

Negative Effects of the Standards of Feminine Beauty in the United States

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Abstract

Through this work, we want to expose the consequences that current standards of beauty have on women in the United States and in general. The information it contains was gathered through articles, expert opinion, and studies on the subject that concerns us. Over time, as human beings, we have searched for multiple definitions of the term "Beauty Standards" and how they are capable of evolving over the generations. As a result, an immeasurable amount of criticism, prejudice and constant attacks on the female gender in general are generated, but this trend is further reaffirmed in the United States. This has brought with it great negative consequences specifically on the mental health of women. As a society we are in a constant struggle to reverse this situation. Five terms that would help us to research more about this subject are body image, beauty, beauty standards, women, and health.

This problem has generated alterations in society solidifying a banner of beauty that not only physically affects women, but also their constant struggle to be part of society. It has had repercussions at an emotional level that lead to a high incidence of depression since the need for acceptance plays an important role in the lives of women in this country. In recent years, the subject has taken a more abrupt turn. The call of support of groups of people who do not feel comfortable or satisfied with the sex with which they were born –Transgenders- to be accepted within the society's beauty standards has increased the confusion on a subject that was not at all clear before. Fortunately, in recent years there has been a trend of inclusion by the companies that lead the beauty market, which has greatly improved the path to a society with less prejudice. We can see this in different advertising campaigns where faces of different ethnic groups are shown, as well as transgender personalities (Civita, 2018).

Introduction

With the arrival of the new millennium, the beauty banner of the 90s was left behind. However, with the arrival of the year 2000, there was an increase in criticism of the average American woman, as strong changes approached not only on a physical and emotional level but also at a social level. Fresh ideas came as they were a restructuring in the nutritional patterns, a severe workout in the gym at least 12 hours a week and of course the arrival of a stereotype of women who was far from their originality and nature. However, with the passing years, society has begun to implement the concept that beauty is subjective since not all people find beauty in the same features or characteristics. This opened a wide range of opinions about the standards of beauty in the United States since general opinions about what is considered beautiful should be the ones taken into account and it is incorrect for an individual to judge a woman by her appearance.

Currently there are numerous health problems that are associated with the body dissatisfaction suffered by women in the United States. There is a tendency to want to homogenize the criteria and establish rigid rules concerning physical features, the standards of beauty and health in women. These are words that are not complementing each other at the moment due to the patterns to which women submit themselves: patterns like the definition of the body with "ideal" measures, smooth skin that must be free of marks and wrinkles, the "perfect face" that should have a straight-edged nose, fleshy lips, eyebrows perfectly delineated, slender bodies, among others. These features are the reason why many women resort to plastic surgery. Some studies show that in more than 40% of the cases the complaint focuses on the shape of the nose, face -pimples, mouth, jaw, weight, backside, belly, breasts, genitals, legs, etc. Many of these features are heavy points of focus since they are very exposed at almost every time, even with clothes on, making it very difficult to go unnoticed by others (BBC, 2015). And many times due to continuous surgeries or poorly performed ones, there can be an absence of authenticity in the image of the person.

This phenomenon can be observed repeatedly in people who are under greater pressure in terms of beauty, such as Hollywood personalities. The case of Uma Thurman is one of the best known due to the great change suffered by the American actress at 44 years of age who was recognized in the decade of the 90s for its beauty. Some media described her as unrecognizable when she participated in a promotional event for a new series. Even a hypothesis, that the actress may suffer from a mental disorder called Dismorphophobia, was formulated after repeated statements where the actress claimed not to feel comfortable with her appearance and this change of image due to surgery that the actress may suffer from a mental disorder called Dismorphophobia. (BBC, 2015).

As we can find in The Medical Dictionary by Farlex, Dismorphophobia or "Body dysmorphic disorder or BDD is defined by DSM-IV-TR as a condition marked by excessive preoccupation with an imaginary or minor defect in a facial feature or localized part of the body" (BBC, 2015). Due to the social pressures already mentioned, this disorder is gaining ground. It begins to expose symptoms with puberty. However, it is more noticeable in adolescence. An estimated 1.5% of the total world's population suffers this condition. But the experts emphasize that the numbers may be higher since many of the people with this condition prefer to hide and suppress this problem instead of looking for professional assistance (Moura, 2016).

This, trying to adapt to those patterns that we have as "Gold Standard", generates a change not only in the physical aspect of the person but also in his or her behavior to the point of putting at risk both physical and mental health. In view of the high costs of corporal modifications, many seek the most economical aesthetic procedures in which the objective is that the desired effects have immediate results and leaving aside important points such as hygiene quality, adequate materials, and a personnel trained to perform these procedures, putting their safety at risk. These modifications also precede changes in diet and arduous schemes of exercises, where the object of this is to encourage the inhibition of the amount of food and nutrients for the proper functioning of the body, without taking into account that the body is forced to reduce or limit all its processes to conserve energy.

The media exerts an immense influence on how people perceive beauty. Things as simple as advertisements that show a woman and label her as an ideal are enough to generate a certain level of change in our perception (Thorpe, 2018). The world standard in the field of beauty is highly influenced by American culture. This is because the American media are the most broadcast worldwide. People often compare themselves to the characters considered beautiful within these media and many even seek to look like these. Also, a large part of the world population is influenced because the largest beauty magazines are from American publishers. This generates an avalanche of modification of the perception itself that has been occurring for decades and has modified the appreciation of many cultures about what is beautiful and what is not.

In our constant evolution, "Universal Beauty" has been one of the highest standards of beauty in the United States, always starting from characteristics that at first glance seem minimalistic. This is an important part of how standards are capable of changing a woman's beliefs and quality of life, starting from very early ages where the woman is still getting to know herself, to advanced ages where the negative effects are part of her life. Women are affected by these almost impossible to reach standards. This does not only happen in the United States, but in different nations that are also obsessed with beauty like, Ukraine, UK, Italy, Spain, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, China, and Russia.

Esther Honig, a Freelance journalist born in San Francisco, United States of America in 1990, dedicated herself to the creation of a revolutionary social experiment on beauty standards worldwide. Her study is based on the importance that Photoshop presents as a beauty standard in culture and society; this is why the experiment started with the journalist taking a photo of herself and requesting more than 25 countries in the world to modify it according to the beauty standards they currently have. Honig concludes that "photoshop allows us to achieve our unattainable standards of beauty, but when we compare those standards on a global scale, achieving the ideal remains all the more illusive" (Perez, 2014).

The constant change suffered by the concept of "Beauty" in other nations is so aggressive that it leads to a constant change in women. This includes not only psychological alterations such as assimilating behavior patterns that give off the essence of the same, but also the low self-esteem and development of diseases with clinical manifestations, both physical and mental, such as: depression, surgical interventions and nutritional alterations. These happen to achieve subjective results that could change due to the banner.

In society, beauty is governed entirely by cisnormative beauty standards, which is very complicated for the group of people who identify as transgender. This especially affects trans women. Cisgender is a term for people who are comfortable with the genitals they were born with. Cis comes from Latin and means "on the same side as". That means, cisgender people are the opposite of transgender people (Act, 2018). Who says that cisgender people usually don't realize how confusing this can be for trans people, if they dress too feminine cis people complain that they are trying too much and if they wear masculine cis people indicate that they are not trying enough and that they do not deceive anyone. Finding a balance for trans people is extremely complicated and therefore it is just as difficult to find a place in the society in which they feel comfortable (Burns, 2018).

There are several causes for what the average American woman may be able to submit to the fact of being part of a standard of beauty today. These are the cult of body representation that presents the perfect sketch for a fashion designer and the social pressure or expectation of "Universal Beauty" as the process that delimits even the dress of women to be recognized in society. Also, another cause is low self-esteem, which is the most frequent one since it expresses frustration through the prejudice of society. The influence of the media by models of beauty damages the essence of a woman modifying all behavior patterns making it unrecognizable. The unattainable stereotypes that promote fashion brands as a strategy to feed marketing with the intention of displacing the nature of a woman is another cause. Perfectionism involves arduous discipline that destroys society because it expresses the little compassion that beauty standards can show to women. And the last cause we will discuss is fear of isolation and non-acceptance with superficial and racist issues that provoke dialogues and internal conflicts in the American woman.

American culture has gone through numerous changes in the history of beauty, giving prominence to makeup as one of its main participants. Currently, the main and most significant seems to be an "enviable" figure where women are disinhibited from their natural side; in fact, everything opposite is hidden under layers of makeup. Sometimes this leads to the woman losing her distinctive features that unlike what she may think, for some people can be very attractive.

Currently, hiding imperfections has turned away from women's own beliefs of beauty by adopted patterns; in psychology these tendencies of beauty standards have a negative effect on personality, the conduct, the way of socializing and the change in terms of being recognized before the American society where it undergoes behavioral changes. Society gives special attention to physical appearance where criticism and prejudice go hand in hand with everything that does not fit with the stereotype to which they are subjected. These changes in personality and behavior lead to a series of progressive alterations, taking into account that it can cause psychological disorders such as depression, suicidal behavior, anxiety, phobias and obsessive-compulsive disorders. It can also cause addictions to chemicals and eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia (Marsh, 2016).

In anorexia there is a decrease in caloric intake that leads to a decrease in body weight that turns out to be significantly low in relation to age, sex, course of development and physical health. When we talk about bulimia, we refer to those episodes that are constant and these are identified by binge eating. This is the intake of food in an excessive amount accompanied by inappropriate and frequent behaviors to avoid weight gain, such as vomiting, fasting, strenuous physical exercise or use of depurative or other medications; all this is preceded by episodes of depression together with a feeling of guilt and inefficiency. This can be accompanied by marked deviations of spirit, repetitive suicidal ideas to and in the most extreme cases suicide attempts (Gotter and Underwood, 2018).

Faced with the breadth of difficulties that this problem brings to society, we believe that the norms and concepts about beauty in the United States are carried to high scales of severity. The female population in general is subject to constant changes in their personal and professional growth, while searching for the acceptance of society and a space in which they feel safe.

Relating this topic to structural-functionalist theory, we think that female beauty standards in the American society are related to social pathology because they constitute a social sickness, due to people who are not properly socialized to accept women as they are. In addition, we think this topic is very related to social problems because it has been an on-going issue throughout the years that is not talked about so much in the real world due to the influence it has on many people out there.

The impact it makes on females lives, bodies and eating schedules is huge. It is crucial to seek for solutions to these problems because they have reached a high level of impact on the mental health of women which is harmful for their lives. In order to solve this social problem, people need to receive moral education to be adequately socialized and accept others and their physical appearances. Also, to prevent this social issue in the future, members of society must be educated by institutions such as the family, school, workplace, and church about loving themselves.

Through education we think that it is possible to change the focus on this problem and illustrate the population in general that the standards of beauties that surround them are nothing more than advertising that seeks to sell. To get tangible change, society must restructure perspective and see beyond physical beauty, a beauty that disappears over the years without exception. We need to educate for self-acceptance, treat each other with respect and honor, recognize the validity and dignity of being respected despite not being "perfect". It is important to create a change in the way we think, all in favor of personal growth.

With self-acceptance we will be able to instill the authenticity and courage to take risks and put aside uncertainty and vulnerability, disconnecting from the zone of failure and feeling of negativity that affects self-esteem. Therefore, we believe that there should be education in emotional intelligence. That way we will stop comparing ourselves with each other. We must be aware that we are talking about a society that rewards money and beauty, possessions and labor success over self-acceptance, and this leads to an increase of anxiety and depression. Reflection is essential for human growth; the knowledge of ourselves is an important part of life.

Prejudice is related to the conditioning of the mind by culture and the social norms that guide the being. Reeducation speaks of understanding and accepting with empathy. Abandon the ideal of perfectionism and the thought that it is wrong to have imperfections. Everything is part of the process of personal fulfillment. This way we can avoid so much abuse on the female gender and focus our intentions to conserve life, integrity and values.

The issue of beauty and how it has an immeasurable relevance at the time of generating a prejudice about the image of a woman, remains in great dispute. As evidenced, the consequences that this has on health are of huge proportions. Every day women not only in the United States, but worldwide, are constantly subjected to modifications of what is the standard of beauty. However, there are tools with which we can generate great solutions without having to spend much time. Education about emotional intelligence, and personal and professional growth are perhaps a starting point to avoid increased levels of incidence of pathologies such as deep depression, dysmorphophobia, anorexia, bulimia, personality disorders, eating disorders, and stress, among others.

The artistic representation of beauty must always be maintained under the definition of a subjective concept. This means that what is beautiful in the eyes of one person for another is perhaps something very unpleasant. In this new era, as human beings we have had a positive evolution in our beliefs, our wishes, dreams and attitudes towards life. We have broken taboos about whether a woman can or cannot dedicate herself and be successful in activities considered masculine. All this is part of a constant growth that humanity is experiencing in regards to standards beauty.

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