



Impact of Beauty on Women's Health

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between women's beauty and health is a subject that requires serious exploration. Beauty is not a personal concept, but it is socially constructed, which ultimately influences the lives of women and their health. The standards of beauty set by the media, social, and cultural norms are often perceived as both inspiring as well as exhausting. On the one hand, the desire to be beautiful can be beneficial as it encourages healthy lifestyle choices like eating healthy foods, exercising, and skin care. But, on the other hand, it can also create pressure among women to conform to the unrealistic standards of beauty, which leads to unhealthy habits like eating disorders, taking high risks with cosmetic surgery, undergoing extreme dieting, and also involving mental health issues like depression, anxiety, body dissatisfaction, and self-doubt. This paper examines the connection between beauty and health of women with reference to various theories like Social Constructionism, Symbolic Interactionism, Bourdieu's Cultural Capital, and Feminist theory. It analyzes the responses of women towards expectations of beauty which are molded by media, class, and culture, locating the notion of beauty into a wider context of inequality, gender, and power. It highlights that institutional as well as societal factors impact the health of women, which ultimately shows the dual nature of beauty, that is, empowering and repressive.



Introduction

Throughout history, beauty has been able to gain a major place in defining women's social responsibilities, their identities, and their relationships. Although the standards of beauty have been evolving over time and between different nations, they continue to play a huge role in defining their social worth and acceptance in the society. In the modern period, due to the rise of globalization and electronic media, these standards have resulted in the creation of a homogenized and narrow notion of women's beauty, like youthfulness, a slim body, and flawless skin (Wolf, 1991; Gill, 2007). To attain these features, women go to a large extent, which unknowingly impacts their health.

The connection between beauty and health is intricate, while the practice of beauty may encourage self-confidence, upward mobility in the society, and self-care, but it can also harm one's physical and mental health, which results in chronic stress, eating disorders, effects from cosmetic surgeries, and low confidence (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). Importantly, these consequences are controlled by one's social status, resources, and culture, available instead of spreading evenly. Across different cultures, the beauty standards vary, and women are valued and judged according to their skin tone, hair, height, body size, and fashion. These norms may evolve with time and space, but pressure to look a specific way is constant, which may lead to severe health issues.

This paper discusses how the physical wellness of women is impacted by the standards of beauty by using a societal perspective. It applies numerous theoretical perspectives to throw light on how the notion of 'beauty' is socially produced. It also deals with how women respond to the dynamics of gendered power by relying on those theoretical perspectives. The study highlights how essential it is to view beauty as an important factor that impacts women's health, instead of just as an unimportant concern, by situating it in the context of health.

The rationale of this study is the realization that beauty is an influence of society that carries serious health issues. Worldwide, women are being forced to adhere to the conventional beauty standards that may benefit a few but cause harm to others. Considering its major impact, beauty is often neglected in case of studies related to health and given less importance than any other health-related factors. The present work aims to bridge the research gap caused by it.

From a sociological viewpoint, women's position in the society, relationships, and opportunities are all shaped by their physical attractiveness, which acts as a kind of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Yet, this wealth is distributed unevenly as well as is obtained at the price of their health risks when they



follow detrimental practices in order to fit in with the expectations of society. In the case of society, the advent of social media platforms has boosted the concerns among women regarding their appearance and has also normalized treatments like skin whitening and cosmetic surgeries (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Additional research is required to deal with the trends and their effects on women's health.

The study is also important for advocacy and policy. Understanding the notion of beauty as a factor impacting the health of women may help guide the measures that aim to minimize the harmful practices of beauty and promote healthy results. Strategies that foster media literacy, raise questions on unattainable standards of beauty, and restrict the harmful chemical products can also lower the risks and encourage healthy relationships with beauty.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore how the physical health of women is affected by the beauty standards.
2. To investigate the influence of beauty standards on the psychological and emotional health of women.
3. To examine the ways socioeconomic status, culture, and media impact the health of women associated with beauty.

Review of Literature

The ideals of beauty have evolved throughout history, which are based on religious, economic, and cultural factors. Although having a slim figure became an important part of womanhood in Post-war America, the pale complexion of the skin became a sign of elegance during the Victorian period. Women with fuller figures were appreciated in non-Western societies as a sign of wealth and fertility; however, the Western notion of slimness was more popularized as an outcome of globalization (Nasser, Katzman, & Gordon, 2001).

There is a contradictory connection between women's health and beauty. Dieting, although it is often marketed as a healthy practice, may result in eating disorders, which include anxiety as well as bulimia (Grabe et al., 2008). Even though several people believe that cosmetic surgeries enhance their physical beauty, there is also the possibility of long-term health effects like scars and infections (Grogan, 2016). Similarly, the products of skin lightening, most of which are famous in African as well as Asian countries, have been associated with skin problems and exposure to mercury (Hunter, 2011).



The mental health of women is significantly affected by the standards of beauty, and also impacts their self-confidence and body image. The social comparison theory says that, when there is a continuous exposure to an idealized figure, then it can result in depression, dissatisfaction and anxiety (Festinger, 1954; Fardouly et al., 2015). The internal tracking of one's look or body surveillance is mainly connected with cognitive impairment and objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Yet, the standards of beauty also offer women empowerment and confidence, which challenge the basic views of oppression.

The role of the media is important in promoting and establishing the concept of beauty. According to research done by Levine and Murnen (2009), media exposure boosts eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. With the advent of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, women are under constant pressure to conform as well as fit into the standards, which introduces them to filtered and edited pictures of women (Perloff, 2014). Because of globalization, the beauty standards have been homogenized, which leads to the incorporation of Western beauty standards in numerous cultural settings, which often eliminates the regional variations (Kaw, 1993).

Theoretical Framework

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), society constructs reality through common meanings and practices. Thus, the concept of beauty is not natural rather a construction of culture, which is reinforced by various social institutions like fashion, advertisements and media. The theory focuses on how health practices associated with beauty, like body modification, dieting and also use of various cosmetic products, and these behaviours are influenced by society.

According to feminist scholars, beauty norms are means of male dominance that limit women's freedom of choice. As stated by Naomi Wolf (1991), beauty is the last and best system of belief that keeps male power to remain intact, in which women are primarily evaluated on the basis of their physical appearance. The feminist theory argues that gender inequality gets strengthened through the expectations to live up to the standards of beauty that place one's wellness at risk.

The concept of 'presentation of self', which was developed by Erving Goffman (1959), shows that women participate in practices of beauty to manage judgement in social settings. Through this viewpoint, beauty acts as a tool for social communication that affects the mental health of women as well as their self-image. Whenever women's inner perception of themselves contradicts with societal expectations then it results in body dissatisfaction.



Bourdieu (1984) defines the concept of 'cultural capital' as a non-monetary element that offers social benefits like physical appearance, education and many more. Beauty serves as an inherent capital of culture that represents status and power, particularly if increased through costly cosmetic treatments. However, since only a specific population are able to afford good cosmetic treatments, whereas others choose unsafe or poor substitutes, such a form of capital usually promotes inequality.

Research Methodology

The present study is entirely based on secondary data, utilizing the data gathered from existing scholarly studies, surveys on health, journals, books and many more. Knowing how the standards of beauty impact women's mental and physical health across different nations and time periods is the aim of utilizing secondary sources.

The applicable literature has been analyzed from disciplines like sociology, media studies, gender studies, public health and psychology. To identify trends on how women view themselves, their diet routines, cosmetic treatments, impact of the media and how they impact women's health. Studies including resources like Google Scholar, WHO report and JSTOR were reviewed. A theme-based analysis method was used, in which data were gathered from prior research that were organised into significant themes.

Utilizing only secondary information enables the study to gain insights from multiple contexts as well as worldwide viewpoints, allowing a broader view of how physical appearance influences the health of women. The ethical considerations were upheld through correctly citing every source while preventing any false representation of past studies.

Findings

The study shows that the physical appearance of women greatly affects their health in both positive and negative ways. To appear slim and flawless, women are usually pushed to follow strict diets, over-exercising, and disorders of eating like bulimia and anorexia (Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008; Stice et al., 2011). The beauty industry has globally normalized skin-whitening treatments and cosmetic surgeries that have numerous potential risks, like infection from mercury poisoning (Grogan, 2016; Hunter, 2011; Charles, 2019). Although practices such as skin care and fitness can improve one's health, as well as help in minimizing stress (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015), the risky pursuits linked to unrealistic goals often outweigh these positive or beneficial effects.



Psychologically, the standards of beauty cause symptoms of depression, anxiety and feelings of low self-worth, particularly in young women who are affected by judgments in the media, whereas elderly women experience problems associated with outdated norms of beauty (Clarke & Griffin, 2008). Although certain women find self-confidence and freedom of expression by being involved in beauty practices, surveillance of the body also reinforces the feeling of inferiority (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Through promoting limited, artificially modified ideals and celebrity or influencer-driven aesthetic fashion trends, the media, as well as social media platforms, intensify these challenges (Levine & Murnen, 2009; Abidin, 2016).

In some Pacific and African communities, fuller figures are still admired (Nasser, Katzman & Gordon, 2001), whereas women of South Asian communities still suffer from stigma linked with skin colour (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). The consequences are also influenced by culture as well as class; for example, the wealthy women might enjoy a choice of secure treatments, whereas poor women often choose unsafe treatments (Charles, 2019). In the end, physical appearance ultimately turns up to have qualities that are both restricting as well as empowering, whereas conforming to ideals may provide benefits in the work environment and social wealth (Bourdieu, 1984; Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994), such priorities on beauty maintain patriarchal gender norms through imposing too much value on looks at the cost of structural autonomy (Wolf, 1991).

Discussion

The results highlight the conflicting nature of beauty in influencing the health of women. Although the practice of beauty sometimes promotes a healthy lifestyle and empowerment, its profound connection with limiting principles can be an indicator of risk. From a sociological point of view, beauty operates as an enforcement system that regulates the bodies of women in accordance with Foucault's concept of biopower (Foucault, 1977).

The interaction between media, culture and class shows the structural aspect of the influence of beauty. Beauty is also affected by worldwide media trends, cultural traditions and access to resources, along with one's own taste. Based on Bourdieu's concept, the women who are affluent might prevent higher-risk behaviours while adopting rituals of beauty to convey their status in the society. Yet, feminist theory argues that the way such behaviours foster gender disparities is by connecting the worth of women to their physical appearance.



It is essential to highlight that beauty may not always be overpowering. Beauty can also be an indicator of agency, shown through the intentional use of beauty practices by a number of women to acquire both economic and social capital. However, this sort of autonomy can often be temporary and relies on conforming to prevalent standards.

Conclusion

The present work examined a broad connection between the health of women and beauty, illustrating how beauty can be both favourable as well as restrictive. Although beauty practices may foster good health and self-confidence, being forced to adhere to unrealistic standards of beauty often ends in physical harm, social disparity and psychological suffering. The study reveals that beauty is a socially created factor of health instead of a personal trait from the lens of Social Construction, Cultural Capital, Feminist Theory and Symbolic Interactionism.

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