

The Cost of Beauty: Insecurity and Profit

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Abstract : This research contributes to existing knowledge of the complexities surrounding women's relationship to beauty standards by examining their lived experiences. While there is much academic work on the effects of culturally imposed and largely unattainable beauty standards, the arguments tend to fall into two paradigms. On the one hand is the radical feminist perspective that argues that women are subjected to absolute oppression within the patriarchal system in which beauty standards have been constructed. This position advocates for a complete restructuring of social institutions to liberate women from all types of oppression. On the other hand, there are liberal feminist arguments that focus on choice, arguing that women's agency in how to present themselves is empowerment. These arguments center around what women do within the patriarchal system in order to liberate themselves. However, there is very little research on the lived experiences of women negotiating these two realms: the complex negotiation between the pressure to adhere to cultural beauty standards and the agency of self-expression and empowerment. By exploring beauty standards through the intersection of societal messages (including macro-level processes such as social media and advertising as well as smaller-scale interactions such as families and peers) and lived experiences, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how women navigate and negotiate their own presentation and sense of self-identity. Current research sees a rise in incidents of body dysmorphia, depression and anxiety since the advent of social media. Approximately 91% of women are unhappy with their bodies and resort to dieting to achieve their ideal body shape, but only 5% of women naturally possess the body type often portrayed by Americans in movies and media. It is, therefore, crucial we begin talking about the processes that are affecting self-image and mental health. A question that arises is that, given these negative effects, why do companies continue to advertise and target women with standards that very few could possibly attain? One obvious answer is that keeping beauty standards largely unattainable enables the beauty and fashion industries to make large profits by promising products and procedures that will bring one up to "standard". The creation of dissatisfaction for some is profit for others. This research utilizes qualitative methods: interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups to investigate women's relationships to beauty standards and empowerment. To this end, we reached out to potential participants through a video campaign on social media: short clips on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok and a longer clip on YouTube inviting users to take part in the study. Participants are asked to react to images, videos, and other beauty-related texts. The findings of this research have implications for policy development, advocacy and interventions aimed at promoting healthy inclusivity and empowerment of women.

Keywords : women, beauty, consumerism, social media

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