

Societal Beauty Standards

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Abstract

It's easy for us to name beautiful people in our life. But what makes them beautiful? Why does society agree that one look is 'more beautiful' than another? How does social media affect this idea? Our aim was to understand beauty standards in four contexts: historical and racial context, social media in today's world, the patriarchy's effect on the image of beauty, and emphasized eurocentric standards. Our research questions are: 1. To what extent the body positivity movement on social media has a positive effect on adolescent girls? 2. How internalized eurocentric beauty standards are in adolescent girls? 3. To what extent does the male gaze influence the behavior of adolescent girls? Data was collected from our original survey exploring the implications of beauty standards on females and individuals who identify as non-binary between the ages of 14-22. Using a two-way ANOVA statistical significance was found between ethnicity and the modes of communication of beauty standards- social media and television ($p < 0.05$). This shows how the media has ingrained the beauty standard that several participants have identified as the "hourglass" body shape and with the high number of participants responding that they have been body shamed or have felt objected/harassed by a man it shows how the male gaze has affected the daily lives of females. Limitations of this study was that only 97 females were surveyed primarily in the United States, thus we were only able to draw conclusions based on how females are affected in this region. Additionally, further research can be done to determine how the beauty standard is introduced to females before their adolescent years.

Categories: Beauty, Social Media, United States

Keywords: Beauty Standards, Body Shape, Harassment, Eurocentric Standards

Background

Our newest generations are unique from any other we've had in history, thanks to modern technology and social media; we are offered knowledge of the world at our fingertips, and who are we to refuse? But what also comes with a social media presence and culture, is the expectations and standards young people find themselves having to meet - the need to achieve an unachievable image. Despite what positives it might hold, damage that social media has and will continue to cause is something that cannot be ignored. The western societal image of "beauty" can be many things, but the most prominent today is that these standards all revolve around eurocentric bodily and facial features. These expectations are harmful to all young children today who have exposure to technology and communication like no generation before, but especially to POCs. The fast growing world of social media opens up a platform for young girls who find themselves being held to higher standards of beauty like never before. Although traditionally unattainable, these features are even more so for POCs, who are told from a young age that their ethnic features are unattractive and undesirable. These have been known to have lasting negative results on self-esteem, mental health, and confidence later in life.

It is important to consider just how damaging it is to hold an image of beauty revolving around one's race and skin color. In a world where white women are deemed more attractive than their darker counterparts, what undeserving advantages do these women claim, and how much harm can this cause from such a young age? A study done by Umberson and Hughes in 1987 found that "people deemed attractive by society are given more professional and social opportunities from childhood through adulthood, thus giving lighter-skinned black women greater access to success than darker-skinned black women" (Bryant, 2019). Beauty standards have very real very serious effects, and it is important they be addressed. With a recent burst in popularity for social justice movements, namely - Black Lives Matter - we as a society are finally beginning to hold accountable these unfair standards, and those who work to uphold them. Through this research, we hope to understand the historical context behind societal beauty standards today as we understand them, and their resulting effects in a modern world of social media. As stated in the words of Nato Kan, "if you are unable to understand the cause of a problem it is impossible to solve it." Our aim is to understand the problem that unattainable beauty standards present, so that we, as a society, can work towards a solution.

Research Question and Hypothesis

The emphasized beauty standards of society and unrealistic beauty propaganda grows more dangerous, as real and ideal standards of beauty grow larger and girls are constantly trying to fit society's mold (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Despite the body positivity movement that has recently become more popular on social media, the thin ideal is internalized in girls (Stamp, 2019). Social media posts include contradictory messages promoting losing weight and traits consistent with Western beauty ideals, such as clear skin and a toned body (Lazuka, Wick, Keel, & Harriger).

Thereby, this study aims to research to what extent the body positivity movement on social media has a positive effect on adolescent girls? Additionally, it is important to note the implications of eurocentric ideals when examining the effect of beauty standards in social media.

Thereby, this study also aims to answer how internalized are eurocentric beauty standards in adolescent girls? We believe that social media has allowed girls to feel more confident, but the toxicity of the body positivity movement has warped the initial purpose of the movement and is unable to create a more sustainable effect. Furthermore, we infer that girls with varying body types feel excluded from the movement due to the contradictory messages that are promoted with the body positive movements and that eurocentric ideals are internalized. In terms of the male gaze, we aim to answer, “To what extent does the male gaze influence the behavior of adolescent girls?” We infer that the male gaze has gradually made girls feel more insecure and influence their decisions, such as what they choose to wear.

Materials & Methods

This research paper is a data analysis, using qualitative and quantifying measures to analyze beauty standards such as social media in today’s world, the patriarchy’s effect on the image of beauty, and emphasized eurocentric standards. In these papers, we will look for both quantitative and qualitative data, analyzing personal accounts, and statistics using our survey. The advantage of this approach is that it will allow us to get a comprehensive picture of the topic and to add onto pre-existing research.

Moreover, we created a survey using Google forms, which will ask 20 personal questions in order for us to get a better understanding of the implications of beauty standards today. The survey took approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. Our survey asked questions about how individuals have been personally affected by beauty standards and the effect of this. Our target audience for this survey is high school and college females from the ages of 14-22. A limitation in our study is sample size. We are aiming to survey approximately 100 females, however a larger sample size would have been preferable. We recruited participants through the FINXERUNT network and social media. Additionally, we mentioned that all responses will be kept confidential. Some research questions we want to emphasize is, where did these beauty standards start, who is perpetuating this cycle of beauty standards, evaluate its implications, and what does the future of beauty standards look like. We hope that the data we collect, whether it be through published research or our own survey, will shed light on critical questions as such.

Results

For our study we collected a total of 97 responses for our survey. However, it is important to note that 14 participants listed their pronouns as he/him and could possibly identify as male, which is thus gender is our confounding variable. Additionally, 16 participants responded they do not

identify as female. The average age of participants was 16 (SD=1.36). The percentage of participants broken down in ethnicity was: 20% Caucasian, 8.4% Black or African American, 3.2% Middle Eastern, 8.4% Hispanic or Latino, 46.3% Asian, and 13.7% Mixed. Most participants lived in the United States with 3 other participants living in India, Bangladesh, and Nigeria.

To determine if social media or the television influences the beauty standard of females of different ethnicities a two-way ANOVA was run in Excel to examine the relationship between ethnicity and modes of communication (social media and television). We found statistical significance ($p < 0.05$) (Figure 1). This shows that ethnicity does influence the mode of communication that ingrains the beauty standard within the female population.

Additionally, our survey considered largely qualitative data, so after collecting our responses, they were transferred to a Google Sheet and examined. For descriptive statistics we examined the responses in terms of our variables. Participants were asked to describe if they ever felt like they were not meeting societal beauty standards because of their ethnicity, also what they consider the common standard of beauty, followed by a picture showing different body types and they were instructed to choose what they consider to be the ideal body type and what makes this ideal by society. Several participants answered by describing how their ethnicity is not socially desired in society and that they do not fit the societal beauty standard because there are stigmas present and they “feel ugly.” Those who replied no believed either that they did meet societal beauty standards because they are white or that they weren’t meeting societal standards but not because of their ethnicity. Additionally, there were a lot of common trends in responses when asked what they consider the common standard of beauty. Features listed include: petiteness, long hair, light skin, small nose, full lips, white, defined jaw, thin bodies, curved hips, big butt, clear skin, good height, big & bright eyes (blue/green). Several participants described it as stereotypical and that “in women it’s pretty obvious...” or that it is very mainstream and eurocentric. One participant wrote “Brandy Melville models basically.” Moreover, when asked what they consider to be the ideal body type 75.3% selected the hourglass body type and 7.2% selected inverted triangle.

We were very careful with wording; we asked participants what they consider to be the ideal body type, then followed by asking why they think this body type is ideal by society. No participant argued that the body type they choose was ideal to them, not society or that society does not affirm the body type they chose. This shows how internalized the beauty standard is in young females. The common answer to why the body type they selected is ideal to society was that it is commonly portrayed in the media, that it is seen as perfect and has perfect proportions according to society, as well as it being subjective and stereotypical.

Exploring the next set of questions that deal with the variable of the male gaze there is a common trend experienced by our participants of being body shamed and objectified. When asked the question, “Have you ever been body shamed,” 69.3% of participants answered yes and 13.6%

responded maybe. When asked for what features/body part there was a wide range of responses. This portrays how society constantly fuels that females are not adequate and that girls have been treated with that conditioned within them. To build off of the idea of the male gaze we asked “have you or a friend ever felt objectified/harassed for your appearance by a man before” and a follow up question, in which 31 people responded, to describe the circumstances of this objectification. It was found that 74 out of the 97 participants (76.3%) felt objected/harassed before by a man and the circumstances beyond their experiences were negative and left the participant uncomfortable. To explore the male gaze further, we wanted to see if it affected the daily choices of a female, such as the type of clothing they would feel uncomfortable wearing. The range of clothes included crop tops, leggings, revealing clothing, anything transparent, clothes that skin-tight, and low cut shirts. The reasons for why were because of insecurities, creepy men, they don’t feel like shaving, uncomfortable, or that the clothing does not fit their body type.

The next set of questions dealt with social media and the body positivity movement. In our study 95 out of the 97 participants use social media. The responses were mixed when asked if they support the body positivity movement. Some people recognized that the body positivity movement was not inclusive, that the movement is not always positive, or that the movement will backfire. Some people wrote that the movement needs to be about body neutrality. Majority participants wrote that the body positivity movement allowed them to feel represented and confident or that they support it because all bodies are beautiful. There were participants that wrote that it promotes unhealthy lifestyles, which shows that they do not truly understand the movement. Lastly we asked, “How do you feel about bodies being described as fruit,” and there were three main responses: I am not sure, it is a weird concept, it is objectifying and dehumanizing.

They were also questioned what body type their romantic partners to have (all genders). 25 participants responded with one of the body types listed, 45 participants responded N/A, and the remaining 27 wrote along the lines of that they don’t care about body size or shape and that it goes beyond one's body shape. We hypothesize that it is because of the body positivity movement and more body acceptance that people are more open about body types in relationships, also it can not be determined how stigma affected their responses. This could be an area of further research.

ANOVA						
Variables	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Rows	593.9792	95	6.252412	2.184416	8.80E-05	1.403841
Columns	52.08333	1	52.08333	18.19644	4.71E-05	3.941222
Error	271.9167	95	2.862281			
Total	917.9792	191				

Figure 1. This figure shows the statistical representation of the relationship between modes of communication and ethnicity.

Discussion

The bulk of the research work was based on our survey and we found that beauty standards have become more eurocentric over time and that using a two-way ANOVA we determined that there is a significant relationship between ethnicity and modes of communication. Social media and television does not portray females of different ethnicities and influences the beauty standard that is ingrained within the female population. It also contributes to the eurocentric western ideal.

Moreover, through the collective analysis of the results of the questions asked about societal beauty standards it is clear that the features listed of what participants listed as what they common standard of beauty and why it is considered ideal in society shows how internalized the Western beauty ideal is and when considering the questions of what participants are comfortable wearing, if they ever been body shamed, and the other responses it is clear it is a universal experience and that the hourglass figure is the dominant beauty standard in today's standard. Additionally, when considering how ethnicity and modes of communication are related based on our ANOVA and how girls described the common beauty standard as eurocentric, this clearly proves our hypothesis to the research question, "How internalized eurocentric beauty standards are in adolescent girls?" Additionally, when looking at the responses about the body positivity movement it is clear that social media has allowed some girls to feel confident, but several girls do not feel represented and that the movement is not always positive. It is also clear that some people do not understand the movement when they express how they feel the movement promotes unhealthy lifestyles.

Several people mentioned how the movement needs to shift towards body neutrality, thus our original hypothesis that the movement has created but the toxicity of the body positivity movement has warped the initial purpose of the movement and is unable to create a more sustainable effect is proven. Lastly, when considering our question, "To what extent does the male gaze influence the behavior of adolescent girls," it is clear that our hypothesis that male gaze has made girls insecure and influence their decisions, such as what they choose to wear was correct. Many girls reported that they were body shamed and felt objectified by men, as well feeling insecure about wearing revealing clothes with one of the reasons being creepy men.

More research can be done to explore how beauty standards have grown eurocentric over time due to historic changes in global power relations, both economically and politically. Europe has been centrally located on the geo-political map of the world in the recent past. This has influenced the rest of the world culturally as well and our preliminary readings lead us to believe that notions of beauty have been altered due to Eurocentrism. The influence of racism can be traced via the rise of the phenomenon of white washing in Asian, specially East Asian, media and entertainment industries. The ideal body type in these regions have also been heavily influenced by European notions of beauty. The role social media plays in perpetuating these beauty standards can be

analysed by analysing data related to relation between usage of social media and declining mental health.

The results of our survey allows us to conclude that beauty standards are a social construct highly influenced by the media and men. The study is limited by the sources we select and by our selected parameters for analysis. Further research can be done to explore the influence age and how beauty standards are introduced for the first time and research can be done to determine how the beauty standard is introduced to females before their adolescent years. Limitations of this study was that only 97 females were surveyed primarily in the United States, thus we were only able to draw conclusions based on how females are affected in this region.

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