

BEAUTY OR HEALTH? A PERSONAL VIEW

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the question of beauty and health in women. It discusses changing definitions of beauty as a result of influences from the entertainment, beauty and health product industries. Advertisements are seen to be major players in defining beauty through promotion of cosmetic, skin, hair and slimming products. Concerns relating to beauty become inculcated in girls through the process of socialisation as they mature into womanhood. The media plays a significant role in portraying the meaning of beauty through its representation of women. These influences largely influence and alter women's perceptions of their body image and in trying to meet the goals of beauty as represented by the media. This may result in dissatisfaction with their body image. Advertisements can encourage women to indulge in smoking as a fashionable trend or opt for plastic surgery in attempts to acquire beauty. This paper concludes with implications of the issues relating to changing perceptions of beauty and suggests recommendations.

Key words: beauty, health, impacts of advertisements, smoking, beauty enhancement, adolescent behaviour, health promotion, health education.

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays women are showing more concern for beauty than for health. This tendency is possibly influenced by several factors – social processes, role of advertisements and mass media, local and global trends in the fashion industry, and adoption of foreign cultural practices. This article provides a critique of the obsession for beauty, argues for more research into this phenomenon and calls for the development of health promotion programmes to ameliorate this trend.

CONCEPTS AND MEANINGS OF BEAUTY

The Oxford English Dictionary¹ defines beauty as "excelling in grace or form, charm of colouring, qualities which delight the eye and call forth that admiration of the human face in figure or other objects". In practice, beauty may be easier to recognise than to define, as exemplified by the remark of the Hollywood producer, Aaron Spelling, who said, "I can't define it, but when it walks into the room, I know it". There is continuing debate as to whether beauty is "in the eye of the beholder" or that there is a universal aesthetic standard in the human body shapes and faces.

There are claims that physical beauty has an evolutionary basis in that beautiful people are more likely to be healthier and able to reproduce.² Averageness of features (i.e.

neither too large or too small), bilateral symmetry and skin free of blemishes not only suggest the absence of inherited or acquired medical disorders, but are also commonly judged to be relatively beautiful. Female faces are judged to be more attractive if they have delicate jaws, full lips, small noses, high cheekbones, and large eyes.²

Feminist writers such as Naomi Wolf³ contended that beauty is but a male-dominated construct. They argue that beauty myths are created through images in magazines, films, and beauty contests; they work in tandem with highly effective marketing of the beauty products and fashion to transmit ideas about how women should look like.

THE INFLUENCING FACTORS

Whether physical beauty in the females is a biological reality or has evolutionary advantage is difficult to verify. What is obvious and disturbing is the current obsession on beauty by the general population. The factors that bring about this beauty craze are examined below.

The encoding of beauty: the role of advertisements

A survey among seventy female respondents in Kuala Lumpur found that 43.3% of them were attracted to the models in beauty product advertisements.⁴ Nine out of ten of them said that women in beauty advertisements were portrayed as 'beautiful', while three-quarters thought they were 'young and attractive'. One cursory glance at the women's magazines and one finds page after page of advertisements on beauty products and fashion. A typical example reads "... night after night, your complexion is perfected and a pure radiance is revealed..." The text of the advertisement highlights that a well known cosmetic

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the advertisement highlights that a well known cosmetic manufacturer has discovered a product that can do wonders to the skin while the user sleeps at night – the face brightens for the next 24 hours. The advertisement reassures that women need not worry about its suitability as the product was specifically made for Asian women. The whole text aims to instil in women readers a fear about melanin production, an element that makes the body age and darken. Advertisements urge women to care for their complexion by recommending products that could help to achieve a perfect complexion without losing their radiance.

Reconstructing the new self in diet products

Another advertisement hinges on the importance of body image and describes the ease and miraculous transformation that can occur by consuming a slimming product or joining a weight loss programme. Among other things, it proclaimed "...this product shows results in just 8 days!" "...it involves no starvation, no drugs, no injections..." By using the principles of semiology (the study of signs and symbols and their meanings), advertisers are telling readers that there is an answer to their dreams. The advertisement on weight reduction has these words "Lose fat – not water or muscle – PERMANENTLY" and the visuals that go with it attempt to convince women of how a miracle can be achieved.

Socialisation for womanhood

In our society, boys and girls are brought up differently. Norms and rules exist to ensure that females know their roles in comparison to those of males. Though there is new social role for females (such as women can now be the primary income earner), they are still being pressured to conform to prevailing societal expectations. Although bodily changes are expected and differential effects are experienced by females and males, females are more concerned with aging than males are. Physical appearance, especially for women is heavily subjected to social judgements. As stated by Abu Laban & McDaniel,⁵ beauty is held out as an intrinsic goal for both girls and women. In infancy, females are judged by standards of "cuteness" and "prettiness," that shifts with age into standards of "beauty" and "glamour". Hence, beauty and health are entwined in the women's socialisation process. Early learning can predispose individuals to accept and enact traditional sex-typed behaviour and attitudes. These may later change with new experiences, which may dramatically alter their perceptions and values.

Globalisation and changing view of beauty

Globalisation has impacted virtually all aspects of human activities. As rapidly as news travel across the continents, so do ideas about beauty. The holding of the Miss World 2001 in South Africa generated intense media publicity and public interest in the African continent. The subsequent crowning of the Nigerian beauty Agbani Darego was

reported to have significantly swayed the African women's perception about beauty - they now prefer to be thin like Agbani Darego.⁶

HEALTH RISKS IN BEAUTY PURSUIT

According to Psychology Today, "body preoccupation has become a societal mania".⁷ Both men and women are increasingly becoming unhappy about their body image; the resulting poor self-esteem in many of them lead to a search for cosmetic enhancement.⁸ In the local context, a concerned medical doctor has expressed fears that "people are killing themselves to look beautiful,"⁹ e.g. by injecting Botox to hide their wrinkles. The extraordinary demand for Botox in USA has raised valid security concern due to an increasing demand for the nasty bug *Clostridium botulinum*.¹⁰ Believing in the miraculous effects of slimming pills, a Singaporean actress nearly lost her life as result of acute liver damage.¹¹ According to Utusan Malaysia, more than 30 people in the USA have died of heart disease after taking slimming preparations that contained phentermine.¹² During an investigation of a case of mercury poisoning in an adolescent, it was found that many users of a Mexican beauty cream had significantly higher urine mercury concentration.¹³ The above are but a small fraction of the reported health risks linked to beauty products.

The preoccupation with beauty has made significant inroad among the adolescent females. It is possible that the desire to reduce appetite and hence to lose weight could be a major motivation to start and continue smoking among the adolescent girls. These impressionable youth are also more likely to partake in various procedures to alter their external appearance, such as eyebrow plucking, ear and lips piercing, and body-tattooing. Extreme concern with weight and body size among female adolescents is an important factor in the increasing incidence of the eating disorders anorexia nervosa and bulimia.¹⁴

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HEALTH EDUCATION AND HEALTH PROMOTION PROGRAMMES

We all recognise that the physical appearance of a person can affect her/his social or economic success in life. What is of major concern is the preoccupation with physical attractiveness and the questionable medical necessity of cosmetic surgery. The clamour for more regulation for cosmetic procedures, whether performed by medically qualified personnel or otherwise, need to be tempered by the public demand for freedom and self-expression.^{15,16}

Women, who are the major targets of endless efforts by the beauty, cosmetic and fashion industries, need not fall into the traps set by the sophisticated advertisements. Females should develop a more enlightened understanding of

beauty and health by resisting the persuasive advertisements solely designed to stimulate consumption of the products they represent. To become discerning users of the information doled out by the mass media, they need to distinguish between sublimed advertisements that sometime camouflage as public education.

Television, as the dominant form of mass media, can and should provide a more balanced views concerning beauty and health. There is currently under-representation of women in health campaigns shown on the television, thus perpetuating the misinformation that health problems are only prevalent in men. Documentary films projecting a positive aspects of health and a more culturally sensitive view of physical beauty are sorely needed. The potential health risks of beauty products and procedure are not well publicised. On the other hand, many females prefer the quick route to weight loss by consuming slimming products rather than taking care of their diet or engage in more physical activity. For the obese, an appropriate level of body weight concern is actually useful but preoccupation with body image can be unhealthy in normal weight adolescent girls. In this regard, magazines targeting at this impressionable group should not go overboard in giving information on health, health risks, and health-related products.¹⁷

Health education is a life-long process, it is therefore crucial that it should be started early in life. How can we as parents and concerned member of the community encourage a positive regard for health and beauty, in particular for the girls as they grow up to be women? There is a dearth of publication that takes into account our cultural context. More research should be done regarding how television and advertising are shaping opinions of the

viewers and consumers, especially in relation to health and beauty.

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