance: A Digital Literary Study

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Abstract

As one of the world's largest digital storytelling platforms, Wattpad has become a significant space where young readers and writers engage with romance narratives that shape perceptions of beauty, femininity, and self-worth. This study examines how beauty standards shape female identity in global Wattpad romance fiction. As a leading platform for digital storytelling, Wattpad provides a space where narratives of beauty, insecurity, makeover, and romantic validation circulate among young readers across different cultural contexts. Although previous research has explored Wattpad in relation to digital authorship, participatory culture, and youth literacy, it has paid limited attention to the relationship between beauty standards and female identity within global romance narratives. Using a qualitative digital literary approach, this study analyses selected Wattpad romance stories. The analysis focuses on story texts, tags, and reader comments. The study draws on Rosalind Gill's postfeminist sensibility, Platform Theory, and Intersectionality to investigate how beauty ideals are represented, circulated, and negotiated within platform-based storytelling. The findings suggest that beauty is often constructed as social and romantic capital that shapes female characters' confidence, popularity, and social acceptance. Makeover narratives and romantic validation often position physical attractiveness as a pathway to empowerment and self-worth. However, the stories also reveal cultural variations in beauty ideals and include moments of resistance that challenge dominant standards through self-acceptance and alternative representations of femininity. The study contributes to digital literary studies by highlighting Wattpad's role in shaping contemporary understandings of beauty and female identity within global youth culture.

Keywords: *Beauty Standards, Female Identity, Postfeminist Study, Digital Literary Study, Wattpad Romance Fiction.*

INTRODUCTION

Among contemporary digital storytelling platforms, Wattpad is particularly well suited to examining the construction and negotiation of beauty ideals because it combines text-based, user-generated fiction with participatory social-reading features. Other major storytelling platforms offer different modes of narrative engagement. WEBTOON, for example, is primarily organized around visual and sequential webcomics, making images and graphic representation central to meaning production, while Inkitt similarly hosts user-generated prose fiction but places stronger emphasis on reader analytics, story performance, and the identification of commercially promising works for further publication. Wattpad, by contrast, operates simultaneously as a space for literary production, circulation, and social reading. Previous research has characterized it as one of the major platforms for user-generated fiction and has demonstrated its significance for studying global youth reading cultures across languages (Pianzola et al., 2020). In a study of 379 adolescent Wattpad users, found that peer social interaction was the most important factor influencing their platform use, highlighting Wattpad's function as a social as well as literary environment (Kurt et al., 2025).

Wattpad is one of the largest social reading platforms for user-generated fiction, including novels, fanfiction, humor, classics, and poetry, with approximately 70 million readers and 300,000 writers from 35 countries (Pianzola et al., 2020). This reshapes reading practices and social interaction within a single digital platform, offering diverse experiences for readers and writers (Pianzola et al., 2020; Stollfuß, 2021). The notion that traditional literary works require major publishers has been overtaken, and this platform opens more opportunities for amateur authors to explore their creativity. This phenomenon portrays a space of social authorship shaped by interaction, visibility, and community (Ramdarshan Bold, 2018).

Previous studies have found that romance is the most frequently consumed on the platform. As a transnational literary platform, Wattpad allows adolescents and young adults to participate. Consequently, this creates interactive features encouraging cross-cultural engagement among readers and writers (Başoğul, 2021; Frens et al., 2018; Santa María et al., 2024). Romance fiction on Wattpad functions as a room to negotiate ideas of love, intimacy, gender, and selfhood. It fosters strong engagement among readers, writers, and adolescents as they explore personal experiences and social expectations around romantic relationships. Wattpad also offers a participatory experience through comments, feedback, and voting mechanisms that connect authors and audiences. The platform also enables cross-cultural interactions that examine how cultural values are represented and even contested within popular romance narratives. Authors also frequently blend local culture with global romance conventions, creating a hybrid form of storytelling (McAlister et al., 2023; Ren, 2024). This study concerns hybrid storytelling, referring to the narrative process through which transnational romance tropes are adapted to specific local cultural contexts. For instance, the makeover, love triangle, enemies-to-lovers relationship, wealthy or dominant male lead, and romantic transformation. Hybrid storytelling then does not simply represent a mixture of "local" and "global" elements; rather, it involves an ongoing negotiation in which global conventions are localized, reinterpreted, and sometimes contested through culturally specific values and experiences. Through Wattpad, this hybridity allows stories to remain familiar to transnational romance audiences while reflecting social and cultural realities.

Popular Wattpad stories include beauty-related themes, such as body image, insecurity, and makeovers. There has been research using a massive Wattpad corpus, collecting 1.8 billion words of fiction from Wattpad, which found that the stories mostly reproduce traditional gender stereotypes, focusing on attractiveness, femininity, masculinity, desirability,

and romantic relationships (Fast et al., 2016). While their corpus-based study identified broad patterns of gender representation, it did not specifically examine how feminine beauty ideals are constructed and negotiated within individual narratives. Addressing this gap, the present study employs a qualitative approach to explore how physical attractiveness, male validation, and social acceptance shape female characters' experiences. Thus, it extends previous research by examining how Wattpad narratives reproduce, negotiate, or challenge conventional beauty standards. Wattpad romance stories frequently reflect concerns common in young adult literature, including identity, physical appearance, bullying, peer relationships, romantic desire, and social acceptance. One example is Diary ng Panget (Diary of an Ugly Person) from the Philippines, featuring recurring storylines that portray physical insecurity, social exclusion, and hierarchical notions of popularity (Fabro, 2025). In youth culture, body image, insecurity, physical appearance, and social validation- in this case, the online environment- have been an essential part of teenagers' lives (Alluhidan et al., 2025).

While stories in the romance genre incorporate social elements dealing with appearance, femininity, and gender stereotypes, focusing on the female characters involved in the story, this rationale shapes the readers' and authors' concerns in perceiving beauty. These stories shape how readers and authors understand self-worth, confidence, and social acceptance. By contrast, media representations of femininity and beauty lead to self-objectification, appearance anxiety, and appearance-based self-worth, especially among female audiences (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). These findings are relevant to the present study since they demonstrate the significance of beauty representations in shaping cultural expectations of femininity. Building on this perspective, this study examines how Wattpad romance narratives construct feminine beauty through physical attractiveness, male validation, and social recognition, while exploring how female characters negotiate or resist conventional beauty standards. This discourse between physical attractiveness and positive life outcomes creates misconceptions rooted in those narratives. When beauty becomes a recurring portrayal used to overcome social exclusion and gain romantic recognition, readers value appearance in ways that align with their social expectations and opportunities. In other words, beauty is equated with self-worth.

Additionally, these misconceptions are often reinforced by dominant global beauty standards circulated through popular media and digital platforms. Through repeated portrayals of attractive female characters with fair skin, slim body shapes, and symmetrical facial features, this narrative is constructed beyond fictional communities and shapes how people perceive beauty culture (Kuipers & Sarpila, 2026). There has been a detailed investigation concerning the negative effects of idealized media images displaying superficial beauty standards produced on viewers' body image. The meta-analysis shows that in 543 of 127 studies, higher exposure to appearance-related media was associated with negative body image outcomes. This data implies that people are eventually less confident in their bodies and appearances, causing unrealistic beauty expectations (Huang et al., 2021).

In discussions of female representation in fiction, female archetypes often reinforce traditional gender expectations. These repeated literary representations still normalize beauty standards tied to femininity and attractiveness (Beauregard et al., 2026). Another research analyzes the contemporary romance heroines in popular romance novels, highlighting how femininity is constructed. The result states that romance narratives shape ideals of womanhood and beauty (Arvanitaki, 2019). The discussion examines female identity, empowerment, and representation. It contributes to understanding how online narratives construct gender, in this case, ideals of femininity. By conducting a focus group discussion with

16 secondary students, the research found that young readers can internalize messages from fictional characters, including ideal-woman behavior, for instance, female characters who giggle and chatter (Jane Mukherjee et al., 2025). As a result, beauty becomes standardized rather than accepted as a culturally and socially diverse construct. It generates polarization between those who are privileged (who meet the beauty standards) and those who are marginalized (who do not). This creates a divide between individuals who conform to prevailing beauty standards. Those who meet these standards often enjoy social privileges, while those who fall outside them may experience marginalization. These global beauty ideals gradually compel individuals to reconstruct their perceptions of attractiveness in relation to identity, self-esteem, and belonging in society. For that reason, scrutinizing how beauty ideals are represented in romance narratives through the lenses of literary and media studies is essential, as it contributes to their reproduction.

With the growing influence of digital storytelling platforms in youth culture, portrayals of female characters are understood, normalized, negotiated, or even challenged. Wattpad should be viewed not merely as an entertaining platform, but as a digital cultural space that plays an important role in shaping meanings of beauty and womanhood. This issue is academically relevant, as it sits at the intersection of literary, gender, and media studies and incorporates digital culture. From a literary studies perspective, Wattpad provides a form of digital literary culture in which reading and writing increasingly converge through participatory practices, allowing literary texts to develop through interactions among authors, readers, and communities (Stollfuß, 2021). From a gender studies perspective, Gill's (2007) concept of postfeminist sensibility can be used to examine beauty representations, makeover, romantic desirability, and self-improvement, particularly its emphasis on femininity as a bodily property, self-surveillance, choice, empowerment, and the makeover paradigm. From media studies, Wattpad cannot be merely a neutral repository of literary text, since digital platforms actively organize cultural production, circulation, visibility, and participation (Duffy et al., 2019; Van Dijck et al., 2018). Features like tags, recommendations, comments, voting, and reader interaction shape how stories and cultural meanings become visible and circulate within digital communities. Carrying these perspectives, this study examines beauty discourse as a literary representation, a gendered cultural construction, and a platform-mediated phenomenon, contributing to a more interdisciplinary understanding of how digital storytelling participates in the production, circulation, and negotiation of contemporary ideas about femininity, beauty, and self-worth.

Traditional literary criticism examined representations of women and beauty in fiction. The advent of Wattpad offers new dynamics presented through readers' participation, algorithmic visibility, and transnational mobility. Wattpad enables authors to reach global readers, contributing to the reproduction of dominant beauty standards. Therefore, it offers a broader opportunity to investigate how beauty standards, insecurity, and female identity shape cultural perceptions of femininity, with Wattpad serving as a contemporary digital literature platform. This study not only examines the expansion of Wattpad and digital fiction but also offers insight into readers' perceptions of self-worth, confidence, and attractiveness within the interconnected media sphere.

As a major digital platform, Wattpad plays an important role in digital authorship, social reading, participatory culture, and youth literacy. It also involves reader engagement, online writing communities, and the new emergence of social authors within digital society. Studies concerning femininity have examined how social media platforms, advertising, television, and celebrity culture have evolved. Meanwhile, the representations of beauty standards in digital

literary narratives, such as Wattpad romance fiction, are under-researched. Moreover, existing research rarely incorporates postfeminist theory and studies of digital literary platforms to examine how platform-based storytelling largely constructs beauty, insecurity, and female identity. Previous studies also focus on reader experiences, participation in digital platforms, or local communities, rather than conducting comparative textual analyses in transnational contexts. These early studies do not focus on how beauty-related romance tropes evolve across diverse cultural communities or how female identity is expressed.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating beauty standards, insecurity, makeover narratives, and romantic validation or recognition in selected Wattpad romance stories. By incorporating a postfeminist lens, platform theory, and intersectionality, the study offers a digital literary perspective on how beauty and female identities are reproduced, negotiated, and challenged in global Wattpad romance. Using a qualitative digital literary approach, this study involved selected Wattpad romance stories. The study also applied Rosalind Gill's postfeminist theory, integrated with Platform theory and Intersectionality, to examine representations of beauty ideals in platform-based storytelling. The research questions comprise: (1) How do beauty standards shape female characters' identities in selected global Wattpad romance stories? (2) To what extent do these stories reinforce, negotiate, or challenge postfeminist beauty ideals? (3) How do Wattpad's platform features, including tags, covers, votes, and comments, contribute to the circulation and negotiation of beauty-related tropes? This study aims to identify representations of beauty standards in Wattpad romance stories; analyze how beauty, insecurity, makeovers, and romantic validation shape female identity; examine whether the stories reinforce or challenge dominant beauty ideals; and explore how Wattpad's platform features contribute to the circulation of beauty-related romance narratives.

METHOD

Research Design

This study used a qualitative digital literary approach, applying thematic analysis to Wattpad romance stories and emphasizing depth of analysis, purposive sampling, data saturation, and cultural relevance. As previous research has noted, Wattpad serves as a transnational platform that mediates interactions among readers and writers across countries and languages. Through this approach, the study examines how beauty, insecurity, makeover narratives, and romantic validation are constructed, and how the platform's mechanisms contribute to their circulation.

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Wattpad stories bring together diverse cultural communities of authors and readers from different countries. Previous research has demonstrated that Wattpad functions as a transnational platform that facilitates interactions among readers and writers across countries and languages (Pianzola et al., 2020; Ramdarshan Bold, 2018). Moreover, digital fiction platforms encourage transcultural storytelling in which local cultural values intersect with globally circulating narrative conventions (Ren, 2024). Furthermore, the large number of

readers and votes contributes to the popularity and visibility of the narratives on the platform, highlighting the urgency of exploring how such widely consumed texts shape and circulate beauty ideals.

The primary data consisted of the 12 selected Wattpad stories under the following criteria in order to ensure relevance and comparability: 1. Belong to the romance, teen, or teen-romance genre; 2. Published or updated between 2020 and 2026, 3. Contain beauty-related themes such as physical appearance, body image, insecurity, makeover, popularity, bullying, romantic validation, or self-acceptance. 4. Show substantial reader engagement through popularity indicators, e.g., reads, votes, and comments, with more than 10K readers. The supplementary data include story titles, cover images, tags, and character descriptions. Readers' responses are central to Wattpad's appeal, meaning it goes beyond its text. It also provides valuable insights into how beauty narratives are received, reinforced, or contested within the Wattpad community.

The data collection was conducted in several stages. The first stage comprised story identification. The researcher identified potential stories through Wattpad's search and tagging system, such as #lovestory, #beauty, #makeover, #insecurity, #popular, #bullying, and #relationship. These tags helped locate relevant stories across the four selected language communities. This initial search aimed to generate a broader set of potential texts for further examination. The second stage involved selecting stories using purposive sampling. Each story underwent a predetermined evaluation process concerning genre, publication period (2020-2026), thematic relevance, and reader engagement (more than 10K readers). The third stage focused on contextual information regarding the visibility and popularity of the selected stories. Stories that clearly reflect issues of beauty standards and female identity were chosen most often. The fourth stage constituted textual data extraction. The structured textual data extraction and coding matrix was designed to document beauty-related representations across the selected Wattpad narratives. The matrix organized relevant passages by narrative context and thematic characteristics, including physical attractiveness, body insecurity, makeover experiences, romantic validation, and social acceptance. Story metadata and relevant reader comments were recorded separately to distinguish narrative representations from audience responses. This organization facilitated systematic cross-textual comparison and supported the identification of recurring patterns, variations, and contradictions in the construction of feminine beauty standards. The researcher identified passages related to physical appearance, beauty standards, body insecurity, makeover scenes, social acceptance, popularity, romantic validation, and self-acceptance; then collected and organized relevant excerpts for coding. The last stage was platform data collection. The researcher documented story tags, reader comments, and popularity indicators through vote counts. These platform elements were collected because they revealed how beauty narratives circulate, are reinforced, or are challenged through Wattpad's sociotechnical environment. In particular, twelve stories served as the primary objects of analysis.

The data analysis process employed thematic analysis, which focuses on identifying, interpreting, and organizing recurring patterns of meaning across qualitative data. This approach emphasizes "a family of methods focusing on developing and reporting themes from qualitative data" (Braun & Clarke, 2024). This flexibility makes thematic analysis particularly appropriate for the recent study since the dataset consists of heterogeneous yet interconnected forms of digital literary material, including narrative excerpts, representations of female characters, story tags, and reader comments from selected Wattpad romance stories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis began with familiarization: the researcher repeatedly read

the selected stories and related platform elements to develop a deep understanding of recurring patterns and themes. The next phase was data coding. The researcher assigned codes to relevant excerpts from the stories, reader comments, tags, and other elements based on recurring concepts. The initial coding categories contained beauty standards, body insecurity, makeover narratives, romantic validation, social capital, platformed beauty, and self-acceptance. The table below lists the coding categories.

Table 1. Coding Categories

Code	Category	Indicator
BS	Beauty Standards	Ideal appearance, attractiveness
BI	Body Insecurity	Shame, comparison, self-doubt
MT	Makeover Trope	Physical transformation
RV	Romantic Validation	Recognition by romantic partners
SC	Social Capital	Popularity, acceptance, status
PB	Platformed Beauty	Tags, covers, comments, ran
SA	Self-Acceptance	Resistance, confidence without transformation

The initial coding categories were developed deductively from the study's theoretical framework and research objectives. Codes related to Beauty Standards (BS), Body Insecurity (BI), Makeover Trope (MT), Romantic Validation (RV), and Self-Acceptance (SA) were primarily derived from Rosallind Gill's (2007) concept of postfeminist sensibility. Gill argues that contemporary femininity is constructed through bodily self-surveillance, self-improvement, confidence, desirability, and continuous management of appearance (Gill, 2007). The code Social Capital (SC) draws on Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital to examine how physical attractiveness functions as a social resource that confers popularity, visibility, and other social advantages on characters. The code Platformed Beauty (PB) draws on Platform Theory, as described by José Van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal (2018). The concept emphasizes how digital platforms shape content circulation and popularity through sociotechnical mechanisms embedded in platform features, such as tags, images, reader comments, and votes on Wattpad.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher has found 12 stories that represent how beauty ideals are constructed and circulated, categorized by 7 main themes consisting of Beauty Standards, Body Insecurity, Transformation, Romantic Validation, Self-Acceptance, Social Capital, and Platformed Beauty, as shown in the following table 2.

Table 2. Selected Wattpad Stories Data

No	Story Title	Genre	Year	Reads	Votes	Relevant Tags	Main Theme
1	*The Only Girl of Class E*	Romance	2025	2.5M	25,4K	#lovestory #badboy #bully	SC, RV, and PB
2	*Stars in the Morning Sky*	Teen Romance	2025	34.3K	929	#truebeauty #teenromance	BS
3	*The Girl He Never Noticed*	Romance	2020	228M	7M	#bodyimage #selfacceptance	RV and SA
4	*Diary ng Panget*	Teen Romance	2024	84.8K	1.7K	#*panget*(ugly)	MT and RV
5	*Typical Secrets*	Teen Romance	2022	88.8K	1.7K	#romance #insecurities #love #bodyimage	BI and RV
6	*No Second Chances*	Romance	2025	296K	6.1K	#love #romance	RV
7	*Far from Perfect*	Romance	2020	605K	18.8K	#selfacceptance #romance #love	BI
8	*My Personal Trainer*	Romance	2025	808K	26.9K	#romance #selfacceptance	MT
9	*Silver Lining*	Teen Romance	2024	1M	7.4K	#love #romance	RV
10	*Sidelined 2: Intercepted*	Teen Romance	2025	453K	2.9K	#firstlove #romance	RV
11	*Big Boned*	Teen Romance	2021	415K	7.2K	#romance #love #lovestory #selflove	SA
12	*A Love Like This*	Romance	2025	84.1K	1,4K	#bullying #romance #insecure #love #bodypositivity	BI

Table 2 shows that 12 selected Wattpad stories for analysis were published between 2020 and 2026 in the Romance and Teen Romance genres. The corpus is evenly distributed across two categories, with six "Romance" and six "Teen Romance" stories. This categorization is pivotal to examining how female beauty and identity are constructed within two closely related but not identical forms of popular romantic fiction. Both genres feature intimate and interpersonal relationships. Teen Romance situates these relationships in youth-oriented

contexts, featuring prominent themes such as peer evaluation, social acceptance, insecurity, and identity.

For the bibliographical information, the table records platform-based criteria, such as reads, votes, and relevant tags, also identified with the thematic categories in the preliminary analysis. These elements carry the texts into the digital literary environment in which readers circulate, produce, categorize, and encounter them. From the perspective of digital literary studies, reads, votes, and tags matter, as Wattpad narratives are inseparable from the platform on which they circulate. The literary texts include metadata and participatory features that enhance their digital presence. Reads indicate the visibility and circulation of a story. Votes represent a form of reader interaction, while tags serve as paratextual markers, consisting of messages and cues surrounding the main text, placing the story in thematic communities and accommodating its discoverability. Therefore, those platform features are not considered statistical evidence; instead, they provide contextual information that helps narratives such as romance, beauty, body image, and female identity circulate within Wattpad's participatory literary culture.

The corpus above demonstrates that female appearance is rarely presented as an isolated concern. Beauty representation intersects with romance, insecurity, self-perception, social judgment, transformation, and self-acceptance. The thematic codes formulated in Table 2 reveal an interconnected structure of representation in which female identity is repeatedly negotiated between external evaluation and internal self-understanding.

Based on these categorization details, the researcher clustered the data around the main themes to produce a strong thematic structure. Table 3 below concisely presents the clusters.

Table 3. Data Based on Thematic Structure

Theme	Story Title
Beauty Standard	*Stars in the Morning Sky*
Body Insecurity	*Far from Perfect*, *A Love Like This, Typical Secrets*
Makeover Trope	*Diary ng Panget*, *My Personal Trainer*
Romantic Validation	*The Only Girl of Class E*, *No Second Chances*, *Silver Lining*, *Sidelined 2 (Intercepted)*, *Diary ng Panget, Typical Secrets, The Girl He Never Noticed*
Self-Acceptance	*Big Boned*, *Far from Perfect*, *The Girl He Never Noticed*
Social Capital	*The Only Girl of Class E*
Beauty Standard	*Stars in the Morning Sky*

Table 3 displays that the most visible thematic pattern is Romantic Validation (RV). It appears in the stories entitled *The Only Girl of Class E*, *The Girl He Never Noticed*, *Diary ng Panget*, *Typical Secrets*, *No Second Chances*, *Silver Lining*, and *Sidelined 2: Intercepted*. The recurrence suggests that these romantic relationships function not merely as narrative plots but as spaces where the female characters negotiate recognition, desirability, and personal value. In addition, the significance of RV becomes clearer, especially when it intersects with other thematic categories. For instance, in *The Girl He Never Noticed*, RV appears together

with Self-Acceptance (SA). *Typical Secrets* connects RV with Body Image (BI). *Diary ng Panget* features two themes: RV and Makeover Trope (MT). *The Only Girl in Class E* carries RV and relates to Social Capital (SC) and Platformed Beauty (PB). The next recurring thematic patterns are Body Insecurity (BI) and Self-Acceptance (SA). The story *Far From Perfect* emerges in both themes, BI and SA. The stories *Stars in the Morning Sky*, *My Personal Trainer*, *A Love Like This*, and *Big Boned* do not connect to the other themes. *Stars in the Morning Sky* represents Beauty Standard (BS). *My Personal Trainer* includes the Makeover Trope (MT). *A Love Like This* highlights BI. *Big Boned* emphasizes SA.

Nevertheless, this classification does not necessarily imply that the identified themes are discrete or mutually exclusive. Each theme connects to the others, forming a circular network among Beauty Standards, Body Insecurity, Makeover Trope, Romantic Validation, Self-Acceptance, and Social Capital. Those thematic intersections demonstrate narrative patterns in the stories. At the beginning of the narratives, beauty standards and body insecurity often serve as initial sources of conflict that shape the female protagonists' self-perceptions and social positions. As the stories develop, the makeover trope and romantic validation address those initial insecurities, and beauty increasingly functions as social capital that leads to recognition, attractiveness, and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, these themes shape the narrative's resolution, especially in determining whether self-acceptance emerges as an option or depends on external validation and socially constructed beauty standards.

Constructing Beauty Ideals in Contemporary Wattpad Romance

Beauty functions as a form of social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), enabling female characters to gain popularity, social acceptance, and romantic recognition. Through physical transformations, particularly makeovers, female characters often move from marginalization to social visibility, gaining friendships, male attention, and greater self-confidence. However, these opportunities remain conditional upon conformity to dominant beauty standards, revealing how physical attractiveness operates as a mechanism of social distinction and gendered power. From Bourdieu's perspective, beauty becomes a socially valued resource that reinforces existing hierarchies, while Gill's (2007) postfeminist framework highlights the contradiction between apparent empowerment and continued dependence on external validation. Although makeovers seemingly promote confidence, autonomy, and self-expression, such empowerment is often achieved through self-surveillance and conformity to conventional ideals of femininity. Thus, these narratives reproduce a paradox in which female characters gain social mobility and a sense of agency through beauty, while simultaneously reinforcing the gendered expectations that constrain their self-worth and social recognition.

Beauty ideals extend beyond the physical. The association expands into more socially fragmented areas. In this case, beauty gives female characters access to popularity, friendship, male attention, confidence, and higher social status. The protagonist's physical transformation marks an important moment in her developing sense of identity and self-worth. The narrative presents the makeover as more than a change in appearance, associating it with renewed confidence and a greater sense of personal possibility. This connection between beauty and perceived empowerment is reflected in the protagonist's emotional response to her transformation. As seen in the excerpt from Stars in the Morning Sky,

"She was finally showing her fully transformed self, and she felt like she could do anything." (SkyeLeAwesome, 2024, Ch. 1, para 3).

The line shows that the protagonist's fresh look made her feel confident and able to do anything she wanted. The transformation motivates her to restart her life as a way to

celebrate the new her. A physical makeover is associated with identity transformation. Another piece of evidence appears from the elaboration of the table below,

Table 4. Sample of Analysis

Title	Chapter	Scene Description	Analysis
Stars in the Morning Sky	Chapter 2	The protagonist is added to the girls' group chat, meaning that she eventually has friends.	Beauty gives social acceptance.

In Table 4, Chapter 2 of Stars in the Morning Sky shows the protagonist's inclusion in the girls' group chat as a key moment in her social life, signalling her growing acceptance within her peer group. The group represents more than a means of communication; it symbolizes friendship, belonging, and recognition within the school's social hierarchy. Viewed through the lens of beauty as social capital, this scene shows how physical attractiveness can give female characters opportunities to build social relationships and gain visibility among their peers. Her inclusion can therefore be read as a transition from social marginalization toward acceptance, in which belonging becomes a key marker of social status. However, this also raises questions about the conditional nature of friendship and whether social acceptance depends on genuine interpersonal connections or conformity to dominant beauty standards. The narrative thus provides an opportunity to examine how beauty influences female characters' access to social networks and shapes their sense of belonging.

This discussion shows that beauty is not merely a physical attribute but a form of social capital that determines a female character's visibility, desirability, and acceptance within her social environment. In a society where physical attractiveness is closely tied to social value, beauty becomes a powerful resource through which female characters gain popularity, build friendships, attract male attention, and achieve higher social status. The female character's physical transformation often marks a major turning point in her social experiences, shifting her from being overlooked or marginalized to being admired and socially accepted. This transformation suggests that her recognition and worth are not necessarily determined by her personality, abilities, or individuality but by her conformity to dominant beauty standards. Moreover, the romantic attention she receives reinforces the idea that physical attractiveness is a prerequisite for love and desire.

Although beauty seemingly empowers the female character by increasing her confidence and expanding her social opportunities, such empowerment remains conditional upon external validation. Thus, beauty operates as a mechanism of social inclusion and exclusion, exposing how patriarchal beauty standards shape women's access to recognition, affection, and belonging. Those representations reflect what Gill (2007) describes as postfeminist femininity, in which women are fostered to continuously evaluate and improve their appearance. Beauty functions not merely as a physical characteristic but as an indicator of confidence, social value, and desirability. Consequently, attractiveness becomes a key factor shaping how female characters understand themselves and how others perceive them.

Postfeminist Beauty Ideals in Wattpad Stories

Reconstructing Female Identity through Insecurity and Transformation

The makeover trope serves as a significant narrative device in reconstructing female identity, portraying physical transformation as a turning point from insecurity and social

marginalization toward confidence, recognition, and acceptance. Through changes in makeup, clothing, hairstyling, and other beauty practices, female characters who were previously overlooked or bullied become more visible, socially desirable, and romantically attractive. This transformation illustrates how beauty operates as social capital, enabling access to popularity, friendships, male attention, and higher social status. However, the apparent empowerment achieved through makeovers reveals a fundamental contradiction: although female characters gain confidence and greater social opportunities, their newfound agency remains conditional upon conformity to dominant beauty standards and external validation. Rather than challenging the social expectations that initially marginalized them, these narratives may reinforce the notion that women must improve their physical appearance to attain self-worth and social belonging. Thus, the makeover trope simultaneously represents personal reinvention and reproduces patriarchal beauty ideals, exposing the tension between female empowerment and the continued regulation of femininity through physical attractiveness.

A recurring pattern identified across the corpus is the movement from insecurity to transformation. The female characters initially feel dissatisfied with their appearance and see themselves as inadequate compared with socially desirable beauty standards. Stories such as *Far From Perfect* and *A Love Like This* directly address insecurity, body image, and self-perception. These narratives often position them as marginalized or overlooked because they fail to conform to prevailing standards of attractiveness.

This insecurity often resolves through some form of transformation*. In Diary ng Panget* and *My Personal Trainer*, transformation functions as a pivotal narrative device that alters the female characters' social position and self-confidence. Through changes in appearance, lifestyle, or self-presentation, female characters gain recognition and visibility. This pattern reflects Gill's (2007) notion of self-improvement, whereby femininity is constructed through continuous bodily work and appearance management. While the transformation appears empowering, it also reinforces the assumption that confidence and social acceptance come through physical improvement.

Beauty as Social and Romantic Capital

Male characters play a significant role in reinforcing the female characters' perceived values, particularly in narratives where physical attractiveness determines social recognition and romantic desirability. Their attention, admiration, and romantic interest often function as forms of external validation that confirm their transformation from an overlooked or marginalized individual into a desirable woman. After a makeover, male characters may notice her beauty, compliment her appearance, or compete for her affection, suggesting that her physical transformation has elevated her social and romantic status. This relationship can be examined through the interactions between female protagonists and male characters, as shown in the sample excerpts, *The Girl He Never Noticed* and *Sidelined 2: Intercepted*.

"I recalled seeing Jade entered the building earlier. My eyes suddenly focused on her. I didn't understand why I found everything about her amusing." (sweetdreamer33, 2020, Ch. 10, para 11).

"He grabbed my hand and spun me around. I threw my head back laughing as he pulled me in and dipped me. It was quick and breathtaking. The couple beside us clapped while another glared as we bumped into them. I realized we were being the obnoxious couple on the dance floor, but it was hard to stop." (Sidelined_Tubi, 2025, Ch. 7, para 28).

Such interactions can be interpreted through Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital, as physical attractiveness may function as a socially valued resource that generates symbolic

recognition and access to relationships. Gill's (2007) postfeminist framework further illuminates the contradiction between apparent empowerment and dependence on external validation. When female characters gain confidence primarily through male approval, their agency may remain constrained by conventional expectations of femininity. Nevertheless, these interpretations must be considered alongside instances in which female characters question or resist appearance-based judgments, revealing the complex relationship between beauty, romantic recognition, and female autonomy.

Female self-worth in contemporary romance narratives is frequently constructed through romantic attention, particularly when the female character becomes the object of affection of a popular, wealthy, or emotionally distant male character. The theory of capital suggests that beauty can be understood as a symbolic resource that may be converted into social capital through recognition, desirable relationships, and access to influential social circles (Bourdieu, 1986). In romance narratives, the attention of a socially privileged male character may elevate the female character's position, making her more visible, admired, and accepted. His romantic interest consequently becomes more than a personal expression of affection; it functions as a symbolic recognition that enhances her perceived social value. This dynamic links physical attractiveness, romantic desirability, and social mobility, in which the female character's beauty gains greater significance when acknowledged by someone with considerable social or economic capital.

Beauty and romantic validation reflect a postfeminist sensibility that emphasizes bodily attractiveness, self-surveillance, individual choice, and empowerment (Gill, 2007). In this framework, the female character's ability to attract a desirable male partner may be represented as evidence of her personal success, confidence, and independence. Romantic recognition appears particularly significant when the male lead is initially emotionally distant or indifferent, as his eventual affection distinguishes the female character from other girls. However, this empowering transformation reveals a contradiction. Although the female character appears to have control over her romantic life, her desirability remains subject to external evaluation. The expectation that women must continuously improve their appearance to become desirable reflects the postfeminist emphasis on individual responsibility for achieving socially recognized femininity. While aligning with Bourdieu's view, Gill's framework reveals how beauty is simultaneously presented as a reward within social hierarchies. Female empowerment may therefore be celebrated through romantic success while the social conditions that make male recognition valuable remain largely unquestioned.

These theoretical perspectives provide a basis for examining romantic recognition in *The Only Girl of Class E*, *No Second Chances*, *Silver Lining*, *Sidelined 2*, and *The Girl He Never Noticed*. In *The Girl He Never Noticed*, for example, Jade's relationship with Eros, a wealthy and initially arrogant male character, establishes a contrast between their respective social positions. Their developing romance challenges the assumption that conventional attractiveness is necessary for romantic desirability, while also offering an opportunity to examine the significance of affection from a socially privileged man. Similarly, *The Only Girl of Class E* places Jay-Jay in a predominantly male classroom, where her relationships with her classmates develop from initial hostility into friendship and romance. Her experience offers an opportunity to explore how male attention contributes to social recognition while acknowledging the importance of her personality and relationships beyond physical attractiveness.

In both narratives, romantic relationships can be examined as sites where female identity intersects with male privilege, social hierarchy, and the struggle for recognition. Rather

than assuming beauty alone determines the female character's romantic experiences, a combined Bourdieusian and postfeminist reading allows an investigation of how physical appearance, personality, class, and male approval interact to construct female desirability. The relationship between beauty and romantic validation nevertheless raises important questions about the conditions under which female characters achieve recognition and empowerment. In examining *No Second Chances*, *Silver Lining*, and *Sidelined 2*, particular attention can be directed toward whether the female character's self-worth sensibility depends upon attracting or maintaining the affection of a desirable male partner, or whether she develops an identity independently of romantic approval. *In Sidelined 2*, for instance, Dallas and Drayton must negotiate the pressures of their individual ambitions, financial difficulties, and a changing relationship, making the heroine's aspirations beyond romance relevant to the analysis.

Bourdieu's (1986) framework helps identify whether romantic relationships provide female characters with additional social recognition or reinforce existing inequalities, while Gill's (2007) postfeminist perspectives question whether their apparent empowerment remains dependent on attractiveness, self-improvement, and heterosexual desirability. Together, both perspectives encapsulate the tension between romantic recognition and independent female agency. Although being loved by a socially desirable man may be portrayed as a reward for the female characters' attractiveness or personal transformation, such recognition does not necessarily challenge the social expectations that determine their value. The central analytical question is whether these narratives place romantic attention as one aspect of the female character's personal development or as the ultimate confirmation of her beauty, femininity, and self-worth.

Resistance and Self-Acceptance

Although physical attractiveness often shapes female characters' social recognition and romantic desirability, some Wattpad narratives challenge conventional beauty standards by emphasizing self-acceptance and autonomy. Resistance emerges when female characters reject external expectations and prioritize their individuality over social or romantic approval. These representations offer an alternative understanding of femininity in which self-worth and personal fulfillment are not dependent on physical appearance or conformity to dominant beauty ideals.

Another form of resistance emerges when female characters develop self-worth independently of romantic relationships. In conventional romance narratives, a female character's confidence is often reinforced when a popular, wealthy, or attractive male character expresses romantic interest in her. A female character who embraces her physical appearance, acknowledges her abilities, and establishes meaningful relationships without relying on romantic validation demonstrates an alternative construction of female identity. Through Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital, these representations can be read as challenging social environments in which physical attractiveness functions as a valuable resource that facilitates recognition and social mobility. By refusing to prioritize beauty as the primary measure of personal value, the female character shows a form of resistance.

In *Far From Perfect*, the female character resists dominant beauty standards by embracing her appearance, even though she knows she does not conform to conventional ideals of attractiveness. Rather than seeking perfection or comparing herself negatively with other women, she experiences a moment of self-acceptance, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

"I look at myself one last time in the mirror and do a pirouette, making sure that everything is in check. I know that I am not perfect and that I definitely won't be one of the prettiest girls at the party, but for once I feel content with my appearance." (AngelicaGabriela1991, 2020, Ch. 3, para 3).
Table 5 below explains the detailed context of the sample analysis.

Table 5. Sample of Analysis

Title	Chapter	Scene Description	Analysis
Far From Perfect	Chapter 3	The protagonist is about to attend a party, so she starts getting dressed and putting on makeup.	Accepting imperfection challenges postfeminist beauty ideals.

The excerpt above illustrates an alternative construction of female confidence in which self-worth does not depend entirely on conforming to dominant beauty standards or receiving romantic validation. Although the female character acknowledges that she may not be among the most attractive girls at the party, she chooses to appreciate her appearance rather than regard her perceived imperfections as limitations. The phrase "for once I feel content" signals an emerging self-acceptance that challenges the assumption that women must achieve physical perfection to feel confident. From Gill's (2007) postfeminist perspective, this moment reveals the tension between feminine self-surveillance and personal empowerment. The female character continues to evaluate her appearance through established beauty hierarchies. Her self-acceptance is therefore not a complete rejection of conventional beauty ideals but a negotiation of their influence on her identity. The narrative opens a space for alternative femininity by suggesting that female confidence can emerge through self-recognition rather than physical transformation, social comparison, or male approval. Table 6 presents a detailed sample of the selected corpus.

Table 6. Sample of Selected Corpus

Title	Narrative	Analytical Focus
Big Boned	Lori Palmer gradually finds her voice through her artistic abilities while navigating a school that privileges thinness and conventional attractiveness.	Body positivity and identity beyond beauty.
The Girl He Never Noticed	Jade deliberately conceals her natural beauty beneath a wig, glasses, and unfashionable clothing. Her relationship with Eros raises questions about appearance and recognition.	Genuine resistance to beauty standards.
Diary ng Panget	Eya considers herself unattractive and becomes	The tension between

	romantically involved with the wealthy and handsome Cross.	challenging conventional attractiveness and depending on male validation.

Table 6 presents selected Wattpad stories that negotiate and challenge conventional beauty standards through different forms of female resistance. *In Far From Perfect*, the protagonist demonstrates self-acceptance by expressing satisfaction with her appearance despite not considering herself conventionally beautiful. Similarly, *Big Boned* portrays resistance through self-expression, creativity, and recognition of personal abilities, suggesting that female confidence can develop independently of physical attractiveness. In contrast, *Diary ng Panget* presents a more ambivalent form of resistance, as the protagonist challenges appearance-based judgments while romantic recognition remains important to her sense of desirability. Thus, while *Big Boned* emphasizes self-worth beyond conventional beauty, *Diary ng Panget* negotiates beauty standards within existing expectations of romantic acceptance. *The Girl He Never Noticed* similarly illustrates the tension between challenging conventional attractiveness and seeking romantic validation. From Bourdieu's (1986) perspective, these narratives question the social value assigned to physical beauty, while Gill's (2007) framework highlights the tension between individual agency and continued conformity to feminine ideals. Collectively, these stories demonstrate that resistance to beauty standards is neither uniform nor absolute, ranging from self-acceptance and personal autonomy to negotiated resistance shaped by romantic expectations.

Wattpad and the Circulation of Beauty Narratives

Female characters in Wattpad narratives frequently experience shame and insecurity as their bodies and appearances become subject to societal judgments shaped by dominant beauty standards. Their body size, skin color, clothing, facial features, and use pr absence of makeup become markers through which their femininity and social worth are evaluated. Social and mental pressures intensify with social class, as economic privilege often determines access to beauty products, fashionable clothing, and other resources needed to achieve socially desirable appearances. Consequently, female characters who fail to conform to those expectations may experience humiliation, social exclusion, and diminished self-worth, revealing how beauty standards operate as mechanisms of social control that reinforce gender and class inequalities.

The struggles experienced by the female characters are further reflected in the tags attached to Wattpad stories, contributing to the visibility and circulation of beauty-related narratives on the platform. Tags associated with physical appearance, body image, bullying, insecurity, social class, and romantic transformation serve not only as tools for categorizing stories but also as mechanisms through which representations of femininity become discoverable and widely circulated. By connecting narratives that depict similar experiences of appearance-based discrimination and social exclusion, these tags create a shared space where readers encounter recurring expectations about female beauty and desirability. Although the circulation of dominant beauty narratives may reinforce them, it can also create opportunities to question and resist them. Thus, tags categorize stories and reveal how Wattpad facilitates

the production, dissemination, and negotiation of beauty-related discourses within its digital literary community.

The recurrence of tags such as #truebeauty, #bodyimage, #bodypositivity demonstrates that beauty functions not only as a narrative concern but also as a discoverability mechanism on the Wattpad platform. Stories focusing on beauty, transformation, and romantic validation attract substantial reader engagement. For example, The Girl He Never Noticed accumulated approximately 228 million reads and seven million votes, indicating the popularity of narratives centered on appearance, self-worth, and romantic recognition. These findings resonate with the notion that platforms actively shape content visibility and cultural circulation through sociotechnical mechanisms (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Table 7 illustrates the Wattpad tag data as follows.

Table 7. Sample of Wattpad Tag Data

Title	Narrative	Analytical Focus
The Girl He Never Noticed	#assistant, #badboy, #beautiful, #billionaire, #boss, #ceo. #funny, #hot	Beauty may intersect with class and social mobility.
The Stars in The Morning Sky	#truebeauty, #romance, #teenromance	Beauty transformation is linked to romance.
Big Boned	#bodyimage, #bodypositivity, #comedy-romance, #firstlove	The story may discuss body insecurity and self-acceptance.
The Only Girl in Class E	#badboy, #bully, #enemiestolovers, #lovetriangle	Beauty hierarchy appears through school-based social conflict

The analysis of Wattpad tags reveals how beauty-related narratives intersect with romance, social class, body image, and social recognition. In *The Girl He Never Noticed*, tags such as #beautiful, #billionaire, #boss, and #ceo suggest a link between physical attractiveness, economic privilege, and romantic desirability. Similarly, *Stars in the Morning Sky* connects #truebeauty with #romance and #teenromance, indicating an association between beauty and adolescent romantic relationships. In contrast, *Big Boned* incorporates #bodyimage and #bodypositivity, suggesting alternative representations of femininity centered on self-acceptance, while *The Only Girl in Class E* uses #bully, #enemiestolovers, and #lovetriangle to situate female identity within school-based conflict and romantic competition. These patterns demonstrate how Wattpad tags categorize both conventional beauty narratives and those that potentially challenge dominant beauty standards.

Drawing on Van Dijck et al.'s (2018) platform society framework, Wattpad tags can be understood through datafication, selection, and commodification, which organize and potentially influence the visibility of narratives about beauty and femininity. This perspective complements Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital by illustrating how platform visibility may contribute to the symbolic value attached to physical attractiveness and social recognition. It also extends Gill's (2007) postfeminist framework by highlighting how narratives of beauty,

transformation, and empowerment circulate within digital environments. Together, these perspectives suggest that Wattpad's tagging infrastructure not only categorizes competing representations of femininity but also provides a platform through which dominant beauty ideals and alternative constructions of female identity may gain visibility and engagement.

Another crucial element to discuss is reader comments, especially those with multiple replies. This organic engagement creates space to negotiate beauty ideals. For instance, Table 8 illustrates the reader's negotiation of natural beauty standards in *The Girl He Never Noticed*.

Table 8. Sample of Wattpad Tag Data

Reader	Selected Excerpt	Interpretation
R1	"yes yes she is not like other girls. she is all natural and rest of them are fake bimbos we get the drill"	Sarcastic criticism of the natural-beauty ideal and the devaluation of other women.
R2	"Actually most guys just prefer girls with no makeup / naturally beauty"	Defense of natural beauty through perceived male preferences.
R3	"men cant tell between natural, flawless makeup look and no makeup"	Challenges the distinction between natural beauty and cosmetically produced attractiveness.

Source: Reader comments from The Girl He Never Noticed, Chapter 6, collected on 12 August 2026. Reader identities have been anonymized as R1, R2, and R3.

The interaction among these three readers illustrates how natural beauty becomes a contested concept within Wattpad's participatory reading environment. R1 sarcastically criticizes the familiar representation of a female character whose supposedly natural appearance distinguishes her from other women, questioning the tendency to construct female desirability through comparisons that devalue women who wear makeup. Conversely, R2 defends natural beauty by citing perceived male preferences, showing how female attractiveness may still be evaluated through heterosexual desirability. R3 challenges this assumption by questioning men's ability to distinguish between naturally flawless skin and makeup designed to look natural. These responses reveal competing understandings of authenticity, femininity, and attractiveness.

Van Dijck et al.'s (2018) views on the platform society framework suggest that Wattpad's comment section provides a space where readers collectively negotiate and circulate meanings of beauty through digital engagement. This perspective complements Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital by illustrating how readers' interpretations may reinforce or challenge the symbolic value attached to physical attractiveness. It also aligns with Gill's (2007) postfeminist framework by revealing tensions between self-acceptance, individual empowerment, and conventional beauty expectations. Together, these perspectives demonstrate how reader interactions contribute to the ongoing negotiation of "natural beauty," positioning Wattpad not merely as a storytelling platform but also as a participatory space where dominant and alternative ideals of femininity coexist.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Wattpad romance narratives frequently construct physical beauty as a source of social recognition, romantic desirability, and female self-worth. Through recurring

themes of insecurity, makeovers, and male validation, female characters often gain confidence and acceptance by conforming to dominant beauty ideals. However, some narratives challenge these expectations by emphasizing self-acceptance and personal autonomy. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of capital and Gill's postfeminist perspective, the findings highlight the tension between female empowerment and the continued influence of conventional beauty standards. By incorporating Van Dijck et al.'s platform society framework, this study further contributes to digital literary and gender studies by demonstrating how Wattpad stories, tags, and reader comments collectively facilitate the circulation and negotiation of beauty ideals across different linguistic and cultural contexts.

Nevertheless, the findings are limited to a purposively selected corpus of Wattpad romance stories and their associated tags and reader comments. Therefore, they cannot be generalized to all Wattpad narratives or users. The study also does not examine algorithmic recommendation systems or broader audience behaviour, limiting conclusions about platform-driven visibility and engagement.

Future research could explore beauty representations across platforms such as TikTok and Webtoon or examine how Wattpad-to-film adaptations reshape ideals of femininity and desirability. Cross-cultural audience reception studies and investigations of AI-generated romance fiction could further illuminate how emerging digital storytelling practices reproduce, negotiate, or challenge conventional beauty standards.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, editing; **Author 2**: Data curation, Writing- Original draft preparation; **Author 3**: Visualization, Investigation, Supervision; Author **4**: Software, Validation, Reviewing;

AI USAGE DECLARATION

The authors acknowledge using ChatGPT and Grammarly during the preparation of the manuscript. The tools were used solely to improve grammatical accuracy and academic terminology, assist in identifying relevant literature, and refine the wording of selected scholarly sources, preserving their intended meanings. All conceptual development, critical analyses, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this manuscript are the authors' original intellectual contributions.

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