

## Deconstructing Beauty: A Critical Discourse Analysis of *Why You Think You're Ugly* by Melissa Butler

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Keywords:</b> Beauty Standards, Critical Discourse Analysis, Melissa Butler, TED Talk.</p> <p><b>DOI:</b> <a href="https://doi.org/10.22437/langue.v3i2.43936">https://doi.org/10.22437/langue.v3i2.43936</a></p> <p><b>Received:</b> May 10, 2025</p> <p><b>Reviewed:</b> June 24, 2025</p> <p><b>Accepted:</b> June 30, 2025</p>	<p>One of the most important areas of focus in English instruction, especially at higher levels, is the ability to interpret and assess the underlying meanings of written and spoken texts, particularly those that deal with social issues. To help students develop their critical thinking and discourse analysis skills, teachers can include real-world materials like TED Talks in English language instruction. Through a critical discourse lens, this study examines how Melissa Butler's TED Talk, <i>Why You Think You're Ugly</i>, questions prevailing beauty standards. The study focuses on the descriptive and explanatory elements of Fairclough's framework while analyzing the textual elements and social contexts of Butler's discourse. Data were collected from the video transcript and categorized using Hall's beauty framework to emphasize themes such as body size, face traits, skin tone, and hair texture. The findings showed that Butler used rhetorical strategies and personal storytelling to critique linear beauty norms, expose the emotional toll of conformity, and advocate for a more inclusive vision of beauty. Her discourse emerged as a counter-narrative, resisting Eurocentric ideals and affirming cultural identity and self-acceptance. Ultimately, the study underscores the role of discourse in shaping social perceptions and supports the ongoing movement toward equity in beauty representation.</p>

### 1. Introduction

In today's digital era, video-sharing platforms such as YouTube have significantly transformed how people produce, distribute, and consume media content. As one of the largest video-sharing platforms in the world, YouTube has changed how people use media. YouTube makes sharing content easy, ranging from personal vlogs to talk shows that address social and cultural issues (Star, 2023; Haquq et al., 2019). In this context, the language used in user-generated content shapes its audience's interpretations, understandings, and actions (Hall, 2023). One of the topics discussed on this platform is the issue of beauty and the social standards surrounding it.

Recently, the issue of beauty has become not just a cosmetic concern but also a cultural debate, especially on social media. TED Talks, one such educational YouTube content, plays an important role in critiquing the definition of beauty that is shaped by social constructionism. Melissa Butler's TED Talk, *Why You Think You're Ugly*, is clear evidence that digital media can improve critical thinking and deconstruct oppressive social norms.

TED Talks is not only about conveying opinions but also presents narratives rich in meaning and stimulate critical thinking. As a source of authentic and educational English materials, TED Talks offer valuable opportunities for language learners to engage with real-world issues while developing their listening, speaking, and critical thinking skills. In Melissa's TED Talk, she critiques the limited and discriminatory beauty standards against women of color. She discusses how beauty standards are judged by physical features such as fair skin, slim body, and height. This is in line with Pandian (2020), who pointed out that beauty standards to date still idealize a thin body shape, light skin color, and tall posture. In addition, Melisa also discussed how perceptions of physical appearance affect one's life chances. This also aligns with Hamermesh (1986), who states that physical attractiveness significantly affects career earnings. This shows that beauty standards are social and have an economic impact.

Although many studies have investigated beauty discourse in academic research and media (Jeffries, 2007; Gill, 2007; Wolf, 1991), few studies have examined TED Talks as sites of resistance—especially those delivered by women of color. Most recent CDA research instead examines multimodal beauty ads (Chenglaunganbi, 2025; Saeed & Khan, 2022) or television and social media images (Rohmah & Suhardi, 2020; An & Kwak, 2019), while analysis of motivational public-speaking platforms remains scarce, leaving a gap in analyzing publicly accessible digital platforms like TED. By applying Fairclough's CDA to this TED Talk, this study addresses that gap by exploring how language is employed not only to critique but also to reframe beauty norms in empowering ways.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the TED Talk "Why You Think You're Ugly" by Melissa Butler using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, specifically Fairclough's three-dimensional model. The analysis reveals how Butler strategically uses language, rhetorical techniques, and narrative structure to critique dominant beauty standards. It also highlights the role of language in challenging traditional norms, promoting self-acceptance, and encouraging more inclusive perspectives on beauty. This study is important because it contributes to understanding how discourse shapes and reshapes social ideologies and offers valuable insights for English language education, where authentic materials like TED Talks can foster learners' critical thinking, media literacy, and awareness of sociocultural issues. Ultimately, to guide this investigation, the research questions were formulated as follows:

1. What social beauty standards are deconstructed in Melissa Butler's TED Talk "Why You Think You're Ugly"?
2. How does Melissa Butler critique dominant beauty standards in her TED Talk?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**

According to Rogers (2013a), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) studies language that looks at how words connect to bigger social issues. He claims it is like being a detective who examines what people say, why they say it, and how it affects society. Furthermore, he also states that CDA helps us understand how daily language can reinforce or challenge power structures, spread ideas, and shape how we see ourselves and others. For example, it might look at how politicians talk to convince people, how advertisements use words to sell products, or how news reports might favor certain viewpoints. In addition, Van Dijk (2017) argues that by using CDA, researchers can uncover hidden messages in everyday communication and show how language plays a significant role in shaping the social world. He argues that it is all about connecting the dots between words and how society works.

The distinctions between CDA and other sociolinguistic methods can be best understood through their overarching principles (Meyer, 2001). He says the problems CDA addresses fundamentally differ from methods that do not define their focus. CDA generally poses various

research inquiries. CDA scholars advocate for socially discriminated groups. In line, Wodak (2015) stated that when examining the CDA contributions to the reader, it becomes clear that the boundary between understandable social scientific research and political argumentation is occasionally crossed. He says that no matter the situation or the topic being studied, CDA takes a unique and critical perspective on issues, aiming to uncover power dynamics that are often obscured to produce real-world outcomes.

Furthermore, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) differentiates itself from alternative textual analytical approaches through six fundamental characteristics. Primarily, it acknowledges the contextual nature of authentic texts, embracing their inherent intricacies. Additionally, CDA employs a multifaceted approach, integrating textual analysis with examining discursive practices and broader societal influences. CDA prioritizes addressing significant social issues and adopts an ethically oriented stance, highlighting power asymmetries and societal inequities to advocate for change. Moreover, it embraces a social constructionist paradigm in its approach to discourse. Finally, CDA scholars endeavor to make their findings accessible, facilitating broader engagement with their work in pursuing democratic ideals. (Dudley-Evans, 1997).

## **2.2 The Concept of Beauty**

Beauty means a combination of attributes that please the senses or the moral senses of the intellect. (Baqui, 1999). In line, Kant (2000) states that beauty is a multifaceted notion beyond one's outward look. It is described as a combination of moral and physical characteristics that appeal to our senses or intellect. He argues that numerous academic disciplines, including philosophy and anthropology, investigate beauty as a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing an individual's mental, emotional, and physical attributes. Modern language, morals, and philosophy all influence our ideas of beauty. Whereas the desire to be attractive is considered universal, opinions on how beauty is viewed and appreciated in nature and by various genders range. Beauty is generally viewed as a complex idea that may please our brains and senses in various ways.

In the United States, beauty standards predominantly reflect White European American ideals. There is a culturally recognized standard in America for what constitutes beauty, leading to gaps in physical characteristics between White and African American women, which may contribute to self-esteem issues and other psychological challenges for African American women (Marrinan, 2019). Clinicians must recognize that the ethnocentric, hegemonic standards of beauty in the U.S. might have harmful consequences.

## **2.3 Melissa Butler**

Melissa is the founder and CEO of The Lip Bar, a beauty brand that began in her kitchen while working on Wall Street. In 2020, INC Magazine honored her as a notable entrepreneur. Influential publications such as Forbes, Women's Wear Daily, Entrepreneur, and Allure have praised her insights into business and beauty. Her commitment to these fields also prompted her to give a TED Talk 2018 on the intersection of beauty and culture.

Melissa Butler's TED TALKS distinguishes itself by delving into why individuals perceive themselves as "ugly" and how language contributes to this perception. Butler's narrative challenges conventional notions of beauty and offers a raw and personal perspective on the impact of language on self-image. The researcher is interested in this episode because it may offer a deeper understanding of how language shapes and challenges beauty ideals.

As found in Melissa's speech, she explains how beauty has a role in society lately. Melissa conveyed her speech with easy language, which was acceptable to the audience. The researchers found that Melissa tried to influence the audience by explaining her life story. The way she gets

bad judgment from men around him and the way she tries not to care about many judgments about herself.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study applied a descriptive qualitative method that aims to explore social experiences and meanings in real situations through the application of phenomenological, content analysis, and thematic approaches (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This method is considered appropriate because science develops gradually and is interpretative, in which new knowledge is formed by reviewing existing information (Creswell & Poth, 2007; Magilvy & Thomas, 2009). The object of this study is Melissa Butler's speech entitled *Why You Think You're Ugly*. Melissa's utterances in the speech are the data of this study. The initial stages carried out in this study are the selection of relevant videos, downloading videos and transcripts, and classifying parts that contain beauty concepts and issues. Next, the data is analyzed by referring to Fairclough's (1992, 2003) three-dimensional model, especially in the description and explanation stages, to reveal the construction of social beauty standards and criticisms conveyed in the speech. Hall's (1995) concept became the basis of the focus of the analysis with four main aspects: skin color, hair shape and style, facial characteristics, and body proportions. Gee's (2017) critical discourse framework was also used to examine how the choice of language in the speech reflects power relations and social norms that influence the construction of beauty. After that, the researchers also conducted document analysis based on the criteria of authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and significance, referring to Morgan (2022) and Flick (2022) as a step to strengthen data validity. Finally, the results of the qualitative analysis of the findings are presented as the final part of the research process.

### **4. Findings and Discussion**

#### **4.1. Deconstructing Social Beauty Standards in Melissa Butler's TED Talk**

This study deconstructs social beauty standards into four main types: skin color, hair, facial features, and body weight and size. The 'Concept of Beauty' by Hall (1995) is applied in the analysis of this study. First, in the aspect of skin color, Melissa produced three utterances. One of the most striking utterances is below:

“I grew up right here in Detroit, where the ideal image for black girls is light-skinned, with long hair.” (segmentation 1)

The above utterance implies that light skin color is still the benchmark of beauty in the black community as a form of prolonged influence from colonialism and European construction of beauty standards. Second, in terms of hair, the same statement emphasizes a social push for black women to conform their hair appearance to European beauty standards. This finding supports Russell et al. (1993) that perceptions of hair in terms of whether it is good or not are based on Caucasian hair standards. The sacrifice of time, effort, and money in caring for hair indicates the pressure experienced by black women to conform to beauty standards. Melissa opposes limited beauty standards and advocates valuing the diversity of natural hair forms.

Third, related to the aspect of facial features, Melissa expressed her concern for the younger generation as shown by her words below:

“This is a multi-generational gender-neutral issue; our children are growing up not valuing themselves and certainly not being able to extend that love and acceptance onto their peers.” (segmentation 8)

The utterance implies that beauty standards that emphasize features such as thin lips, small noses, and symmetrical faces have a psychological impact on black women because these features are expected of those with black skin. This finding corroborates Higgins' (1987) self-discrepancy theory that emotional distress is significantly caused by expectations that do not

match reality. Next, the fourth aspect of body weight and shape found in Melissa's utterance is the following:

“...And so it makes me think back to when I was a little girl, and I thought about me not having a butt. You know, if I didn't have that confidence to keep going on, I could be one of these statistics.” (segmentation 10)

The utterance indicates that social pressure to have a body shape that fits beauty standards can trigger risky decisions, such as undergoing plastic surgery. This finding is confirmed by Striegel-Moore et al. (1986), who claimed that limited cultural views of the ideal body influence individuals' physical dissatisfaction. Overall, Melissa does not simply critique limited beauty standards but fights back in favor of self-acceptance and physical diversity. These findings reveal that the construction and internalization of beauty standards are socially constructed, especially for black women, and Melissa's narrative appears as a form of resistance to these norms.

#### **4.2. A Critique of Social Beauty Standards in Melissa Butler's TED Talk**

This section discusses Melissa Butler's critique of dominant beauty standards, as expressed in her speech. The analysis addresses both explicit and implicit elements of her message, particularly how she challenges socially constructed beliefs about beauty. Key aspects such as skin color, hair, facial features, and body weight and size are examined to understand how Butler constructs her argument against narrow definitions of beauty.

The first is for the aspect of skin color. Melissa sharply criticized the view of beauty that glorifies light skin color and having European characteristics as ideal beauty. Her statement, "I am a woman who's fed up with linear beauty standards," shows her disappointment with beauty standards that discriminate against dark-skinned women. This finding is in line with Hall (1995), who states that historically, colorism privileges light-skinned individuals and discriminates against dark-skinned individuals. The phrase 'linear beauty standards' shows the limited definition of social beauty, which has a negative impact on self-confidence and cultural identity.

The second is the aspect of hair. Melissa expressed criticism that black women's hairstyles are treated discriminatively. In her speech, she said the following:

“Now braids have always been a long-standing part of African and African American beauty culture, and just because you don't practice it doesn't mean that you can't accept respect.” (Segmentation 3)

In that utterance, she stated that respect for culture is very important even if you do not adopt it. This criticism is a form of rejection of Western beauty standards that tend to trivialize natural hair and conventional styling heritage. This finding aligns with Kinuthia et al. (2023), who state that European cultural beauty standards have become the main reference in African communities that favor fair skin and straight hair. This suggests that colorist and texturist views are inherited in everyday social relationships, which causes young women to doubt the value of their beauty.

The third, in the aspect of facial features, Melissa describes the psychological impact she experienced in the face of society's judgment of facial features. In her speech, she stated:

“It taught me how to never allow someone else's opinion of me to determine my value.” (Segmentation 8)

The utterance emphasized that beauty standards can undermine one's self-worth. She invited the audience not to let other people's perceptions determine their self-worth. This finding supports Aggarwal et al. (2023), who asserted that individual self-esteem is significantly affected by negative thoughts about physical appearance, including facial features.

The study showed that social and cultural influences that emphasize beauty standards could affect emotional and mental stability.

The fourth, regarding body weight and size, Melissa denounced the industry's beauty standards, encouraging individuals to make extreme physical changes. In her statement, "Those children grow up with low self-esteem and end up being consumers of weight-loss fads, of plastic surgery" (segmentation 5), she revealed the utilization of self-confidence by the beauty industry for business benefits. This confirms Ouyang et al. (2023), who states that facial features significantly impact an individual's self-esteem. This study confirms that cultural and social pressures regarding beauty standards can cause individuals to be insecure about their appearance and mentally unstable.

Overall, Melissa fights against limited and discriminatory beauty standards and emphasizes self-acceptance and respect for diversity. Melissa's personal experiences and social analysis inspired her to encourage her audience to judge beauty through external and internal assessments. Her argument frames beauty as something that is both very personal and politically influenced, enabling people—particularly women of color—to take back their stories and defy expectations.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper elaborates on society's unneutral view of beauty and cultural constructions that are often unfair to black women. In her TED Talk *Why You Think You're Ugly*, Melissa Butler criticizes the fact that beauty standards are constructed through physical characteristics such as skin, hair, face, and body shape. This study's analysis using Fairclough's CDA approach shows that Melissa's utterances in her speech imply resistance to beauty standards controlled by European values and the beauty industry. The results of this study found that personal experiences conveyed in a critical and reflective manner can be an effective means to build public awareness regarding the negative impacts and limited beauty standards. In addition, Melissa voiced the importance of loving oneself and accepting differences to counter social beauty standards. In short, her speech brought together personal experiences and social reflections to counter and expand the definition. The successful use of this speech in the analysis proves that digital platforms such as TED Talk can serve as educational tools that foster critical thinking. With innovative and relevant development strategies, critical discourse analysis has the potential to become an educational tool that promotes a more just and diverse society.

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