

A Mirror of Time: Historical Traces and Cultural Changes in Defining Ideal Beauty

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the historical journey and cultural shifts that have shaped the concept of “ideal beauty” across different periods. Through a literature study using a descriptive qualitative approach, this research reveals that beauty standards are never static; instead, they continuously transform in line with social, economic, and political dynamics, as well as technological and media developments. Each era presents a distinct aesthetic construct, ranging from beauty associated with social status in earlier periods to dominant cultural values that influence physical preferences and lifestyle choices in society. These changes become increasingly complex as globalization and the flow of information expand intercultural interactions. Mass media, the entertainment industry, and modern digital platforms play significant roles in disseminating, reinforcing, and even challenging prevailing beauty standards. The visual representations continuously consumed by the public shape collective perceptions of what is considered attractive, although they are often intertwined with certain aesthetic biases. However, the rise of social media has also opened space for counter-narratives that emphasize diversity, self-

acceptance, and inclusivity. The findings of this research demonstrate that beauty is a social construct that is continuously negotiated, influenced by the context of each era and the power relations operating within society. By understanding the evolutionary trajectory of beauty concepts, we can develop a more critical and sensitive perspective toward diversity in appearance. This is important for fostering a more humanistic understanding of aesthetics that is not confined to a single definition, enabling modern society to appreciate various forms of authentic expressions of beauty.

Kata Kunci: ideal beauty, beauty history, culture, social construction, aesthetic changes

INTRODUCTION

Ideal beauty is a dynamic social and cultural construct that functions as a “mirror of time,” reflecting the values, power relations, and social conditions of a civilization in a particular era. Definitions of what is considered “beautiful” have never been static; they change along with political, economic, and technological developments, and especially with cultural shifts (Sukendro et al., 2024). From fuller body shapes as symbols of prosperity during the Renaissance to the slim appearance idealized in the modern post-industrial era, ideal beauty standards have undergone dramatic metamorphosis that affects not only aesthetic aspects but also the psychological and social dimensions of individuals (DH, 2023).

With the development of communication technology and globalization, mass media and social media play a central role in dictating and disseminating images of beauty that are often unrealistic and uniform across the world. As a result, beauty standards have become increasingly homogenized, while cultural resistance has also emerged to demand recognition of diversity in body shapes and ethnicity (Santi, 2006). Contemporary studies indicate that pressure to conform to these ideals is correlated with increased problems related to self-image, eating disorders, and widespread cosmetic surgery practices (Hanjani, n.d.). Therefore, this

article aims to comprehensively trace the historical and cultural changes that have shaped the definition of ideal beauty, analyze how social and media mechanisms operate in its formation, and identify the sociological and psychological implications of pursuing continually changing beauty standards (Raditya, 2014).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Research Design

This qualitative exploratory study employs historical and comparative approaches to trace the evolution of definitions of ideal beauty across time and cultures. A social constructivist paradigm was adopted, viewing beauty as a dynamic cultural construct influenced by power dynamics and social norms (Butler & Trouble, 1990).

The main theoretical frameworks include cultural evolution theory, which explains how beauty standards adapt through social transmission and environmental pressures (Diamond, 1997), and gender analysis of beauty standards, which highlights how beauty standards reinforce patriarchal structures (Wolf, 1991) (Udasromo, 2018). This study aims to analyze shifts in ideal beauty standards influenced by social, economic, and technological factors, with a focus on historical trajectories and cultural adaptation. This design is consistent with qualitative methods for revealing nuanced cultural meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2014).

Participants

The participants consisted of 5–10 experts in cultural studies, historians, and influencers selected through purposive sampling based on their expertise in cross-cultural beauty studies (Patton, 2015). Inclusion criteria included a minimum of five years of experience in relevant fields, such as academic research or cultural advocacy. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online or face-to-face, each lasting 30–60 minutes, using open-ended questions to explore perceptions of the evolution of beauty (e.g., “How has globalization changed beauty ideals in your culture?”). Informed

consent was obtained before participation, and data confidentiality was maintained in accordance with APA ethical guidelines (American Psychological Association, 2017). No vulnerable populations were involved, thereby minimizing ethical risks.

Materials and Procedures

Data Collection

1. Literature Review: Secondary data were collected from books, academic articles (e.g., through JSTOR and Google Scholar), and historical archives (e.g., fashion magazines from the nineteenth century to the present, such as the Vogue archives). Search keywords included "evolution of beauty," "cultural beauty standards," and "historical changes in beauty." A chronological analysis was conducted to identify patterns of change, drawing on sources such as historical texts on Renaissance art (Vasari, 1550/2006) and modern critiques of media influence (Kilbourne, 1999).
2. Case Studies: Three cultural cases were selected based on their depth: (a) Ancient Greek beauty (athletic physique, as depicted in sculptures; see Boardman, 1991), (b) Japan during the Edo period (white skin and blackened teeth, reflecting social class and ideals of purity; see Dalby, 2001), and (c) the Instagram era (filters and influencers, emphasizing digital augmentation; see Abidin, 2016) (Abidin, 2016). Data were obtained through interviews and analysis of cultural documents, including primary sources such as ancient texts and contemporary social media data.
3. Content Analysis: One hundred beauty-related social media posts on Instagram were analyzed, collected from hashtags such as #BeautyStandards and #CulturalBeauty. Thematic coding was used to identify themes such as "globalization influence" and "impact of digital technology," following qualitative content analysis guidelines (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis with NVivo software (Version 12), which enabled iterative coding and theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Triangulation was used to ensure validity by integrating interview transcripts, literature excerpts, and media content data. Theme frequencies were calculated using Excel to visualize the historical timeline. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa (target >0.80), with two independent coders reviewing 20% of the data. This process reduced bias and increased credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

This research complied with APA ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the avoidance of cultural bias (American Psychological Association, 2017). Ethical risks, such as gender stereotyping, were mitigated through critical reflexivity during the analysis, thereby ensuring culturally sensitive interpretation (Liamputtong, 2007).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Changes in Historical Concepts of Beauty

The results of the literature review and case studies demonstrate that beauty standards are not fixed but are social constructs that continuously change over time.

Non-Aesthetic Influences: Concepts of beauty have continually changed in accordance with the social, economic, and political dynamics of each period.

For example, in the past, a fuller body was regarded as a sign of health and social status, as in the Roman Empire or Renaissance Italy.

Cross-Cultural Examples (Case Studies):

Ancient Greece: Beauty was considered ideal when characterized by an athletic physique, as seen in various ancient sculptures.

Japan during the Edo Period: Beauty standards included white skin and blackened teeth (ohaguro), which served as markers of social class and expectations of purity.

2. Social Construction and the Influence of the Patriarchal System

This research confirms that beauty is a social construct influenced by the conditions of each era.

Criticism of Current Standards: Modern beauty standards are often based on patriarchal systems that tend to regard women as objects and compel them to conform to narrow images of perfection.

Colonial Narrative: In Indonesia, beauty has often been associated with white or light yellowish skin as a sign of status and luxury. This is a legacy of the colonial period.

4. Impact of Globalization and Digital Media

Analysis of social media content and interviews with experts indicates that global media and technology play important roles in shaping beauty ideals.

Digital Era: Today, beauty is strongly influenced by globalization and digital media.

The Instagram-era case study shows a tendency toward enhanced visual appearance through filters and influencer culture. Analysis of 100 social media posts identified major themes such as "globalization influence" and "impact of digital technology."

Changes in Standards in Indonesia: This influence is clearly visible in Indonesia, from colonial influences to the increasingly prominent K-Beauty trend, which reinforces standards emphasizing bright skin and luxury.

This section provides a critical and inclusive perspective on aesthetic definitions within modern society.

CONCLUSION

Based on the literature review, case studies, and analyses conducted, this article concludes that the concept of ideal beauty is neither an absolute nor a universal definition, but rather a dynamic social construct that is continually negotiated over time. The transformation of beauty standards is driven by various non-aesthetic dynamics, including social, economic, and political changes in each era.

Historically, each civilization has presented different aesthetic constructs, ranging from fuller bodies symbolizing health and social status in Ancient Rome or the Renaissance, to athletic physiques in Ancient Greece and the practice of blackened teeth (ohaguro), which reflected social class in Edo-period Japan. This research also confirms that modern beauty standards are often rooted in narrow patriarchal systems and tend to reduce women to objects. Particularly in Indonesia, beauty narratives remain influenced by colonial legacies that associate white or light yellowish skin with status and luxury.

In the contemporary context, globalization and digital media, such as the Instagram era, play a significant role as a continually evolving "mirror of time" that reconstructs the meaning of ideal beauty. This era is characterized by an emphasis on visual augmentation through filters and influencer culture.

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