The problem with beauty standards

Picture a little girl running around the house in her mom’s high heels. She discovers her mom’s makeup and smears it all over her face. Playing dress up fills her with joy and confidence. In that moment, she thinks she is beautiful, and is unaware of the beauty standards in which women are expected to conform. What happens to that carefree little girl when she is a pre-teen, teenager, and adult? The pressures and expectations society places on beauty will eventually get to her. Today’s society focuses too heavily on unrealistic beauty standards and body image.

From the first time a little girl picks up and plays with a Barbie doll, the little girl has already been introduced to beauty standards. Barbie’s unrealistic body image conditions young girls to be conscious about their body image. Girls look up to Barbie and want to look like her, but Barbie sets a false reality of a woman’s body. The doll’s measurements are unnatural, and “with a 16 inch waist Barbie only has room for half a liver and a few inches of intestines” (Fox, 2015). Barbie is the epitome of unrealistic body images. Her figure is impossible to achieve, and when young girls strive to look like her but end up short, their own body image is negatively affected. One particular doll called Slumber party Barbie actually “came with a bathroom scale permanently set at 110 Ibs with a book entitled *How To Lose Weight* with directions saying simply don’t eat” (Fox, 2015). This doll paints a clear picture that beautiful means being thin, and those who are not need to change. The average woman does not weigh 110 Ibs so why does society see beauty as a size two? Beauty should not hinge so much on being thin, but rather being healthy. Beauty radiates from the inside out, so if a person is striving for beauty they should first focus on being happy and healthy.

Beauty pageants for young girls are becoming more and more popular. However, pageants have a negative effect on self-esteem because they teach girls to compare themselves to others. Parents spend thousands of dollars on dresses and beauty products and services for these events; in fact, “a glitz pageant six times a year can easily run $10,000" (Sandberg, 2011). Spending this much money on pageants teaches girls that outward beauty is important and valuable, and that fake products are necessary to be pretty. Spray tans, hair extensions, fake eyelashes and teeth, all of these teach kids that their own natural beauty is not enough. The girls know that they are being judged based on their outward appearance, and this judgment can take a toll on a girl’s confidence. Beauty should not be a competition of looks, but rather being true to ones self. Pageants try to achieve the same unrealistic standards of beauty on young and vulnerable girls. Although “there are over 100,000 girls in pageantry” (Sandberg, 2011), the girls, for the most part, look basically the same at these functions after they have been made up to look like adults. People should realize that underneath the caked-on makeup and hair extensions are real, unique little girls who are special in their own way. Comparing girls’ outward appearance to one another is a dangerous and slippery slope. These girls are young and impressionable, and the feedback they receive at these pageants will affect their self-image long term.

Beauty standards promote eating disorders, and models are a high-risk group for having unhealthy eating habits. Of those surveyed, “31.2% of models have had eating disorders” (The Model Alliance, 2015). Models are constantly exposed to pressures to be thin in the fashion industry. The girls are already very thin, and then they are photo-shopped in magazines to look even smaller. Models aren’t the only group with unhealthy food issues, however. Eating disorders are affecting more and more girls at a young age. In fact, “81% of ten year old girls had already dieted at least once” (Schneider, 1996). Young girls shouldn’t be burdened with trying to be like photo-shopped models they see in magazines. If girls start out at a young age believing they aren’t pretty, imagine how their self-esteem will be affected in the long run. These self-perceptions likely will not go away over time; instead, they will build into adulthood.

Cosmetic surgery is becoming more and more popular so that people can “fix” what is perceived as imperfect on their bodies. Records show that “Americans spent almost $11 billion on cosmetic procedures in 2012” (American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2013). Plastic surgery is a drastic measure to try to fix or change one’s own insecurities. These insecurities will still be there unless they are dealt with internally. Plastic surgery takes away part of one’s individuality. People should strive to be healthy and the best they can be, and accept themselves instead of changing themselves. Nonetheless, plastic surgery is a growing industry. For example, “buttock lifts increased 44% from 2013 to 2014” (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2015). People are worrying more and more about having the perfect image. The increase in cosmetic surgeries shows society’s unhealthy obsession with beauty. Once one surgery is done to “fix” a flaw, patients will likely find other imperfections, and some may even get addicted to plastic surgery. Women should look at themselves as being beautifully flawed, because imperfections are part of natural beauty and should be appreciated.

It’s hard to feel confident about your appearance in today’s society. Society is overexposed to commercials and ads that emphasize beauty. “56% of commercials use beauty as a product appeal” (Ed. University of Washington, 2009). Most of the commercials showcase an ideally attractive and beautiful person when advertising a product. Many times, the models wear hair extensions, fake eyelashes, and have fake tans in these ads. The public sees this standard of beauty over and over again, and of course then believes that is the expectation. Teenagers and women often wear hair extensions, fake eyelashes, fake tans, and acrylic nails to look more beautiful. They also turn to articles in magazines to give them tips on how to be more attractive, and “One in every three articles in leading magazines also included a focus on appearance” (Ed. University of Washington, 2009). Articles that focus on getting the perfect bikini body or having perfect skin perpetuate what society believes are the standards that women should try to achieve. Beauty tools should be used to enhance natural beauty, but people need to have realistic expectations and not expect to be perfect. Every woman is beautiful in her own unique way.

The mirror is just another tool to let women criticize themselves and their appearance. Woman are feeling more uncomfortable in their own skin and don’t see their own beauty. Studies show that “8 out of 10 women will be dissatisfied with their reflection and more than half may see a distorted image” (Fox, 1997). Women find little minute features they have that they believe are unattractive, and most women have features they want to change. The problem is that in today’s society, we are taught to compare ourselves to others. What would happen if these comparisons stopped and we used the mirror as a tool to express our own uniqueness? Women have a hard time looking in the mirror and seeing the beauty that other people see. Dove brought in a criminal profiling sketch artist to draw the descriptions women gave of themselves and their own appearance. All the women described their own features in a negative light; however, strangers described those same women in only positive descriptions (Dove, 2015). This shows the insecurities and lack of self-confidence women have in themselves, and that of those insecurities, most are only in their imagination. Why is it so hard for women to realize they are beautiful and focus on the positives? When women remind themselves of what they do like in their outward appearance, their self-confidence goes up, which in turn makes them appear more beautiful.

Remember that little girl playing dress up? She always felt beautiful in her own skin with her mom’s high heels and smeared on makeup. Society needs to make sure that she doesn’t grow up with unrealistic expectations of how she should look on the outside. Catherine Garner, a professional hair and makeup artist, says, “I use makeup to enhance the natural beauty every woman has so that they can see just how beautiful they actually are” (Garner, 2015). Women need to draw upon the confidence, happiness, and beauty that little girls have when they play dress up. Each woman should be her own type of beautiful and not worry about the world’s opinion. It’s time for that little girl’s beauty and spirit to shine bright once again.

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