

Culture clash: appearance concerns in black and minority ethnic groups

Around the world, men and women of all cultures and ethnicities are being exposed to Western appearance ideals. Paired with a lack of representation of black and minority ethnic (BME) men and women in the mainstream media, the public's appreciation of ethnic diversity is being threatened. Nicola Stock examines the growing trend of appearance-altering practice among those from BME communities.

Throughout history, people have always been interested in making the most of their looks. In recent years, however, appearance ideals have become more extreme, as has the pressure to conform to these ideals (Frith, 2012). Within society, beauty is consistently linked to success in both the personal and professional sphere (Rumsey and Harcourt, 2005). Consequently, for many men and women, the discrepancy between how they look and how they feel they should look is a source of significant distress, resulting in poorer wellbeing and engagement in unhealthy behaviours, such as disordered eating, excessive exercise, the disproportionate use of cosmetics and the risky use of medication (Grogan, 2007). More recently, patterns of globalisation, increased population mobility, media exposure and the growth of the internet has helped to ensure that Western appearance standards are shared across the world, diluting the diversity which was previously to be celebrated among different cultures (Falvey, 2012).

Cross-cultural differences

Cross-cultural differences in appearance are largely determined by biological variation, as well as the practice of grooming, styling and adorning (Falvey, 2012). Although an underlying preference for physical traits which are of evolutionary advantage exists across all cultures, historical notions of 'attractiveness' vary (Falvey, 2012). For example, in East Asia, tradition preferred women with a round face and petite, shapely body, and placed emphasis on natural beauty. However, today, desirable features include unnaturally large eyes, an oval face, a small mouth, a high nasal bridge and whiter skin, as well as a tall and extremely slim body (Li et al, 2008). Similarly, the traditional South Asian woman's 'moon-like' face, 'hourglass' figure and 'medium complexion' has been replaced by a desire for slim, petite, 'European' features. For both men and women, fair skin is now considered a prerequisite for beauty in India (Gelles, 2011). The potential impact of European standards of beauty are perhaps most significant for black men and women, who are increasingly exposed to messages that light skin, straight hair, a thin nose and lips, and light coloured eyes, are beautiful (Bryant, 2013).

Social inequalities

While the vast majority of Western men and women fall short of modern beauty ideals, those of black and minority ethnic (BME) origin are excluded even more so. Research has shown that men and women from BME backgrounds are frequently underrepresented in mainstream television, magazines, advertisements and online (Cottle, 2000). Those from ethnic minorities are often cast in minor roles, heavily stereotyped and/or depicted in a negative context (Cottle, 2000). The way social inequalities are portrayed in society plays a key role in creating a sense of who individuals are and how they differentiate from others (Cottle, 2000). Using the 'doll test' (Clark and Clark, 1947), research has repeatedly demonstrated that when children are presented with a 'white' doll and a

'black' doll and asked a series of questions, children of all ethnic backgrounds report a preference for lighter skin tones, attributing positive characteristics to the light-skinned doll (e.g. smart, nice, good, pretty) compared with the dark-skinned doll (e.g. dumb, mean, bad, ugly). Not only does this impact on individuals' satisfaction with their appearance, but also their evaluations of self-worth.

Demand for lighter skin

Although the preference for light skin is not a new phenomenon, the demand for 'whiter' skin is rising at an alarming rate among BME groups (Glenn, 2008). In many countries, light skin continues to be associated with intelligence, authority and beauty (Hunter, 2005). Much controversy has been seen in Western media in recent months, where magazines and advertisements have been accused of digitally lightening the skin of BME models and celebrities. For example, *Vanity Fair* was recently accused of lightening the skin of Lupita Nyong'o (Wilson, 2014). In stark contrast to the European desire for tanned skin, many individuals from ethnic minorities do everything they can to reduce sun exposure (Kung and Lee, 2006). More concerning, however, is the growing use of skin-bleaching products within BME communities. Unsafe, untested and illegal in the UK, such products claim to turn skin between two and three shades lighter, even out skin tone and eradicate dark patches, freckles and other unwanted marks (Glenn, 2008). Despite high levels of mercury, hydroquinone and glucocorticoids, as well as clear links to skin disease and cancer (Oluide et al, 2010), BME men and women across the world continue to apply these products to achieve lighter skin (Glenn, 2008).

Removing ethnic features

One of the most extreme surgical procedures gaining popularity among East Asian men and women is the blepharoplasty ('double-eyelid surgery'), which reshapes the eyes and produces a crease above the eyelid. Among those of African, Caribbean and South Asian descent, rhinoplasty to reduce a bulbous tip, flat bridge or wide nostrils is now among the most sought after cosmetic procedures. However, with darker skin comes a greater risk of keloid scarring and dyspigmentation following surgery if not properly managed (Grimes and Hunt, 1993). Chemical treatments to straighten or 'relax' Afro-textured hair are also common among BME groups, despite the understanding that such treatments can damage the hair and scalp permanently (Robinson, 2011).

Embracing cultural diversity

In many countries, a 'European appearance' reflects a modern, affluent, young and consumer-driven lifestyle (Hunter, 2005). The message being portrayed across the world suggests not only that a Western appearance is beautiful, but that conforming to this cultural ideal may affect marital and employment prospects, social status and earning potential (Li et al, 2008). With the infiltration of Western beauty ideals, BME individuals are increasingly faced with the tension of whether to assimilate to an increasingly global culture or to preserve their identity (Falvey, 2012). The psychological impact of this decision should not be underestimated. In the UK, a better understanding of the prevalence and extent of appearance-altering practices among BME groups is needed, as is an investigation of underlying psychological mechanisms. Appropriate interventions using empowering, strengths-based approaches should be endorsed. For those undergoing surgical procedures, psychological screening and support should be integrated into practice to ensure the individual has realistic expectations. Fundamentally, diversity in appearance should be embraced and encouraged in schools, homes and the media.

References

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Key points

- Black and minority ethnic (BME) men and women are increasingly exposed to Western appearance ideals and are underrepresented in mainstream media
- The degree to which BME individuals are influenced by and integrate with competing cultures may play a key role in their desire to change their appearance

- The increasing use of skin-bleaching products, chemical hair straightening and cosmetic surgery to reduce distinctive ethnic features is concerning
- A better understanding of the underlying mechanisms of appearance-altering behaviours in BME groups, as well as psychological support, is needed