WOMEN’S BODY STANDARDS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

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Body image is defined by NEDA (2018), the National Eating Disorder Association, as "one’s thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes about their physical appearance." The ideal body of a woman varies depending on the culture of their country. In the United States, it is more common to see skinny models on magazines, but in other places, the skinny women who appear in the United States magazines would not be considered beautiful. While some may think a skinny woman is beautiful, there are other countries who insist on fattening up women in order for them to be considered beautiful. The various, and sometimes unreasonable, standards set for the ideal body have negative effects on women’s body image which can eventually cause mental and physical health problems.

Throughout American culture, the “ideal” woman's body is skinny and surgically enhanced, influenced by models and celebrities. Women in America feel this pressure to look better than the person next to them and they will go to drastic measures to attain this. Girls from young ages are bombarded from every angle about how to tone up and lose weight to become the people they see on television. With the rise of social media, the problem with body dissatisfaction has only
An article from CNN discusses how women's body image in America is constantly changing due to the obsession to appear a certain way (Howard, 2018). Our ideal body image in America is set by our peers and heightened by the celebrities and models we see everywhere we turn. This obsession with looking a certain way has only led women to go out and seek procedures and quick fixes to attain the results that only five percent of women genetically have (ACOG). For most women, this obsession with body image leads to depression, eating disorders, and even suicide.

Women’s body standards in Western cultures are typically set by the media. Magazines typically feature women who appear as a size zero. According to an article written by Itisha Nagar and Rukhsana Virk titled The Struggle Between the Real and Ideal: Impact of Acute Media Exposure on Body Image of Young Indian Women, “the images we see are often artificially enhanced by use of excess makeup and computerized tools such as Photoshop” (Nagar and Virk, 2017). The article reviews the expectations for women in Western cultures in regard to body standards. Young women, especially in their teens, see these images and they often look at the various images without realizing they have been adjusted to look “perfect.” These women then compare what they look like to what models and celebrities look like. Because of this, the media controls a large amount of what the ideal body image is when most women are unable to meet these unrealistic standards.

While most Americans and Western cultures would consider skinny women to be healthier, there are some cultures in Nigeria who would consider a larger woman healthier. Wealthy women in these cultures pay for fattening rooms where they can eat and rest. According to a news website in Nigeria, “A bride [who has] been accepted into the fattening rooms is still considered a thing of honor because acceptance into the fattening room was viewed as a privilege as it was a demonstration of virtue, sexual purity and proved chastity” (Yaakugh, 2019). Not only is being larger considered beautiful but being larger is a sign of being marriageable. Once a woman is accepted to a fattening room, they are kept away from all family for the duration of their stay and are only permitted to be visited by elderly women; this is because the young women in the fattening rooms are expected to refrain from sexual activity prior to their wedding. When the elderly women visit, they give the young women lessons on marital etiquette and acceptable behaviors. Not only are these young women kept away from their loved ones, but they are force-fed. According to Yaakugh, a writer for a major website in Nigeria, “The girls are also fed heavy meals rich in carbohydrate and fat. Sometimes, the girls do not find this process pleasant as they have to consume the food regardless of their appetite” (Yaakugh, 2019). The last major aspect of the fattening rooms is a beauty treatment. Women are pampered from head to toe. The whole process of being in a fattening room lasts for about a month or longer, and after, the woman is presented to society to show how beautiful she became in the fattening room.

Nigerians follow the tradition of fattening their women up as a beauty treatment. On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, many Asian cultures believe the exact opposite. The extreme is one of a kind and eye-opening how different cultures perceive the beauty of their women. The body positivity movement still has not made its way to countries in Asia. The body positivity movement is a movement where “people value their unique identities and are liberated from self-hatred so they can optimize their energy and intellect to make positive changes in their own lives, communities, and beyond” (Welcome to The Body Positive). Many stores have only a one size fits all with their clothing for women. In an article on body politics by Wear Your Voice Mag one young woman was told by shop owners that “if it doesn’t fit, you have to starve until it does” (Olivia, 2015). How does that make women feel who physically cannot conform to that body size? Many women are left feeling ashamed of themselves and like they are a monstrosity. Media plays a huge role in how women view themselves. Many times Asian and Asian American women are victims of double jeopardy of both racism and sexism (Hall, 1995). This can cause deep emotional scarring for women especially when trying to represent their
culture but are ridiculed when they do not fit the exact norm. Body dissatisfaction can often be linked to eating disorders, depression, and self-esteem. There are also many psychological factors that come into play, and it all depends on the culture one grows up in (Lau, Lum, Chronister, & Forrest, 2006; Littleton, Breitkopf, & Abbey, 2005; Nieri, Kulis, Keith, & Hurdle, 2005).

In Japanese culture, women are more likely to be too thin than overweight, especially women in their twenties. The women are also highly critical of each other and believe that the criticisms are a healthy way to keep one another in check to stay slim. According to the Japan Times, a Japanese woman's figure with the BMI between 18.5 and 25 is believed to be “healthy” (Kittaka, n.d). Women are pressured from media and peers to maintain a weight that is unhealthy and dangerous. The media presents the idea that if an individual is heavier, they must be lazy and not work hard. In Olivia’s (2015) article, it is evident that Japanese women who lived in urban areas were much thinner than those who lived in rural areas. It is astonishing that just the geographical location within the country makes a difference in how much women weigh. While the role of one's cultural identity is greatly factored in gender, ethnicity has strong effects on body image as well. For foreign women living in Japan, the change of mindset on eating and dieting is harsh, and many women are often found depressed and having lower self-esteem due to the pressure to conform to the new culture. Some medical professionals blamed a woman for her weight gain as a lack of willpower when she had a condition that caused her to gain weight (Kittaka, n.d). The attention that Japanese women give to their weight is based on the fact that clothes are made solely for petite women and that men are more in favor of women who are thin. The thinner you are in Japan, the more beautiful society thinks you are. Research has shown that when a young Japanese woman attends college, her weight decreases, unlike American women who tend to gain the “freshman 15” (Harden, 2010). While there are cultural differences of either extreme weight gain or loss among women entering college, what remains the same across the board is the pressure to conform to society’s view of what beauty is.

Body standards for women have always existed. In Europe, the beauty standards for white women are physical attributes such as thin, tall, blonde hair, and high cheekbones. These standards are hard to conform to for women who do not already fit within that ideal body type. These are characteristics that can’t be changed easily, whereas some of them can’t be changed at all. Young women and full grown women alike experience the pressures of wanting to look their best not only for themselves but also to attract others. These expectations take a toll on a woman throughout her lifetime. These unrealistic body standards can lead to eating disorders and other issues. As it was stated by Grabe and Hyde in their extensive body image research, “Body image is a crucial topic because of the high levels of disordered eating and depression found among women” (Grabe & Hyde, 2006). These high levels of disordered eating and depression in women are alarming. Body image is important to women, and not being able to conform to the desired standards takes a toll on them.

Black women in Europe experience a different kind of ideal body image issues. The ideal black woman in Europe has a curvy body. That is the only physical attribute that they find to be the most desirable. While white teens describe their beauty ideal using a set of fixed physical attributes, black teens deemphasized external beauty and instead described the ideal girl in terms of various personality traits (Parker, et.al., 1995). These traits included style, attitude, and sense of pride in oneself. This is vastly different than what most white women feel is the most desirable as black women put more focus on the beauty within, rather than the external beauty. This goes to show that there can be different ideal bodies in a way that does not include the physical context. It is important for these women to have these personality attributes in order to feel like they fit in with their peers. Not meeting the standards for their desired body image can lead to them being bullied or picked on. This is not how it should be, and it is unfortunate that women are taught their whole lives that
these characteristics matter more than anything else.

Women around the world suffer from their society's body standards. Body standards differ around the globe, but they impact women, and even men, all the same. Having issues related to body standards and one's own body image can lead to serious medical and psychological conditions, including eating disorders. According to NEDA (2018), “Eating disorders are serious but treatable mental and physical illnesses that can affect people of every age, sex, gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic group.” Cultures that force unrealistic body expectations on women may lead to the women altering their bodies in unhealthy ways just to fit in. Societies that promote healthy lifestyles are hard to find. With the strong influences of models on the covers of magazines or mannequins in stores, many women feel as if they have no other choice than to either become bulimic or anorexic, the two most common eating disorders (NIH, 2017).

According to NEDA (2018), there is no known cause for eating disorders, but some influences include psychological, biological, and sociocultural factors. The focus in this paper is sociocultural factors, due to the increasing awareness of societal and cultural expectations for women around the world. It is important to note that sociocultural factors can impact someone’s likelihood to begin an eating disorder just as much as a biological or psychological reason can.

Society has a large impact on how women view their bodies, and there must be a change in the society to see a change in the prevalence of eating disorders.

Around the globe, there are several different views on what “beauty” is. Some cultures, like Western cultures, believe that to be beautiful, you must be thin and have a nice chest and buttocks, but nothing too big. Other cultures believe that women who are thicker are more beautiful. There is not a single culture who does not have a certain definition of what beauty is, but wouldn’t that be nice? If cultures became more open to healthy body types and people who were just simply being themselves, society would not have so much trouble in regards to eating disorders and depression regarding one’s body type. If society could take a step back from judging people in their own bodies, there would be so many more happy and healthy women on this Earth.

References


