

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Beauty is one of the most significant factors in a woman's appearance. In recent years, beauty standards have become a widely discussed social issue, particularly among teenage girls (Purwaningtyas et al., 2025). These standards refer to the ideals of physical appearance that are culturally defined and socially promoted, which may vary across different societies. Physical standards of beauty are generally seen in body shape, the proportionality of height and weight, hair color, the arrangement of teeth, the shape of the lips, jaw, nose, eyes and eyebrows, the shape of the legs and hands, and skin color (Paudel et al., 2025), such as fair and flawless skin that is often portrayed by mass media.

Nowadays, a stigmatized concept of beauty has emerged in society that is attached to women, leading to discrimination against them based on this beauty stereotype and generating a lack of self-confidence among women. Women who fail to conform to dominant beauty standards in a contemporary society are often perceived as unattractive or undesirable, and may experience social stigma, discrimination, and marginalization (Dubey, 2025). As a result of this stereotype, women are required to conform to ideal standards that define what is considered beautiful in order to be accepted by society. The ideal body shape has become an obsession for women in their pursuit of appearing perfect in society. This issue of women's body image ultimately positions women as objects, implying that their bodies are worthy of scrutiny, which in turn leads women to fail to love their own

bodies. This phenomenon creates psychological pressure on women, especially those who are still developing their self-identity, leading them to engage in dangerous behaviors such as extreme dieting, cosmetic surgery, or other unsafe practices in an attempt to conform to these ideals.

This phenomenon of beauty standards also has a real impact on women in Indonesia. This can be seen through the widespread circulation of beauty-related content in advertisement, magazines, and social media. A study conducted by Purwaningtyas et al. (2025), which involved two teenage girls who experienced social pressure related to beauty standards, shows that self-confidence regarding physical appearance is influenced by social media, advertisements, and the popular culture of other countries that present an ideal image of beauty. In the Indonesian cultural context, beauty standards also create a social construct in which women are expected to be slim and have fair skin (Rakhma Islamey, 2020). These standards are closely related to the influence of American and European colonialism, as the dominance of Western culture continues to shape worldwide perceptions of women's beauty (Mady et al., 2023).

Dubey (2025) stated that beauty standards are reinforced through various channels, including traditional media, social media, family, and peers. Family members and peers shape these perceptions by praising individuals who conform to beauty standards and criticizing deviation from accepted beauty ideals. Moreover, Contemporary media plays a significant role in shaping representations of ideal beauty and body image by promoting various ideologies related to the beauty myth for women. Television, advertisements, magazines, the film industry, and social media platforms amplify these norms through curated images and videos

that promote trends and reinforce conventional beauty standards (Dubey, 2025). As a result, consciously or unconsciously, women continue to demand themselves to fit into the criteria of the ideal woman as defined by societal standards.

Beauty standards that indirectly oppress and pressure women have been widely represented through contemporary media, such as the film industry. One form of contemporary media entertainment that frequently represents ideal beauty through its films is Walt Disney. Through the creation of Disney princesses, Disney has presented figures that have served as representations of ideal beauty for decades (Silalahi et al., 2023). For instance, Cinderella, the second Disney princess created, represents the idealized concept of beauty (Hazem Elboraie, 2025). In relation to Disney princess films, Cinderella also carries various values, ideas, and images of women within society, which depicts how women are expected to behave and think according to social norms.

Cinderella is one of the classic fairy tales that has the earliest known version from ancient Greece. One of the most famous versions was written by French author Charles Perrault in 1697, which introduced the fairy godmother, the pumpkin-turned-carriage, and the iconic glass slipper. As the story of Cinderella's popularity grew, Walt Disney adapted and released the animated film of Cinderella, which has since become the standard for the contemporary version. Although Cinderella has been created in numerous versions, its main storyline generally remains the same (Mohammadhanif Quraishi δ, 2025). Cinderella is commonly portrayed as a beautiful young woman who is exploited by her stepmother and stepsisters after the death of her biological mother. As the Prince becomes interested in her at their meeting at the ball, Cinderella subsequently leaves in a hurry and loses one of her

shoes while trying to conceal her identity. The Prince then declares that he will marry the woman whose foot fits the shoe. In the end, Cinderella married the Prince and escaped the mistreatment of her stepmother and stepsisters. To this day, the Cinderella story continues to be adapted in various forms, including the recent film *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025), as the twisted take on Cinderella's classic tale.

The Ugly Stepsister, or Den Stygge Stesøsteren (2025), is a Norwegian dark comedy and body-horror film that premiered at the 2025 Sundance Film Festival on January 23, 2025, at the Library Center Theatre in Park City, UT. As stated by Emilie Blichfeldt in an interview with *Script Magazine*, *The Ugly Stepsister* is set in the nineteenth century, particularly between the 1850s and 1880s. She explains that the film's costume designs were partially inspired by Victorian silhouettes, while the depiction of cosmetic procedures draws on the emergence of early rhinoplasty and aesthetic surgery during the 1880s. This film further explores themes of beauty standards and societal expectations shaped by patriarchal systems, revealing how far an individual is willing to sacrifice themselves in pursuit of social acceptance. In contrast to the perspective of the classic Cinderella such as Disney *Cinderella* (2015) film, which centers the story on Ella as Cinderella, *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025) focuses more on Elvira as the oppressed stepsister rather than on Agnes, who represents Cinderella in the film. Elvira's portrayal as a young woman living under the shadow of her sister's conventional beauty explores how physical appearance becomes a measure of social value and how women's identities are shaped by constructed standards of beauty. By centering the story on Elvira, the core issue in this film is not merely the classic moral conflict over the relationship between the stepsisters, but rather the manifestation of structural control over

women's bodies legitimized and regulated by constructed beauty standards in that era, where women's appearance was closely associated with their moral character, social class, and marriageability (Kaur, 2024). The ideal feminine appearance emphasized a pale complexion, a slender waist with corsetry, a symmetrical face, a small and well-proportioned nose, and an hourglass silhouette (Howes, 2026). These beauty ideals are reflected throughout *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025) film, where Elvira was expected to discipline and modify her body by undergoing various beauty procedures and extreme practices in order to conform to these ideals, making physical appearance an important measure of her social value. Additionally, according to IMDb data, this film earned 6 awards & 24 nominations, including the Best Motion Picture at The 58th Sitges International Fantastic Film Festival of Catalonia, the Best International Film at The 53rd Saturn Awards, and the Best Achievement in Makeup and Hairstyling at the Academy Awards (Oscar) 2026.

Naomi Wolf's Beauty Myth was chosen as the main approach in this study, as it helps me to understand how women are pressured by patriarchal society to look a certain way and meet social expectations, particularly those of males. As Naomi Wolf argues in her influential work *The Beauty Myth* (2002), beauty is not about objective physical appearance, but rather a system of political currency used to maintain patriarchal dominance and control women's agency. The beauty myth makes women feel unsatisfied, anxious, and inferior when their bodies do not fit the ideal standard. As stated by Wolf (2002), women's physical appearance becomes an instrument of punishment when body dissatisfaction turns into body hatred. They are encouraged to follow certain beauty standards, such as having an ideal body, fair skin, or a perfect face, with the promise that beauty will bring

happiness, love, or success. This theory is relevant to the analysis of *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025) because Elvira's body is constantly judged, disciplined, and modified in order to make her fit into the ideal standards of beauty. By depicting beauty as an aspect that is crucial to Elvira's identity, this myth creates pressure for Elvira to constantly strive to achieve unrealistic beauty standards through physical pain and self-destructive practices. Therefore, Wolf's Beauty Myth is relevant for analyzing how the film portrays beauty as a form of patriarchal control over women's bodies and identities.

Several previous studies have used Naomi Wolf's Beauty Myth theory to examine how female characters experience oppression through socially constructed beauty standards. The first study is conducted by Heri Okta Sayekti and Sari Fitria (2022), titled "*Beauty Standard as a Construction of Woman Objectification in Trisha R. Thomas's Nappily Ever After.*" This study aimed to analyze how beauty standards construct female objectification and how the main character struggles against these standards. The second study is conducted by Amanda Octariani (2025), titled "*The Portrayal of Beauty Myth in Uglies Movie (2024),*" examine how female characters experience the beauty myth in various aspects and how the beauty myth functions as a hegemonic tool to control individuals in *Uglies* (2024).

Additionally, many studies have been conducted on the Disney Cinderella in various fields of study. However, the focus and scope of these studies are varied, indicating a gap in research that this study will fill. One of the previous studies that have explored Cinderella's tale and film with feminist theory, such as the study titled "*Depiction of Patriarchal Society in Disney's Cinderella*" by Hani et al. (2022), focuses to examine the patriarchal society of Disney's Cinderella using the

theory of the patriarchal system from Kate Millet (1970a). A similar study was found in Mardiyah (2022) that also explored Cinderella (2021) film, titled “*The Portrayed of Liberal Feminism in the Main Character in Cinderella (2021) Film*,” focusing on Ella’s character while fighting for her dreams and her desires and to find out the values of liberal feminism using the theory of character and characterization by Boogs and Patrie and Liberal Feminism theory. A similar study of Cinderella (2021) film was conducted by Palguna (2023), titled “*Liberal Feminism Portrayed in Dialog on the Main Character of Cinderella 2021 Movie*,” analyze how liberal feminism is described through the main character, Ella, when against the inequality that happens to her using Tong’s theory.

However, only a limited number of studies have specifically examined *The Ugly Stepsister (2025)* film. One of the previous studies is conducted by Yosefina Delong Jawa Weking et al. (2025), titled “*Analisis Semiotika Roland Barthes Pada Poster Film The Ugly Stepsister*,” analyze each visual element and symbolic components contained in the film that present a horror impression using Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory by displaying the objects that depicts the marginalized character perspectives in the story. Second, the study conducted by Campos (2026), titled “*Abjection as an Interruption of the Aesthetic Canon: Body, Semiosis, and Beauty in The Ugly Stepsister (2025)*,” analyze abjection as an interpretant that challenges dominant beauty discourse in *The Ugly Stepsister (2025)*. This study using Peirce’s semiotic to examine how beauty is constructed through cultural processes of meaning-making, and draws on the integrate contributions of Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, David Le Breton, and Jean Baudrillard’s frameworks that discuss the abject body, bodily norms, and contemporary representations of beauty,

to reveal the violence behind the aesthetic canon and the competition among female bodies.

In contrast to these previous studies, this research focuses on the portrayal of beauty myth oppression through Elvira's character in *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025). As a recent retelling of the classic Cinderella's tale, the film shifts attention to the marginalized stepsister and presents beauty as a standard that shapes women's social value. This research aims to fill the gap by analyzing how beauty myth oppression is portrayed through Elvira, who is positioned as inferior because she fails to meet idealized beauty standards. Her experience reflects how patriarchal society defines women's worth through physical appearance and pressures them to transform their bodies in order to gain acceptance. Using Naomi Wolf's Beauty Myth theory, this research examines how the film exposes beauty standards as a form of patriarchal control that contributes to women's oppression.

1.2. Research Question

1. How is the oppression of the beauty myth portrayed through Elvira's internalization of beauty standards in *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025)?
2. How does the oppression of the beauty myth affect Elvira in *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025)?

1.3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze how the beauty myth functions as a form of oppression by shaping Elvira's internalization of beauty standards that lead her to engage in extreme beauty practices, and to examine the effects of these practices in *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025).

1.4. Limitation of the Study

This research focuses on analyzing the representation of Elvira's character in *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025), focusing on how her character reflects the portrayal of beauty myth oppression within society.

1.5. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is to provide a deeper understanding of how the concept of beauty myth continues to appear in women's lives as a form of social control regarding physical appearance represented in contemporary media. By analyzing Elvira's transformation and struggle, this research highlights the ideas of how women attempt to adapt to societal expectations within a patriarchal system. Furthermore, by highlighting the persistence of beauty myth oppression within patriarchal system, this study draws parallels between the film narrative and real-world social conditions in which women continue to experience pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards, particularly through media representations and social expectations. Therefore, this study is expected to raise awareness of how beauty standards can influence women's perceptions of themselves through forms of oppression that are often normalized in everyday life.

1.6. State of the Art

This research uses the newest adaptation and reimagining of classical Cinderella, *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025), which focuses more from the point of view of the marginalized stepsisters that takes a body horror twist on the classic story. The theories that will be used to analyze this research are feminist theory, particularly The Beauty Myth theory by Naomi Wolf. Although many previous studies have used feminist theory to analyze Cinderella's story and film, this

research focuses more on analyzing the issue of beauty myth through Elvira's internalization of beauty standards in *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025).

