

The Diversity of Love Journal

Western Beauty Standards in Cross-Cultural Perspectives

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Do modern people place the same value on the physical attractiveness of prospective partners as previous generations? Do they look at and value their beauty the same way as in the past? In Western European and North American media, modern beauty standards are widely promoted. Are they universal and the same in other societies? In this article, I review the studies of Western beauty standards from a cross-cultural perspective.

The Modern Tendencies in Appreciation of Beauty

Men and women have always wanted to find a beautiful partner for a relationship. A beautiful appearance definitely incites romantic love. Many people believed that for men, the beauty of women was a more desired quality than the beauty of men for women.

However, in modern times, the cultural value of beauty in finding an appropriate partner has significantly increased not only among men but also among women. The cross-sectional research of Buss and his

colleagues in the USA showed that during the 57-year period (1939–1996), the importance of physical attractiveness in a prospective mate increased for both men and women ([Buss et al., 2001](#)).

There was an old evolutionary theory according to which men expected to mate with good-looking women, while women cared less about the physical appearance of men. However, this stereotype is not valid anymore. According to recent studies, physical attractiveness has a strong impact on women's rating of a target man as a desirable partner. Personality traits are important, but only for those prospective male partners who are physically attractive. Women rated men with desirable personality traits favorably as mating partners only when they perceived them as moderately or highly attractive. Women never rated men with desirable personality traits as desirable partners if they perceived them as unattractive (e.g., Fugère, Madden, & Cousins, 2019).

Western Beauty Standards

The new cultural trend of heightened interest in physical attractiveness could be due to the surge of beautiful visual media images via fashion magazines, movies, television, the Internet, and other virtual realities. According to recent studies conducted across 12 countries, the globalization of Western beauty standards is an overwhelmingly expanding tendency ([Yan & Bissell, 2014](#)).

In terms of role model references, Western European and North American magazines keep the dominant position in shaping global beauty standards, while Asian magazines remain relatively independent. However, fashion magazines in South Africa and Latin America tend to be assimilated into the Western cultural norms of beauty.

In the United States of America, Western standards of beauty are predominant, despite the great racial diversity of the population. Many

White, Black, Latina, and Asian women in American society tend to follow these White conceptions of mainstream beauty.

Culturally Specific Body Identities and Western Beauty Standards

When looking for a relationship, men and women not only want to find a beautiful or handsome partner, but also consider their self-perception: their own appearance, along with corresponding self-esteem and confidence. How do people of other races, ethnicities, and cultures perceive their own body identity in reference to these Western cultural standards?

Overall, the more a person fits into general societal or specific cultural norms of appearance, the more he or she feels confident in interaction with a partner. Individuals of different cultural backgrounds may differ in their orientation to cultural norms in this regard. Their own racial body identity may be at a disadvantage in social comparison with those. Do they accept or deny such dissonance?

According to one study, an individual's relations with dominant norms of beauty and their relations with their own bodies vary considerably among White, Black, Asian, and Latina women. Denying diversity is a typical tendency. However, women of different races differ in the extent to which they engage in the denial of personal disadvantage ([Poran, 2002](#)).

How Do Asian Women Feel About Western Beauty Standards?

For example, Asian women experience greater dissatisfaction with their own bodies than do Black and White women. For Asians, mainstream

standards of beauty can become a potentially threatening factor for their self-concept and self-esteem. Asian women and men tend to rate White people as more physically attractive than Asians (Mok, 1998; White & Chan, 1983). This comparison may appear to be an upward process stigmatizing them. Exposure to mainstream ideals of beauty can cause problems for Asian women in maintaining positive self-perceptions because they do not employ self-protective strategies. Suffering from lower self-esteem impedes them from having intercultural relationships (Chin Evans & McConnell, 2003).

How Do Black Women Feel About Western Beauty Standards?

Black women are less affected by mainstream beauty standards than Asians and Whites. Among Black women, there is the same or better body satisfaction and global self-esteem compared to White and Asian women (Chin Evans & McConnell, 2003; Porter & Washington, 1979; Rucker & Cash, 1992).

Black women and men do not strongly adhere to mainstream White standards of appearance in their self-evaluations. In the case of being overweight, they do not admit the stigmatizing effect because they believe that cultural ideals of thinness are not applicable to their self-evaluation. Rebuffing mainstream standards of thinness, Black women judge overweight women less negatively and experience less negative self-esteem about being overweight (Hebl & Heatherton, 1998).

They are capable of employing self-protective strategies (Crocker et al., 1998).

For example,

“Black women did not find mainstream standards as relevant to themselves and reported positive self-evaluations generally and about their bodies in particular. Asian women, on the other hand, responded differently than Black women and were more likely to endorse mainstream beauty standards in a similar fashion to White women.”
([Poran, 2002](#), p. 153).

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