English Composition 1021

Ruby Ortega Guzman

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The Underlying Problem with Beauty Standards

It is no secret that everyone comes from a different walk of life. What matters to one person does not necessarily have to matter to the next. The values, norms, problems and insecurities one faces is complex and individualized. But regardless of the mass differences that exist among people, there is one societal norm that is almost universal across every type of person; beauty standards. Beauty standards are everywhere. They are seen more obviously in the makeup, fashion and modeling industries. Makeup, fashion and modeling are intertwined with beauty as most of them market forms of beauty in some ways. And it goes without saying that the people involved in those industries are exposed to a version of beauty in their everyday life. But even the people who say that they do not care about their looks are exposed to beauty and the standards involved with it. Everyday people are exposed to advertisements, which have models that are hired to convince them to buy a product. Pop culture is heavily influenced by the level of attractiveness someone has. Actors and actresses are constantly marketed towards the public and are required to at least look a certain way. This all seems rather harmless; beauty in of itself is not necessarily seen as dangerous, but the truth is that the negatives that arise from beauty standards are harmful and potentially dangerous. Many people already know this. Activists and common people are all too well aware of the pressures that beauty standards bring. The common solution to this problem would be to get rid of beauty standards altogether. Unfortunately, this solution is something that is too idealistic to actually happen. To fix this problem, instead of trying to break down a system that has been in place for some time, society must reach a compromise with the beauty standards that exist. The true solution to the beauty standard is inclusivity. While many would say that beauty standards are a normality of the past and that to truly help people accept and love themselves, these standards must be eliminated, the

reality is that making beauty standards more inclusive will not only decrease the negatives that the beauty standard brings, but it is also the far more realistic choice.

Beauty standards have countless negative side effects due to the lack of inclusivity. Having a standard of beauty means that it is expected for people to look a certain way in order to be deemed attractive or beautiful. Jada Jones, a diversity editor for MeteaMedia, spoke out against beauty standards saying that "They [women] are expected to be hairless all over their body, have to be slim with no tummy but big butt, … and be an all-around perfect Barbie". The beauty standards dictate that certain traits are more desirable than others which in turn makes people feel the need to fit in regardless of how realistic it is. Normal body features like hair, acne, and discoloration grow to become hated (Jones) purely because the beauty standard does not want them shown. The lack of inclusivity creates a cycle of insecurity that creates pressure to fit in. Pressure to fit in is not exactly an entirely negative aspect of society on its own. Many would say that it is very normal to feel societal pressure and that to get over it people need to stick it out. The truth is that the need to fit in is a lot stronger than people think and can lead to behaviors that are mentally and physically harmful to a person. Eating disorders are a clear example of this. To be more specific, anorexia is an eating disorder that is directly affected and caused in part by the beauty standards. Anorexia is a condition where people avoid food, severely restrict food, or eat very small quantities of only certain foods" says the National Institute of Mental Health, a federal agency that conducts research on mental disorders. In fact, symptoms of anorexia are caused by the desire to look skinny. This typically includes the fear to gain weight or of staying at a healthy weight, a constant and daily pursuit to stay thin, and most importantly self esteem that is reliant on the perception of body weight. ("NIMH » Eating Disorders"). The reasons as to why a person develops anorexia are not simple, but it most

definitely has to do with the societal expectation that considers skinniness and being beautiful to be hand in hand. This pressure and expectation fuels the obsessive thoughts an anorexic person has. ("Anorexia nervosa - Symptoms and causes"). While anorexia is psychological, the physical effects show how dangerous a beauty standard truly is. Eating disorders such as anorexia can have serious life threatening symptoms such as heart problems, loss of muscle, severe malnourishment, and even death. ("Anorexia nervosa - Symptoms and causes"). All this stemming from the simple societal pressure that beauty standards uphold.

Beauty standards also make it so that people go through many lengths to be beautiful regardless of how harmful, time consuming or costly these lengths may be. To start off simple, the want to look beautiful can result in a lot of money and time spent where it does not necessarily need to be spent. Julianna Strano, a writer for The Daily WildCat, who has written countless articles on beauty, writes that "women spend thousands of dollars on hair extensions, lip fillers and cosmetic surgeries to look like the celebrities that are praised because of their beauty". While women spend a lot of time and money to look beautiful in the eyes of society, it could be argued that it is the choice of the women and no one else. Women are capable of making their own decisions on how they want to look but it is important to recognize the reasoning behind that choice. Why do women want fuller lips? Why are hair extensions wanted? It is because that's how others will see them as beautiful. It is how they will fit into society's standards. Apart from this, it is also important to recognize that because of beauty standards many women do not consider themselves beautiful at all. In fact, only about 4% of women worldwide think of themselves as beautiful and 72% of women feel pressure to look beautiful" (Strano). So while there is no doubt that women can get cosmetic procedures for themselves, many do not realize they are doing it to fit in. A more extreme but common example of people

spending time and money to fit into an unrealistic beauty standard would be the billion dollar industry of skin whitening products in India. People will gladly spend money and time going through what is a harmful process to their body so they can fit into India's beauty standard that says that white skin is more beautiful than dark skin. The products in this industry include "... creams, face washes, deodorants, even a vaginal whitener" which is worth about 270 billion rupees, which is otherwise considered $4 billion dollars ("India's multibillion-dollar skin lightening industry under fire as Indians seek whiter shade of pale"). As is obvious, these products are aimed at people with a darker skin complexion who in India are not the beauty standard. These skin whitening products are dangerous because it was found that "in a 2014 study that nearly half the creams it tested in India contained mercury, which is "completely illegal and unlawful" ("India's multibillion-dollar skin lightening industry under fire as Indians seek whiter shade of pale"). Due to how much money this industry makes, it is very clearly succeeding in pushing this unrealistic, dangerous product and all to appeal to the standards of beauty. People in the name of fitting in and being considered beautiful put themselves through harmful treatments that waste their time, money and health.

Lastly, beauty standards advertise a standard of beauty that is unrealistic and unattainable. The body traits that beauty standards advocate for are at times not possible for the daily person to achieve. In trying to achieve these beauty standards, people are brought down constantly for falling short which has unfortunate consequences such as bodily or mental harm. While skin whitening products are an example of this, pageants also can show the toxic standards that are present. Pageants are a show meant to show off beautiful women looking their best. While pageants are a show, beauty standards are heavily tied into them. The whole point of them is for contestants to win over the judges and audience with their beauty which can only be done if the

contestants are stereotypically beautiful. So how do pageants show the unrealistic standards of beauty? Even when women in pageants show their absolute best selves in terms of looks they are still attacked online solely for physical features. A Miss USA 2019 contestant named Cheslie Kryst committed suicide due to her long term depression and lack of help during her time in pageants. Cheslie Kryst's death spoke volumes to many and since then pageant contestants have spoken out against the hate they receive while doing pageants. Miss Kansas, Elyse Noe, spoke out and said "Why do we continue to hurt and berate women for presenting their best, beautiful selves?" ("Miss USA Contestants Said They Had No Mental-Health Support at Pageant"). Regardless of how close someone gets to the beauty standard, pageants show that people continue to hate and criticize. The beauty standard never stops which ultimately makes it unachievable and unrealistic.

Having established that the negatives of beauty standards are that it can bring serious mental disorders to vulnerable people, it causes people to spend their time, money and health on unnecessary products, and it promotes an unrealistic and unattainable image of beauty, there is one common denominator to all these issues; lack of inclusivity. Each of these issues is in part caused by the lack of representation of all types of people in society. For the first negative discussed, serious mental disorders like eating disorders are focused around the fact that the victim believes that gaining weight is something horrible. These eating disorders are rooted in fatphobia that while affected by biology and psychology, is absolutely affected by the beauty standards of today's society. If all an anorexic person sees is beauty and skinniness being put together that is what eventually leads to their disorder. To prevent eating disorders, showcasing different bodies as beautiful is the first big step. This way the urge to be skinny will not be as influenced by the beauty standard of today. While this would definitely not cure anorexia, it

would be a way to decrease the odds of it happening. Bigger people would be able to feel beautiful which would result in a much lower case of low self image. For the second negative effect of beauty standards, inclusivity would mean showcasing people of all different looks like fat people, people with acne, people with smaller chests or smaller butts, people with curly hair, etc. People would no longer feel the need to pay or spend time changing the features of themselves that do not fit into the beauty standard. Indians in India for example, if they saw that dark skin was beautiful and as highly wanted as white skin, would no longer contribute to the whitening product business. Underrepresentation is a big reason as to why Indians do not like their dark skin because "Advertising campaigns for various brands have typically depicted women - and increasingly men - as winning better jobs and partners, thanks to the fairness creams" ("India's multibillion-dollar skin lightening industry under fire as Indians seek whiter shade of pale"). Ads are the biggest reason why people with darker skin are more likely to want to buy the whitening creams. They associate whiteness with good cause it is all that they have seen. To extend that representation would be greatly beneficial. Lastly for the last negative effect, inclusivity would completely take away the "unattainable" beauty that is currently being sold to people everywhere. People would no longer be being sold an unrealistic beauty standard because the standard of beauty would be so broad and grounded in realism. The "ideal woman" would no longer be a wide held belief. Instead, diverse realistic beauty would be commonly known. All these solutions to these problems are inclusivity. While every problem is complex, when these three beauty related issues have a common or similar solution it says that the solution can be more simple than originally thought.

Now on the other hand, a common argument that is heard when beauty standards are mentioned is that instead of trying to work with the broken system, society as a whole should

instead get rid of the system altogether. Many people such as Jessica Defino, who is a freelance writer who is deeply passionate about abolishing beauty standards, is in complete opposition for what beauty standards even are and what they stand for. Defino herself in an article for Teen Vogue says, "Even the oxymoronic term "beauty standards" sets me off. I mean, imagine trying to contain a concept as immeasurable… as beauty within one set standard?". Beauty standards for many are by definition placing certain traits and people above others. These standards say that beauty is limited to a set of already defined traits. And while this is in part true, getting rid of the beauty standard entirely will not solve these issues for two main reasons. The first is that beauty standards are directly connected with millions of dollars of profit for many companies. Cynthia M. Frisby, a recognized authority that has written a lot of works about beauty, gender, and race, speaks about the large amount of money that is being generated in the beauty industry. Frisby writes, "Research suggests that approximately $7.5 billion is spent on beauty products annually," (Frisby). Billions of dollars are spent when the topic of beauty becomes marketed. People from all over are buying products that companies make, making billions of dollars in profits. Looking at a more specific group, "Marketing research shows that many African American women will spend twice as much money on skin care products…[that] ultimately generates billions of dollars for the cosmetic industry but at the expense of women of color" (Frisby). This is one source of evidence that shows the extent that beauty is tied to money making on a company's end. People are willing to pay money for beauty products which is the motivation needed for beauty standards to exist. The continuation of beauty standards is what funds companies to make products. It is guaranteed that profit will be made. Due to the large amounts of money being generated, companies will continue to try and profit off the beauty industry. The need for beauty products like makeup and skin products in part comes from the

need to look a certain way, otherwise known as the beauty standard. The money being made is because there is enough pressure from those standards that people are willing to spend their money to fit in. So this all ties back to the popular idea that beauty standards should be eliminated and that self love should be the main focus rather than making beauty standards more inclusive. The reason as to why this is unrealistic is because asking companies to give up their way of making money is a far-fetched idea that would only be possible if everyone had the same morals and values which is simply not possible. Beauty standards pressuring people to look a certain way causes them to go out and spend their money on products. These standards are the foundations for the profit that is generated for these companies. Eliminating beauty standards would mean that companies have to give up their money which is as far fetched as it sounds. Rather than getting rid of beauty standards, the need for compromise arises. Companies will not be willing to give up their money and the everyday person wants to feel good about themselves. A way that this can happen is for beauty standards to showcase more types of people. While some would argue that this would just take away the need for beauty products in general, that would also be considered a general unrealistic statement. Inclusive beauty standards would result in more people feeling good about themselves, but it will not cure every insecurity or bad thought about one's body. That is just not a possible outcome. It also goes to show that the companies that advocate for inclusivity do better profit wise. Frisby states in her work, "the multicultural beauty market is growing fast with brands that market toward minorities growing from 3.7 percent in 2014, to 4.8 percent in 2018". There is a clear demand for more products marketed to a more diverse group of people. Inclusivity will not result in less profit for companies. In fact the opposite would be true. So in making beauty standards more inclusive, not

only would the negatives of beauty standards decrease but companies would still be making the money they so desire.

The second reason that abolishing beauty standards is unrealistic is because beauty standards are based on prejudiced views which are incredibly difficult to change, much less get rid of. Many of the traits that are considered beautiful by the beauty standard are only there because of the strong prejudices that people carry. For example, racism is heavily found to be a foundational basis for beauty standards. Robinson-Moore and Cynthia L are two author's who have written a book titled "Beauty Standards Reflect Eurocentric Paradigms-So What? Skin Color, Identity, and Black Female Beauty" that is, simply put, the way race plays into the beauty and identity of black women. Moore and Cynthia L write, "...blacks in the U.S. have had a long struggle with Eurocentric beauty standards, since they exclude skin colors and hair types which many black females have". Exclusion of black features like curly hair and black skin in favor of the eurocentric straight hair and white skin is racism. The beauty standard favors people who have the eurocentric look which is a direct result of racist ideologies. Even beauty aimed at black people is not safe from racism as "Products and merchandise aimed at African-Americans also perpetuated skin color biases by frequently utilizing actors and models with light-skin tones" (Frisby). Beauty standards are associated with racist ideals as they often used lighter models in beauty advertisements. While it is not directly saying that being whiter is better than being darker, constantly using lighter skinned models in beauty ads indirectly makes that connection. Another example of prejudice being rooted in the beauty standards can be seen through the fatphobia present in beauty. As established earlier, being skinny is a very desirable trait that is fueled due to the fatphobia in today's society. Judith Rodin, Lisa Silberstein, and Ruth Striegel-Moore have written about weight and its relation to beauty. In their work titled, "Women

and weight: A normative discontent", they write, "In this society, obesity is a strongly

stigmatized condition and is met with punishment (psychological, social, and economic)". The

hurdles that bigger people face are all due to the correlation between skinniness and beauty.

Bigger people have consistently been put down through insults as can be seen in the negative

connotation that the word fat has. Being fat is widely considered to be a horrible act and one that

is not and will not be considered beautiful. In research done by Samantha Kwan and several

other named contributors, overweight and obese individuals were asked questions in order to

determine the relationship between health, beauty, and weight loss. Among other discoveries, it

was found that the participants "aspire to conventional beauty ideals hoping that aesthetic

conformity will elicit benefits," (Kwan). Overweight people know that due to their weight they

are not seen as beautiful. They are aware of the fact that conforming to beauty standards could

possibly give them benefits that could alter their life for the better. While this can be positively

seen in the betterment of health, bigger people should not have to lose weight to become skinny

to stop being insulted and bullied. That is the reality that beauty standards are. Due to the

overwhelming pressure to be skinny, bigger people are seen as less than. The whole concept of

what is and is not attractive is based on many prejudiced ideologies, like racism and fatphobia.

This can be seen in what traits are considered more beautiful than others. Many people strive to

have lighter skin because it is what is considered socially beautiful. It is a notion that is solely

based on the prejudice against darker skin, otherwise known as racism. Skinniness is another trait

that is extremely sought after by many. All because in this society, the beauty standard says that

skinniness is beautiful. People who are not skinny are ridiculed into wanting to be skinny which

is due to fatphobia. The point is that beauty standards are filled with ideologies that are so

constant and strong that deconstructing them is nearly impossible. Based on personal experience,

activists have been aware of problems like this and have actively fought and protested against these ways of thinking. But seeing the problems in real life, it can be assumed that these battles for equality are not easy. This is another reason as to why getting rid of beauty standards is not realistic. Attempting to dismantle beauty standards would mean dismantling the foundations that they are built on. Dismantling racism, fatphobia and countless other prejudices is near impossible. The reason why the stigma against fat people can turn into eating disorders is because of how strongly people believe that fatness is ugly and unattractive. It is the same reason as to why skin whitening products are so popular among Indians. The idea that white skin is superior or more beautiful than darker skin is so widely accepted and believed that trying to get rid of it altogether is extremely unrealistic. Devoting to get rid of beauty standards would just result in a long, repetitive cycle that does not achieve as much as it would want to. Making beauty standards more inclusive on the other hand would not so take on the endless battle against prejudice. Instead it would focus on expanding the limited view of beauty that so many hold. It would work to build off of what people already consider beautiful instead of trying to form a whole new and sudden way of thinking.

Beauty standards, regardless of the opinions surrounding them, are here to stay. There has been no major change that has been personally seen in the last few years. People continue to stay with their close minded views on what beauty can be without reaching out and seeing what it can be. Others simply do not think that this topic even applies to them. This whole discussion of beauty is a deeply important one to have because at its core it affects everyone. Every person has insecurities and a desire to look a certain way. It is something that while natural, has now been warped into a toxic way of thinking that is fueled by society as a whole. Learning to accept and involve every sort of person in the beauty world can result in a stronger society that does not

make people out to be ugly over something they can not control. Inclusivity is often looked down

upon by some people as a ploy of political correctness, a cheap tactic meant to draw in money,

but the truth is that the only thing that can bring the human race closer together is to

acknowledge our differences and embrace them. To embrace inclusivity is to embrace our true

beauty as humans; the beauty of acceptance.

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