Diet Culture and Food-Related Meanings: A Qualitative Thematic Review of Body Image and Psychological Well-Being in Asian Sociocultural Contexts

Irhum Rehman[1]; Aaliyan Shafiq[2]; Mushaim Raza Choudhary[3]

[1,2,3]Independent Researcher

[1]Applied Psychology, Kinnaird College for Women University, Pakistan
[2]Food Sciences and Technology, University of Central Punjab, Pakistan
[3]Applied Psychology, Kinnaird College for Women University, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: Irhum Rehman[*]

Abstract: Background: The culture of dieting has grown more prevalent, frequently associated with feelings of guilt regarding food, body dissatisfaction, and compromised mental health. In Asian cultural contexts, where food holds significant social and emotional significance, societal norms concerning body image and eating behaviours may produce conflicting messages that influence individuals' relationships with food. Psychological research emphasizes the importance of examining eating behaviours beyond mere nutritional outcomes, particularly concentrating on disordered eating patterns and social pressures. Objective: This article aims to challenge the normalization of dieting culture, raise awareness of disordered eating behaviours, and examine the impact of societal and peer pressure on body image, food-related attitudes, and psychological well-being. Method: This article utilizes a qualitative, narrative review methodology, drawing on established psychological and social literature related to food psychology, eating behaviours, and body image. Scholarly sources were examined to identify enduring psychological, cultural, and social factors influencing eating behaviours. Discussion: The literature review shows that social norms that focus on appearance and the culture of dieting lead to unhealthy eating habits, guilt about food, and a bad body image. Internal factors, including emotional regulation and self-perception, alongside external factors such as familial expectations, peer influence, and media exposure, were recognised as significant contributors to these experiences, particularly within Asian societies. Conclusion: The article emphasizes that the food itself is not the primary issue; rather, the perception of food requires greater focus. This conversation promotes a more compassionate and psychologically informed perspective on eating behaviours and overall health by increasing awareness and diminishing the normalization of dieting culture.

Keywords: Food Psychology; Diet Culture; Disordered Eating; Body Image; Mental Well-Being; Societal Pressure.

I. INTRODUCTION

Food is very important in many Asian cultures because it not only provides nourishment but also helps families connect, show love, and feel like they belong. Eating together, being expected to finish meals, and following culturally prescribed eating routines are widely viewed as expressions of respect, gratitude, and tradition. These early experiences with food play an important role in shaping individuals' emotional and psychological relationships with eating. However, alongside these positive cultural meanings, family and social environments often include commentary about weight, body size, and appearance. Such remarks, though frequently framed as harmless or well-intentioned, can contribute to early body dissatisfaction and the internalisation of appearance-based self-worth (Anderson-Fye, 2018; Bucchianeri et al., 2016).

In recent years, the growing acceptance of dieting culture, combined with increasing peer and media influence,

has made individuals' relationships with food even more complex. In modern digital and social spaces, restrictive eating is often portrayed as a sign of discipline, self-control, and health. Psychological research suggests that these narratives can foster food-related guilt, disordered eating behaviours, and heightened body dissatisfaction (Cruwys et al., 2016; Jacob & Panwar, 2023). Individuals may struggle to develop a neutral or intuitive approach to eating due to constant exposure to idealised body standards, particularly through social media, which encourages ongoing comparison and body surveillance (Marfil-Carmona et al., 2021). Within Asian societies, the juxtaposition of deeply food-centred traditions and intensifying appearance-related pressures creates a contradictory and psychologically taxing environment that may negatively impact mental well-being (Anderson-Fye, 2018).

For many Asian students and young adults, these mixed messages are embedded in everyday life rather than existing only in academic discussions. Individuals may experience pressure to eat generously in family settings while simultaneously feeling compelled to restrict intake in social or professional environments. Compliments about weight loss and unsolicited advice about eating less often reinforce the belief that body size determines social acceptance. Over time, such repeated interactions can disconnect individuals from internal hunger and fullness cues, leading them to rely instead on external rules and expectations about eating (Cruwys et al., 2016; Mason et al., 2018).

As a result, eating can become a source of stress rather than comfort. Food choices may no longer reflect bodily needs but instead become shaped by fear of judgment, comparison, or rejection. Among young people navigating academic demands and identity development, it may become increasingly common to experience guilt after eating, anxiety around certain foods, and persistent concern about body appearance. These patterns often remain socially unrecognised because dieting behaviours are frequently characterised as responsible or health-conscious, despite their harmful psychological consequences (Shankar-Krishnan et al., 2021).

This article underscores that challenges related to food do not arise in isolation but evolve through continuous engagement with familial expectations, peer influence, and media narratives that shape perceptions of bodies and self-esteem (Anderson-Fye, 2018; Cruwys et al., 2016). Moving beyond blame and toward understanding requires recognising these broader influences. The article therefore encourages readers to reflect on their personal relationship with food and consider how increased awareness and compassion—both individually and collectively—can support psychological well-being (Mason et al., 2018).

Ultimately, this article argues that the problem lies not in food itself, but in the way food is socially and psychologically perceived. Rather than framing eating behaviours as issues of personal discipline or moral failure, it is necessary to understand the wider psychological and sociocultural contexts in which these behaviours emerge.

Drawing on research in food psychology, social identity, and mental health, this article examines the influence of dieting culture, disordered eating behaviours, and societal pressures on body image and well-being within an Asian cultural context (Bucchianeri et al., 2016; Cruwys et al., 2016; Jacob & Panwar, 2023). In doing so, the discussion aims to challenge the normalisation of dieting culture and promote a more compassionate, psychologically informed understanding of eating behaviours.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Shankar-Krishnan (2021) describes food insecurity as the lack of consistent access to affordable and nutritious food and highlights its psychological impact on adolescents. In a study conducted with adolescents aged 12–16 in Catalonia, Spain, the researchers examined the relationship between food insecurity, psychological well-being, body dissatisfaction, disordered eating behaviours, and dietary habits. The findings showed that food-insecure adolescents experienced poorer psychological well-being, greater body dissatisfaction, and a higher drive for thinness compared to food-secure peers. These associations remained significant even after accounting for socioeconomic status, age, gender, and weight status, suggesting that food insecurity itself plays a meaningful role in shaping adolescents' mental and emotional experiences. This study emphasizes adolescence as a critical stage where food-related stress can contribute to long-term psychological difficulties. It supports the broader understanding that eating-related concerns are influenced by environmental and social factors rather than individual choice alone, reinforcing the need for early and compassionate interventions.

Carson (2021) explored how body image norms and disordered eating are experienced by female NCAA Division One distance runners. Using qualitative interviews with current and former athletes, the study examined how sport-specific body ideals and coaching relationships influence athletes' perceptions of their bodies and eating behaviours. The findings identified two key themes: strong body image ideals within the sport of distance running and the power imbalance between coaches and athletes. Athletes described feeling pressure to conform to a lean body ideal, often reinforced through coaching expectations and sport culture. These norms, combined with unequal power dynamics, were found to contribute to increased risk of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviours. This study highlights how social environments, particularly authority figures and performance-based cultures, play a significant role in shaping eating behaviours. It supports the broader view that disordered eating is not solely an individual issue but is influenced by structural and social pressures, emphasizing the need for preventative and supportive interventions in high-risk settings.

Bucchianeri et al. (2016) examined body dissatisfaction and its relationship with disordered eating and psychological well-being among a racially and socioeconomically diverse group of adolescents. Using data from a large population-based study, the research explored how these associations

differed across racial and ethnic groups. The findings showed that levels of body dissatisfaction varied significantly by race and ethnicity, with Asian American boys and girls reporting the highest dissatisfaction with their bodies. Across most groups, body dissatisfaction was strongly linked to dieting and disordered eating behaviours, suggesting that concerns about body image commonly influence eating patterns regardless of racial or ethnic background. However, differences emerged in how body dissatisfaction related to psychological well-being, including depressive symptoms and self-esteem, indicating that cultural and social contexts may shape how body image concerns are experienced emotionally. This study highlights that body dissatisfaction is a widespread issue among adolescents and is closely connected to both eating behaviours and mental health. Importantly, it underscores the need to address body image concerns across all racial and ethnic groups while remaining sensitive to cultural differences, reinforcing the relevance of a culturally informed and psychologically compassionate approach to eating and body image.

Jacob (2023) examined the rise of dieting culture in India, linking it to pop culture, thin-ideal media, and increased social media exposure, particularly during the COVID-19 lockdown. The study explored how diet culture influenced dietary patterns, body image, mindful eating, and appearance confidence among Indian adults aged 18 to 55. Using standardized questionnaires, the research highlighted how restrictive eating, meal skipping, and counter-regulatory eating became more common as individuals attempted to achieve socially desirable body ideals. The findings showed significant age and gender differences in eating behaviors and body image perceptions. Meal skipping, snacking habits, and dissatisfaction with body fat and height were more prominent in certain age and gender groups, suggesting that dieting culture does not affect everyone in the same way. Importantly, higher exposure to social media and diet-related content was associated with changes in how individuals ate and how they perceived their bodies. This study highlights how diet culture, amplified by media and societal pressures, can shape eating behaviors and body image within an Asian context. It supports the view that disordered eating patterns are influenced by cultural and social environments rather than individual choice alone, reinforcing the need to critically examine the normalization of dieting culture and its psychological impact.

Cruwys et al. (2016) highlight disordered eating and dangerous dieting as major public health concerns and argue that these behaviours cannot be fully understood without considering social and psychological influences. Rather than viewing disordered eating as an individual issue, the authors propose that social environments play a central role in shaping eating-related thoughts and behaviours. The study emphasizes three key factors: social norms, social identity, and social context. According to their social-psychological model, individuals are more likely to adopt disordered eating behaviours when restrictive or appearance-focused norms align with the social groups they identify with. For example, dieting behaviours may feel normal within certain peer, cultural, or social media groups, making them more likely to

be internalized and acted upon. This perspective reinforces the idea that disordered eating develops within social settings rather than in isolation. It supports the argument that societal expectations and group norms strongly influence individuals' relationships with food, highlighting the importance of addressing social pressures and collective beliefs when seeking to understand or prevent disordered eating behaviours.

Anderson-Fye (2018) emphasizes that body image concerns and eating disorders are deeply shaped by sociocultural factors rather than existing solely at an individual level. Drawing on evidence from multiple disciplines, the author highlights how cultural values, social expectations, and shared meanings influence how bodies and eating behaviours are understood and evaluated within different societies. The chapter also discusses the impact of globalization, noting that increased exposure to global beauty ideals and media representations has intensified appearance-related pressures across cultures. As societies become more interconnected, traditional beliefs about food and the body increasingly interact with Westernized thin ideals, creating new tensions and vulnerabilities. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding eating-related concerns in non-Western and Asian contexts. Overall, Anderson-Fye's work reinforces the importance of examining eating behaviours and body image through a cultural lens. It supports the argument that meaningful research and interventions must account for broader sociocultural influences and interdisciplinary insights to address the complex psychological experiences surrounding food and body image.

Mason et al. (2018) reviewed existing research on disordered eating and body image concerns among sexual minority women, highlighting how social and psychological pressures contribute to these experiences. The review found that many factors linked to disordered eating, such as low self-esteem, negative emotions, and limited social support, were similar to those affecting heterosexual women. However, sexual minority women also faced additional stressors related to gender roles, sexual objectification, and minority stress. The findings suggest that experiences related to gender and sexual orientation can intensify internalization of sociocultural body ideals and negatively affect emotion regulation. These pressures increase body image concerns, which may then lead to disordered eating behaviours. This pathway highlights how social identity and social stress shape individuals' relationships with their bodies and food. This review reinforces the idea that disordered eating is influenced by broader social and cultural contexts rather than personal choice alone. It emphasizes the importance of considering identity-based pressures and social environments when examining eating behaviours and psychological well-being.

Marfil-Carmona et al. (2021) examined the impact of mass media on psychological well-being, physical activity, and dietary habits, highlighting the broader role of media in shaping health-related behaviours. Using a structural equation model, the study found that mass media exerted a direct influence on psychological well-being and had

negative effects on both physical activity levels and adherence to a healthy diet. These findings suggest that media exposure can indirectly affect individuals' relationships with food and physical health by shaping emotions and lifestyle choices. The study also revealed notable gender differences. Among men, higher psychological well-being was associated with greater physical activity and healthier dietary patterns. In contrast, women's well-being was less directly influenced by mass media pressure; instead, personal satisfaction played a more significant role in supporting healthy behaviours. This indicates that media messages may interact differently with psychological factors across genders. Overall, this research reinforces the idea that food-related behaviours are not solely individual choices but are embedded within media-driven social environments. It underscores the importance of physical-health education as a preventive strategy to promote healthier relationships with food, body, and well-being in a media-saturated society.

➢ *Research Question:*

- How does dieting culture affect our relationship with food and how we see ourselves?
- Why do some people develop unhealthy eating patterns, and what psychological and social factors play a role?
- How do family, friends, social media, and society shape body image, eating behaviors, and mental well-being?

III. METHODOLOGY

➢ *Research Design*

This article adopts a qualitative narrative review methodology with an integrated thematic analysis approach to examine how dieting culture influences individuals' relationships with food, body image, and psychological well-being, particularly within Asian cultural contexts. A qualitative narrative design was selected because dieting culture is not merely a nutritional issue but a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by cultural expectations, interpersonal pressures, emotional experiences, and identity development.

Narrative reviews are especially suitable for exploring complex psychological and sociocultural topics, as they allow for the synthesis of diverse bodies of research and the interpretation of how broader social forces contribute to disordered eating attitudes and body dissatisfaction. This approach aligns with the article's aim of challenging the normalisation of dieting culture and promoting a more compassionate understanding of eating behaviours.

➢ *Data Sources and Literature Identification*

The review is based on existing scholarly literature drawn from the fields of food psychology, social psychology, mental health, and cultural studies. Relevant academic sources were identified through searches of peer-reviewed journals and scholarly databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, and PsycINFO.

Search terms included combinations of:

- Diet culture
- Disordered eating behaviours
- Body dissatisfaction
- Food-related guilt
- Media influence on body image
- Peer and familial pressure
- Asian cultural norms and eating

The selected studies provided psychological and sociocultural insight into how dieting practices become normalised and how external pressures shape food-related beliefs and behaviours.

➢ *Inclusion Criteria*

To ensure academic relevance and quality, sources were included based on the following criteria:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, or scholarly book chapters
- Direct focus on dieting culture, body image, or disordered eating
- Emphasis on psychological outcomes such as guilt, shame, anxiety, or reduced well-being
- Consideration of social influences, including family, peers, and media
- Inclusion of culturally diverse populations, with particular relevance to Asian or collectivist contexts

This ensured that the review captured both universal psychological mechanisms and culturally specific experiences related to food and body ideals.

➢ *Thematic Analysis and Synthesis*

A thematic analysis was employed to interpret and organise patterns across the reviewed literature. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method that allows researchers to identify recurring meanings, concepts, and social mechanisms within existing research. The literature was examined through repeated reading and comparison, and key findings were coded into broader thematic categories. This process resulted in several dominant themes, including:

- The normalisation of restrictive dieting practices
- Familial and cultural reinforcement of body ideals
- Peer influence and appearance-based social comparison
- Media-driven thin-ideal internalisation
- Emotional regulation through eating control
- Psychological consequences such as guilt, anxiety, and body dissatisfaction

These themes were interpreted through established psychological frameworks, including sociocultural models of body image, social identity theory, and emotional coping perspectives. This thematic synthesis highlighted that dieting behaviours often emerge as responses to social expectations and internalised appearance pressures rather than purely health-driven choices.

Table 1 Key Themes Identified in the Narrative Review

Theme	Description	Example From Literature	Psychological Impact
Normalisation of Diet Culture	Dieting and food restriction are socially framed as signs of discipline, health, and success, becoming culturally accepted behaviours.	Jacob (2023); Cruwys et al. (2016)	Internalised pressure to restrict eating, guilt after food consumption, increased body monitoring.
Familial and Cultural Expectations	Family environments often reinforce body ideals through comments about weight, appearance, and socially prescribed eating norms, particularly in Asian contexts.	Anderson-Fye (2018); Bucchianeri et al. (2016)	Early development of body dissatisfaction, self-worth tied to appearance, fear of judgment.
Peer Influence and Social Comparison	Peer groups and social identity shape eating behaviours by establishing appearance-based norms and reinforcing thin ideals.	Cruwys et al. (2016); Carson (2021)	Heightened comparison, dieting as a coping mechanism for acceptance, social anxiety.
Media and Thin-Ideal Internalisation	Social media and mass media promote unrealistic body standards, contributing to appearance-focused self-evaluation.	Marfil-Carmona et al. (2021); Anderson-Fye (2018)	Increased dissatisfaction, distorted body perception, vulnerability to disordered eating behaviours.
Body Dissatisfaction and Self-Perception	Negative evaluations of one's body become strongly linked to dieting behaviours and emotional distress across diverse populations.	Bucchianeri et al. (2016); Mason et al. (2018)	Low self-esteem, depressive symptoms, internalised shame.
Emotional Regulation and Coping Through Eating Control	Restrictive eating patterns often emerge as emotional coping responses to stress, shame, or loss of control rather than health motivations.	Mason et al. (2018); Shankar-Krishnan (2021)	Anxiety, obsessive food-related thoughts, reliance on dieting for emotional stability.
Psychological Consequences of Disordered Eating Norms	Diet culture contributes to long-term mental health risks by reinforcing guilt, fear, and unhealthy relationships with food.	Shankar-Krishnan (2021); Cruwys et al. (2016)	Disordered eating patterns, chronic stress, reduced psychological well-being.

➢ *Cultural Contextualisation*

A central methodological strength of this review is its emphasis on the Asian sociocultural context, where food carries strong emotional, familial, and symbolic meaning. In many Asian communities, eating is closely tied to belonging, respect, and relational bonding.

However, these traditions increasingly coexist with globalised thin-ideal standards and modern diet culture narratives. This creates a psychologically conflicting environment in which individuals may experience pressure to simultaneously participate in food-centred family life while conforming to restrictive appearance expectations.

By situating dieting culture within this cultural tension, the article provides a deeper understanding of how disordered eating attitudes may emerge not simply from personal choices, but from socially constructed expectations and identity pressures.

➢ *Reflexive Component*

In addition to academic literature, the article incorporates a limited reflexive perspective, acknowledging how personal and cultural experiences can illuminate broader psychological processes.

Reflexivity is used not as anecdotal evidence, but as a contextual lens to demonstrate how everyday comments about weight, appearance, and food choices can contribute to internalised body dissatisfaction. This strengthens the narrative review by grounding theoretical research in lived cultural realities, while maintaining an academically sensitive and non-pathologising tone.

➢ *Ethical Considerations*

As this article is based entirely on secondary academic literature and does not involve direct participant recruitment, formal ethical approval was not required.

Nevertheless, ethical principles were maintained through:

- The use of respectful and non-stigmatising language
- Avoiding moral judgments regarding body size or eating habits
- Recognising cultural sensitivity around food practices
- Presenting dieting culture as a societal issue rather than an individual failure

The overall intention is to promote awareness and psychological compassion, rather than blame or prescriptive assumptions.

IV. FINDINGS

The thematic synthesis of the reviewed literature revealed that dieting culture shapes individuals' relationships with food and body image through interconnected psychological and sociocultural pathways. Rather than being driven solely by health motivations, restrictive eating behaviours and food-related guilt are strongly influenced by social norms, cultural expectations, interpersonal pressures, and media-driven body ideals. The themes identified in Table 1 demonstrate that dieting culture operates not as an individual issue, but as a socially reinforced system that affects emotional well-being, self-perception, and eating patterns, particularly within appearance-focused environments and Asian cultural contexts.

A dominant theme across the literature was the normalisation of dieting culture, where restrictive eating practices are socially framed as responsible, healthy, or admirable behaviours. Jacob (2023) highlighted how exposure to diet-related media and thin-ideal narratives contributed to increased meal skipping, restrictive eating, and dissatisfaction with body appearance among Indian adults. Similarly, Cruwys et al. (2016) argued that disordered eating behaviours often become normalised when dieting aligns with the accepted norms of one's social group. These findings suggest that dieting is frequently internalised not as a personal health choice, but as a culturally rewarded form of self-control, which can lead to guilt, anxiety, and unhealthy relationships with food.

The findings also emphasised the powerful influence of family and cultural environments in shaping eating behaviours and body ideals. In many Asian societies, food is deeply tied to tradition, connection, and belonging; however, family discourse often reinforces appearance-based judgments. Bucchianeri et al. (2016) found that Asian American adolescents reported particularly high levels of body dissatisfaction, which was strongly associated with dieting and disordered eating behaviours. Anderson-Fye (2018) further noted that cultural meanings attached to the body are shaped by both traditional values and globalised beauty ideals. Together, these studies highlight that body dissatisfaction often develops through repeated familial and cultural messaging that equates thinness with worth and acceptance.

Peer influence and appearance-based social comparison emerged as another significant theme. Cruwys et al. (2016) proposed that disordered eating is more likely to develop when restrictive eating norms are embedded within the social identities individuals adopt. Carson (2021) similarly demonstrated how athletes experienced heightened pressure to conform to lean body ideals due to sport culture and coaching expectations. These findings suggest that dieting behaviours are often socially enacted, shaped through comparison, belonging, and fear of negative evaluation, rather than purely individual preference.

The literature consistently identified media exposure as a major contributor to dieting culture and body dissatisfaction. Social media and mass media promote unrealistic appearance standards that encourage individuals to monitor, critique, and compare their bodies. Marfil-Carmona et al. (2021) found that mass media directly influenced psychological well-being and negatively affected dietary habits and lifestyle behaviours. Anderson-Fye (2018) further emphasised that globalisation has intensified thin-ideal internalisation across cultures, creating new vulnerabilities in non-Western societies. These findings indicate that media-driven ideals play a central role in reinforcing dieting culture and shaping harmful perceptions of food and body image.

Body dissatisfaction was identified as a core psychological mechanism linking sociocultural pressures to disordered eating behaviours. Bucchianeri et al. (2016) demonstrated that dissatisfaction with body shape and size was strongly associated with dieting across racial and ethnic groups, although emotional consequences varied culturally. Mason et al. (2018) further highlighted that body image concerns are intensified when individuals experience identity-based stressors, such as gender role expectations or minority stress. These findings reinforce that dieting culture fosters distorted self-perception, where individuals evaluate their worth through appearance, increasing vulnerability to shame, low self-esteem, and unhealthy eating patterns.

Another important theme was the role of emotional regulation in dieting behaviours. Restrictive eating often functions as a coping response to stress, shame, or perceived loss of control, rather than a health-based decision. Mason et al. (2018) noted that negative emotions and limited social support increase vulnerability to disordered eating, while Shankar-Krishnan et al. (2021) found that adolescents facing food-related stress experienced poorer psychological well-being and greater drive for thinness. These findings suggest that dieting frequently emerges as an emotional strategy for managing insecurity and social pressure, contributing to long-term psychological distress.

Finally, the literature highlighted the broader psychological consequences of dieting culture. Disordered eating norms contribute to chronic stress, anxiety, guilt, and reduced mental well-being. Shankar-Krishnan et al. (2021) demonstrated that food-related insecurity and body dissatisfaction significantly predicted poorer psychological outcomes during adolescence. Cruwys et al. (2016) further argued that dieting culture becomes harmful when restrictive norms are

socially reinforced and internalised as normal behaviour. These findings support the conclusion that dieting culture poses a significant mental health concern, requiring greater societal awareness and culturally sensitive interventions.

Overall, the thematic analysis based on Table 1 demonstrates that dieting culture affects individuals through interconnected themes of social normalisation, familial and peer pressure, media-driven ideals, body dissatisfaction, emotional coping, and psychological distress. The findings

reinforce the central argument of this article: food itself is not the primary issue, but rather the socially constructed meanings, expectations, and pressures surrounding food and body image that shape unhealthy relationships with eating and self-worth. Addressing these themes requires a shift away from blame and toward greater psychological compassion and cultural awareness.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this narrative thematic review highlight that dieting culture is not simply an individual lifestyle trend but a deeply embedded sociocultural phenomenon that shapes psychological well-being, body image, and relationships with food. Across the reviewed literature, dieting behaviours consistently emerged as responses to socially constructed appearance ideals rather than genuine health needs. This supports the central argument of this article: food itself is not inherently the problem, but the meanings and moral values assigned to food through societal pressure are what create distress and dysfunction.

A key insight from the thematic analysis is the normalisation of restrictive eating practices. Diet culture has become widely accepted in modern social discourse, often framed as self-discipline, responsibility, or wellness. As Jacob (2023) demonstrated, restrictive patterns such as meal skipping and dieting are increasingly common, particularly under the influence of social media. Cruwys et al. (2016) further argued that these behaviours are reinforced through group norms and social identity, making dieting feel like an expected and even admired behaviour. This normalisation is dangerous because it masks harmful eating patterns as socially acceptable, allowing disordered behaviours to go unnoticed and unchallenged.

The discussion also highlights the powerful influence of cultural and familial expectations, particularly within Asian contexts. Food is traditionally associated with belonging, respect, and emotional connection in many Asian societies. However, this cultural richness often coexists with appearance-based scrutiny, where weight and body size become subjects of casual commentary and social evaluation. Bucchianeri et al. (2016) found particularly high levels of body dissatisfaction among Asian adolescents, suggesting that cultural pressures surrounding body ideals may begin early and persist throughout development. Anderson-Fye (2018) further noted that globalisation intensifies these tensions, as Western thin ideals increasingly interact with traditional cultural values, creating conflicting expectations around eating and appearance.

Peer influence and social comparison were also central mechanisms through which dieting culture operates. The findings suggest that individuals often adopt restrictive eating practices not in isolation but through social environments that reward thinness and reinforce body monitoring. Carson (2021) illustrated this clearly in sport settings, where performance cultures and authority dynamics contribute to heightened vulnerability to disordered eating. These pressures are not limited to athletics; they extend into everyday peer interactions and social media spaces where appearance-based validation shapes self-worth.

Media exposure remains one of the strongest contributors to dieting culture, promoting unrealistic body standards that encourage comparison and dissatisfaction. Marfil-Carmona et al. (2021) demonstrated that mass media negatively affects psychological well-being and dietary behaviours, reinforcing the idea that external messaging plays a major role in shaping eating attitudes. In contemporary digital environments, individuals are continuously exposed to idealised bodies and diet narratives, making it increasingly difficult to develop a neutral or intuitive relationship with food.

Importantly, the findings also reveal that dieting often functions as an emotional coping mechanism rather than a health-driven decision. Shame, stress, insecurity, and low self-esteem frequently underlie restrictive eating behaviours, as highlighted by Mason et al. (2018). Shankar-Krishnan et al. (2021) further showed that food-related stress and insecurity are strongly linked to psychological distress and drive for thinness during adolescence. This suggests that dieting culture contributes to harmful emotional cycles where food becomes associated with guilt and control rather than nourishment and care.

Overall, this discussion reinforces the need to shift away from individualised blame and toward a broader understanding of the social, cultural, and psychological systems that shape eating behaviours. Dieting culture is sustained through collective norms, media messaging, familial discourse, and internalised ideals, making it a public mental health concern rather than merely a personal issue.

VI. LIMITATIONS

Despite its contributions, this article has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study adopts a qualitative narrative review methodology rather than a systematic review approach. While this allows for flexible, interpretive synthesis of diverse literature, it may introduce selection bias and limits the replicability of findings. The absence of formal systematic protocols means that the reviewed studies represent a theoretically informed rather than exhaustive body of research.

Second, the article does not include primary empirical data. All conclusions are drawn from existing literature, which restricts the ability to make causal claims about the relationship between dieting culture, body image, and psychological well-being. The findings therefore reflect patterns and themes identified across studies rather than direct lived experiences collected by the author.

Third, although the article focuses on Asian sociocultural contexts, the literature reviewed draws from a range of populations, including Asian, Asian diaspora, and multicultural samples. As a result, the term "Asian" encompasses diverse cultural experiences that may differ significantly across regions, socioeconomic groups, and

national contexts. This limits the specificity with which conclusions can be generalised to any single Asian population.

Finally, the article primarily examines dieting culture from a critical psychological perspective and gives limited attention to contexts in which dietary regulation may be medically indicated. This emphasis, while intentional, may overlook nuances related to clinical health conditions where structured dietary interventions are necessary.

➢ *Future Implications and Directions*
The findings of this narrative review highlight several important directions for future research, practice, and policy. Future studies would benefit from incorporating empirical qualitative or mixed-method designs to explore lived experiences of dieting culture within specific Asian communities. In-depth interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic approaches could provide richer insight into how familial discourse, peer relationships, and media exposure shape eating behaviours over time.

Longitudinal research is particularly needed to examine how early exposure to appearance-related commentary and dieting norms influences body image and psychological well-being across developmental stages. Such research could clarify how dieting culture becomes internalised and how its effects evolve from adolescence into adulthood.

From a clinical perspective, the findings suggest the need for psychologically informed and culturally sensitive interventions. Mental health professionals should consider assessing dieting behaviours as potential indicators of emotional distress, identity conflict, or social pressure rather than solely as health-oriented choices. Therapeutic approaches that emphasise emotional regulation, body neutrality, and intuitive eating may help individuals rebuild healthier relationships with food.

At a broader societal level, the article underscores the importance of media literacy and body image education. Educational institutions and public health initiatives could play a role in challenging appearance-based norms and reducing the moralisation of food. Policy efforts aimed at regulating misleading diet-related media content and promoting body diversity may further contribute to improved psychological well-being.

Overall, future work should continue to shift the conversation away from individual blame and toward an understanding of dieting culture as a socially constructed mental health concern embedded within cultural, relational, and media-driven systems.

VII. CONCLUSION

This article set out to explore how dieting culture influences relationships with food, body image, and psychological well-being, particularly within Asian cultural contexts where food holds deep social and emotional meaning. The thematic review demonstrates that the challenges surrounding eating are rarely about food itself, but rather about the social pressures, cultural expectations, and internalised appearance ideals that shape how individuals perceive their bodies and eating behaviours.

The findings highlight that dieting culture is normalised through peer norms, familial commentary, and media-driven thin ideals, contributing to widespread body dissatisfaction, guilt, and disordered eating patterns. Restrictive eating is often reinforced as a socially valued behaviour, masking psychological distress beneath narratives of discipline and wellness. Furthermore, dieting frequently emerges as a coping response to shame, insecurity, and emotional regulation difficulties, rather than as a genuine health-based choice.

Ultimately, addressing dieting culture requires a shift toward greater psychological compassion and cultural awareness. Promoting healthier relationships with food involves challenging appearance-based norms, reducing stigma around body diversity, and recognising the emotional and social dimensions of eating. By reframing food as nourishment rather than morality, individuals and societies can move toward more supportive and mentally healthy approaches to well-being.

The article concludes that food is not the enemy; rather, it is the societal relationship with food—constructed through pressure, comparison, and unrealistic ideals—that must be examined and transformed.

➢ *Conflict of Interest Statement*
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

➢ *Ethical Statement*
This article is based solely on secondary analysis of existing academic literature. No primary data were collected, and ethical approval was not required.

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