Pursuit of Beauty: the Cultural Divide

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Across three studies, we investigate the beauty obsession that is touching unprecedented heights in Asia. We show that Easterners/interdependents are more prone to using appearance-enhancing products to adhere to societal norms. Replicated across contexts, this effect is sequentially mediated by conformity and self-discrepancy, i.e. gap between ideal standards and self-image.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1018827/volumes/ap11/AP-11

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Pursuit of Beauty: The Cultural Divide
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Human beings have always coveted beautiful objects, but the obsession with looking good is touching new heights with double-digit growth in cosmetic, skin care and plastic surgery industries across the world. Existing research suggests that standards of beauty are not universal, but culturally defined (Hamermesh 2011). In this paper, we focus on the cultural antecedents and drivers of the pursuit of looking beautiful.

Evidence from popular culture suggests that in highly collectivist societies, the rulebook for what is considered beautiful, is not only clearly in place but is also extremely strict. We argue that driven by adherence to norms, interdependents are more likely to conform to these narrow ideals of beauty. Specifically, interdependence leads to greater motivation to conform and live up to the standards of the in-group (Bond and Smith 1996). Prior research suggests that this need to adapt and fit-in leads to extensive social comparison (White and Lehman 2005), thus making the ideal standards salient and concrete in their minds. This further results in clear discrepancy between current state and aspiration (Kitayama et al. 1995) and self-criticism/dissatisfaction due to greater self-ideal discrepancies (Heine and Lehman 1999). Hence, we hypothesize that effect of interdependence on usage of appearance enhancing tools will be mediated by conformity and self-discrepancy, i.e. the gap between the ideal beauty standard and actual self-image. Specifically, interdependents’ need to conform to the strict standards will make them feel more “discrepant”, or not living up to the ideal, thus driving usage of enhancement products that can help reduce the perceived gap between ideal and actual self.

We test the above hypotheses across three studies with women in the age group of 18-35 years. Study 1 was conducted with Indian and US participants, Study 2 with US participants and Study 3 with Indian participants. All participants were recruited through MTurk.

To establish that definition/standards of beauty are more concrete/stricter in the minds of interdependents, we ran a cross-country pilot test with Indian and US participants. Participants were presented with a list of 23 attributes that are common markers of beauty (e.g. large eyes, sharp nose, glossy hair, even complexion etc.) and asked to choose all the attributes that are mandatory for a woman to be considered beautiful in their culture. Intuitively, higher number of attributes chosen indicates stricter standards of what it takes to qualify or be considered as ‘beautiful’ in that culture. In other words, more the number of attributes that define beauty, the harder it becomes to match up to those definitions. Poisson regression revealed that participants from India (high interdependence) considered more attributes (M = 9.6) to be mandatory for a woman to be considered beautiful as compared to those from US (low interdependence; M = 7.7; Poisson b = -.22, Wald Chi Sq. = 5.0, p<.05)

Study 1 investigated the impact of interdependence (high interdependence: India, low interdependence: USA) on the usage of image enhancing tools such as filters on smartphone apps to make ‘selfies’ appear more beautiful than the person actually is. These apps are perfect for a quick makeover to get flawless complexion, feature enhancement for bigger, brighter eyes, sharper nose, angular jawline, removing dark circles, whitening teeth, and even applying make-up. We conceptualized the dependent variable as the likelihood of using filters or image enhancing apps to make photos look more attractive using a five-item scale (α = .93). As hypothesized, Indians are more likely to use image correcting filters and tools to enhance their photographs, compared to Americans (M_US = 3.75, F(1, 79) = 8.233, p = .005, η² = .094).

Study 2 followed the same paradigm as Study 1 while measuring interdependence (Singelis 1994). To explore the underlying mechanism, we also measured conformity (Mehrabian and Steffl 1995) and appearance related self-discrepancy with an adapted version of Body-Image Ideals Questionnaire (Cash and Szymanski 1995). As in Study 1, interdependence scores significantly predicted usage of image enhancement tools (b=.43, t(138) = 2.56, p =.012). Further, we found support for the mechanism causing this effect through Hayes (2012) Model 6 (boot strapped serial multiple mediator model) with conformity and self-discrepancy sequentially mediating the link between interdependence and usage of appearance-enhancement tools (95%CI = .037, .219). We also replicated the results from the pilot study and found that higher interdependence leads to a higher number of mandatory attributes for being considered beautiful (Wald Chi Sq. = 131, p<.05)

Study 3 replicated the effect from Study 2 in a different context by using purchase intention (scale adapted from Stafford, 1998) for a complexion correcting skin cream. Given the causal mechanism of self-discrepancy in Study 2, we hypothesized that interdependents’ (positive) attitude towards the cosmetic product will be driven by their perceptions about the product’s ability to minimize the gap between ideal and actual self. Conceptualized as product’s ability to reduce discrepancy, this was measured using the scale from Bower (2001). As hypothesized, interdependence again significantly predicted the usage of the complexion correcting skin cream product (b=.53, t(118) = 4.52, p =.00). Further, mediation through product’s ability to minimize self-discrepancy was found to be significant (95%CI = .241, .625; Hayes 2012). Hence, interdependents’ attitude towards the product is driven by the extent it can help minimize self-discrepancy, the gap between actual and ideal self.

Our work contributes to theory by examining the nuances of cultural variables in the underexplored domain of beauty. Further, we leverage the self-discrepancy theory in an appearance context to explain the causal mechanism driving the effect. Practically, a sharper understanding of cultural antecedents on the quest for beauty has strong managerial implications for the $265 billion industry (by 2017). More importantly, our findings offer pervasive implications for consumer well being. With more women taking increasingly drastic steps to conform to strict beauty ideals, insights from this research can be leveraged to find ways to minimize self-discrepancy, thereby reducing the prevalence of extreme measures such as plastic surgery, in the pursuit of looking beautiful.

REFERENCES


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