

Western Beauty Pressures and Their Impact on Young University Women

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Abstract

This research examines the impact of Western beauty pressures on a select group of young Canadian women. I gathered data using qualitative semi-structured interviews and analysed the data using an intersectional analysis of oppression in order to learn how women's race, class and culture backgrounds shape their experiences with Western beauty pressures. The interviews were analysed using the voice-centred relational method of data analysis. The thirteen women interviewed discussed their perceptions of Western beauty pressures, how these pressures shape their engagement or lack thereof in beauty practices, and strategies they employ for resistance. The results are organized under six main themes: (a) gender roles and beauty (b) education, careers and beauty practices (c) influence of family, friends, relationships and peers (d) cosmetics (e) weight, and (f) resistance.

Key words: Beauty, advertising, women, resistance, intersectionality, oppression.

Introduction

In our global beauty market, Western beauty ads play a significant role in shaping women's and girls' relationships to their bodies by promoting an unattainable beauty that does not leave room for cultural and individual differences. Globally, Western beauty "ideals" pressure women and girls to conform to a fair-skinned, youthful, thin, toned, able-bodied and physically "good looking" woman. Pressure on women and girls to strive for the Western beauty "ideal" is replacing the great diversity of human bodies and beauty (Rossini, 2015). Through imagery in advertising and in popular culture, women and girls receive the message that their value largely depends on their physical appearance (Newsom, 2011). Since advertisers have extraordinary power in determining the content of the media, women are conditioned from a very young age to believe that they can buy their way into achieving the Western beauty "ideal" (Rossini, 2015). Kilbourne (2010) argues that pressure on women and girls to conform to the Western beauty "ideal" has become worse over the years and that the criteria for meeting such standards has become more demanding. The unrelenting pressure on women and girls to meet Western beauty standards is shaped by inequality across gender, race, class, sexuality, gender identity and ability, making it a crucial social justice issue.

In Western culture, women and girls learn that their bodies are a measure of their economic value, causing many women and girls to believe that changing their body size or shape can change their life (Brown & Jasper, 1993). Weitz (2008) found that conventional attractiveness in relationships and careers is a source of power for women. For example, conventionally attractive women are less lonely, more popular, more sexually experienced, are more likely to marry and are more likely to marry men of a higher socioeconomic status (Weitz, 2008). Conventionally attractive women are also more likely to get hired, promoted and paid higher salaries (Weitz, 2008). The transnational, multi-billion dollar beauty industry has taken advantage of female consumers by fostering insecurities and offering a series of solutions that tell women and girls how to hide their imperfections through the purchase and use of beauty products (Darling-Wolf, 2009). Due to the unrelenting pressure on women to meet Western beauty standards and the obvious material gains that can be made by achieving them, many women and girls come to experience their bodies as a source of distress in our consumerist, media-driven culture.

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Weight

Worldwide, the weight loss industry is worth \$586 billion and has a 98% failure rate (Rossini, 2015). Rossini (2015) argues that this profit would be marginal if people succeeded at losing weight with the products sold. However, despite the high failure rate of the weight loss industry, pressure on women and girls to meet the thin Western beauty "ideal" remains. In contemporary Western culture, the thin female body is associated with health, wealth, success and beauty (Rice, 2010), making it challenging for women to participate in various social institutions on the same level as men. Fikkan & Rothblum (2012) found that women's sizes are judged more harshly than men and that they experience more discrimination than men at all ages, regardless of whether they are labeled "average," "overweight" or "obese." Miller & Lundgren (2010) found that college students judged an "obese" female politician more harshly than a "non-obese" female politician, with no significant difference in their evaluations of male politicians based on their weight and size. Thus, harmful body norms reinforce gender inequality by giving women more obstacles to overcome when they are striving for success.

Previous research shows that approximately 7% of women and 3% of men will struggle with eating disorders at some point in their lifetime (de Oliveira, Kurdyak, Cheng, Colton, & Olmsted, 2017). In Canada, eating disorders affect women ten times more than men (Statistics Canada, 2015). Anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are known as the two most common eating disorders. Anorexia nervosa is described as a mental disorder that occurs in females in 90% of cases or more in the population of those diagnosed, and it has been named one of the most common psychiatric conditions for young women (Statistics Canada, 2015). Bulimia nervosa is defined as an eating disorder that involves cycles of bingeing and purging (Statistics Canada, 2015). Women and girls start the cycle by eating excessive amounts of food all at once until they are uncomfortably full. They then try to compensate for overeating by purging what their bodies have consumed (Statistics Canada, 2015). Bulimia nervosa also affects females in 90% of cases or more in the population of those diagnosed (Statistics Canada, 2015). Previous research shows that approximately half of those who suffer from anorexia nervosa recover within five years, while approximately 5% to 20% die due to complications (Statistics Canada, 2015). Over 50% of those diagnosed with anorexia nervosa will develop bulimic symptoms within the first five years (Statistics Canada, 2015). While young, affluent white women dominate representations of anorexia and bulimia, there is widespread evidence that eating disorders do not primarily affect young, upper-class white women (Rice, 2009). A study conducted in *Essence* magazine found that 65% of African-American women were dieting, and 21% were engaging in bulimia as a means of weight control (Rice, 2009). A study with young Indigenous women found that almost half were dieting, 27% induced vomiting to lose weight and 11% used diet pills (Rice, 2009). Since women often need to be thin to get and keep jobs, the pursuit of thinness may not only be about aesthetics, but about economic survival (Eller, 2014; MacInnis, 1993). Eller (2014) found that fat women on average earn less money over a lifetime than women of average weight. Additionally, women of average weight earn less money over a lifetime than women who are 25 pounds under the average weight (Eller, 2014). Thus, the material gains tied to weight loss are difficult for women who are trying to maintain healthy relationships with food and their bodies.

1. Hair

Women's hair has been central to their social position in Western culture. By meeting conventionally attractive hair norms, women are able to more easily get and keep various jobs (Weitz, 2008). For example, Weitz (2008) found that a young lesbian woman in her study used her long hair to pass as heterosexual, enabling her to get more job opportunities. Similarly, female athletes often dye their hair blonde and wear it long and curly to avoid being labelled as lesbians (Weitz, 2008). Regardless of a woman's sexual orientation, she risks discrimination if her hairstyle does not conform to heterosexual beauty norms. Race also directly impacts women's experiences with their hair. Weitz (2008) found that women who drew attention to their minority status with their hair were perceived by others to have lower credibility in the workplace. This included women with curly 'Jewish' hair, immigrant women that had long braided hair, and African women that had afros, braids, or dreadlocks (Weitz, 2008). Buchanan (1993) argues that the beauty "ideal" for black women in Western culture is more unattainable since Western culture deems blackness in itself ugly. Due to such representations of women of colour, the light-skinned black woman with straight or wavy hair who most closely resembles the white "ideal" is the most attractive by the standards of many white people and by many black Westernized men and women (Buchanan, 1993; Patton, 2006). The belief that the white Westernized body is superior is the result of internalized racism. The increasing presence of women of colour in advertising and in popular culture does nothing to challenge white supremacy when the white westernized body is still idealized.

Thus, growing up in a white supremacist culture means that women of colour have learned they must resemble white women to be “beautiful.” For example, Rice (2010) found that many African-Canadian girls reported experiencing racial harassment in schools due to having “unattractive” hair. As hooks (1992) argue, social equality cannot be achieved through racial integration in a white supremacist culture without changes in the culture’s attitudes about blackness and black people.

2. Cosmetics

Cosmetics are a crucial part of Western beauty pressures since women’s use of cosmetics sustains a multi-billion dollar industry and directly influences women’s social positions in Western culture. Previous research found that women feel pressure to wear makeup in order to appear healthy, competent and heterosexual at work (Dellinger & Williams, 1997; Klatt, Eimler, & Krämer, 2016; Nash, Fieldman, Hussey, Leveque, & Pineau, 2006). Dellinger & Williams (1997) had a tall lesbian woman in their study that claimed she wears makeup to avoid drawing attention to her sexual orientation and to avoid intimidating men who are threatened by a woman who is taller than they are. Thus, wearing makeup is a way to comply with heterosexual appearance norms for women who do not want to appear threatening in the workplace (Dellinger & Williams, 1997). Research also shows that for many women of colour, wearing makeup plays a significant role in gaining respect in the workplace despite the sexism evident in this workplace appearance standard (Dellinger & Williams, 1997; Jeffreys, 2005). Additionally, many women spoke of wearing makeup to appear younger in the workplace, while other women wore makeup to look older. Depending on a woman’s age, looking younger or older was directly linked to credibility (Dellinger & Williams, 1997). Thus, Western beauty standards largely shape workplace appearance norms, and therefore constrain women’s choices about wearing makeup at work.

Consistent with the previous racist beauty practices discussed, there is now an industry of face-whitening products designed to aid women of colour in achieving the white beauty “ideal.” Due to Western colonization and sexism, many cultures associate beauty with having light skin (Rice, 2010). A profitable global market in skin-whitening products reinforces the white beauty “ideal.” A recent example is a Dove ad that shows a black woman removing her shirt to reveal a white woman underneath, suggesting that the woman’s skin tone changed after using Dove’s lotion (Larbi, 2017). These historically racist ads continue to be prevalent despite widespread outrage and resistance. Due to the idealization of the white beauty “ideal,” many women of colour speak of avoiding sunlight and using light concealers to meet Western beauty standards (Rice, 2010). Thus, skin-whitening products are one of the few options that racialized women have who desire to achieve feminine beauty and social acceptance under white supremacy.

3. Cosmetic Surgery

Models presented to us through imagery in advertising and in popular culture have become increasingly thin (Darling-Wolf, 2009). While airbrushing has long been possible, the ability to manipulate images through new imaging technology is more advanced than ever (Darling-Wolf, 2009). As a result, today’s supermodels have evolved into “ideals” that bear no relation to real women, increasing the number of women who opt for cosmetic surgery (Darling-Wolf, 2009). The type of cosmetic surgery that women are rendered in need of often depends on their intersecting identities. The social construction of the female body as in need of cosmetic surgery is particularly problematic when considering the types of female bodies that are rendered “in need of change.” Characteristics that place women on the top of the list in need of cosmetic surgery are “the too-long Jewish noses, too flat African-American ones, “Oriental” eyelids, and, of course, any sign of aging” (Darling-Wolf, 2009, p. 254). As can be seen, any characteristics which pull women away from the white, middle-class “ideal” are in need of change. Deviant bodies are those that are “not white enough, not young enough, not middle-class enough, not thin enough, not abled enough” (Darling-Wolf, 2009, p. 254). Western culture pathologizes more women as standards of normality become more rigid due to more and more women undergoing cosmetic surgery (Wendell, 2009). Thus, many cosmetic surgeries reinforce oppressive beauty norms that vary depending on a woman’s identity.

4. Resistance

Many feminists have outlined various forms of resistance women can take to challenge Western beauty pressures. Some of the ways in which women do this includes making radical changes to their appearance by defying family, peer and sexual norms, making connections with people who give them positive messages about themselves, and engaging in rebellious behaviour such as smoking, drinking, tattooing and piercing (Rice, 2009).

Women also engage in consciousness raising by reading, speaking and listening to one another in order to discover differences and similarities in their experiences to create strategies for resistance (Rice, 2009). To resist, women also often redirect their energy to other things they can base their self-worth on other than their physical appearance (Rice, 2010). Lastly, not all women aspire to meet the thin Western beauty standard. Gurrieri & Cherrier (2013) found that many fat women resist the association of fat with ugliness by creating alternative spaces in which many different bodies are beautiful. In these spaces, they challenge the idea that fat women should not wear swimsuits, tight clothing or colours and styles that attract attention by flaunting their fat. Flaunting fat provides women a visible way of rejecting the normative thin beauty standard in advertising and in popular culture (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013). Hence, many women resist Western beauty pressures on their own terms, depending on what is effective for them at the time (Rice, 2009).

Women's race, class, culture, age, sexuality, size, gender identity and ability all largely shape their experiences with Western beauty pressures (Buchanan, 1993; hooks, 1992; Kelly, 2007; Newsom, 2011; Odette, 1994; Patton, 2006; Rice, 2009; Rice, 2010; Rossini, 2015; Siebler, 2012). I will expand on previous feminist literature by utilizing an intersectional analysis of oppression to discuss the ways in which women, depending on their race, class, culture and size, experience Western beauty pressures. Intersectionality is "the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power" (Davis, 2008, p. 68). My research demonstrates how women experience Western beauty pressures differently and at different intensity levels based on their intersecting identities.

5. Methods

In order to answer my research question, I utilized an exploratory qualitative method by conducting semi-structured interviews with female university students. I interviewed thirteen young women who permanently reside in Canada. All thirteen participants were students at Brock University, and were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. Eight out of the thirteen women interviewed were white, two women were bi-racial (White and African-Canadian, Jamaican and Filipino-Canadian), two women were Indian-Canadian, and one woman was Filipino-Canadian. All of the women were either working or middle-class. All of the women were able-bodied with a cisgender identity. The research was completed in 2014. I analysed the interviews using step two, three and four of the voice-centred relational method of data analysis (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998).

After obtaining ethical clearance from Brock University's Research Ethics Board, I utilized twelve questions for the interviews (Appendix A). In order to recruit participants, I put posters up around Brock University and made an announcement on the Brock University Women's and Gender Studies Facebook page. Brock University counselling information was on the participants' copy of the consent form and all participants received a one-page summary of the results once the project was completed.

6. Findings

* All of the names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

6.1. Gender Roles and Beauty

Beauty practices are the main instrument by which the "difference" between the sexes is created and maintained. They create the stereotyped role for women of being sex and beauty objects, having to spend insubordinate amounts of time and money on makeup, hairstyles, depilation, creams and potions, fashion, botox and cosmetic surgery (Jeffreys, 2005, p. 29-30).

One of the women that I interviewed discussed the challenges of being a female athlete while trying to meet Western standards of idealized femininity. Kim said:

Umm, but because we're playing sports, and it is considered a masculine activity, typically done by men, women who play sports are considered more masculine than feminine. But the connotation of say, rugby, is huge, like not a lot of people know the rules or like, technical standpoint of rugby, but, pardon my language, if you play rugby, you are like, a dyke, you know, you are not considered like, even human, sometimes.

-Kim, White-Canadian, 21 years old

This narrative demonstrates the ways in which female athletes are dehumanized when they enter a masculine domain in which gender differences are not evident through the use of makeup, clothes or other forms of “gendering the body.”

6.2. Education, Careers and Beauty Practices

Kim discussed beauty norms as a key factor in determining whether she will be successful. Kim talked about messages that women receive which indicate they can be pretty or smart, but not both. Kim discusses this struggle in her field of study in university: I feel like, in my field especially, you can either be pretty or smart but not both. And, no one will take you seriously if you are not smart, but if you are not pretty, they don't take you seriously either way. You need to be pretty to be noticed, but not too pretty, because then, you'll be considered stupid.

-Kim, White-Canadian, 21 years old

In Kim's experience, Western beauty norms hinder women's ability to succeed in academia and in the workforce. Women have to walk a fine line between being “attractive” enough to get opportunities, but not too “attractive” that they get associated with a lack of intelligence.

Sam discussed the incompatibility of succeeding in university while also taking time to diet and exercise to conform to the thin Western beauty standard. Sam said:

Even for me, I've gained a healthy amount of weight back, but even for me, I need to get to the gym, right? I wouldn't say I'm happy with my body, but I know that I can't, I know based on my work schedule I have now in university, if I were to starve myself, I wouldn't get anywhere, because I can't focus on studying when my stomach is growling. You can't starve yourself and think, you can't be in the gym for three hours a day, and then writing an essay, which takes a long time. They don't match up.

-Sam, White-Canadian, 18 years old

Women who spend copious amounts of their time, energy and money to meet Western standards of beauty often struggle to achieve success in school and in the workforce.

6.3. The Influence of Family, Friends, Relationships and Peers

Ellie, Nora and Sam discussed the impact family, friends, relationships and peers have on their body image perceptions. For example, as a mixed-race woman, Ellie describes the difficulty in negotiating conflicting ideas of beauty between her father's and mother's culture. Ellie states:

It was sort of, like, sometimes I struggled with which side I identified with more, and where I consider myself, and the other thing is that since my dad is British and my mom is black, my physical build is different from a lot of peoples, because I have that mix in, so I would say that it is a bit difficult because, and they both come from different perspectives too, that they both think different things. It's kind of, it was more of a fitting in type thing, because when I go around my dad's family, I don't look like them, but when I go to my mom's family, I don't look a lot like them either, because I am mixed, so it was kind of a fitting issue, I would say. My mom's side is very accepting of everybody, they don't care about money, weight, physical appearance, they don't care about any of that. And my dad, specifically him, not so much the side of his family, but my dad specifically can be very looks critical, and not as accepting. So it kind of, like, he tends, he puts a lot of value on things like weight, as opposed to my mom's side who don't care.

-Ellie, Mixed-race, Canadian, 19 years old

Ellie's family heritage impacts her experience with Western beauty pressures. Since Ellie has to negotiate between two cultures with different beauty “ideals,” she does not feel as though she “fits in” anywhere. She struggles to find an identity since she receives conflicting messages about what is beautiful. People outside of Ellie's family reinforce this cultural conflict. Ellie said:

Because stereotypically, black women are very dark, and a different body type and everything, people would tend to drag along the fact that they didn't believe me, or they would say that I am too white, as in, they would be like, you are not dark enough to be black, and that, which is not true. Yeah, they wouldn't let it go, they would say, you are only like a sixteenth, because you aren't that dark, and all that stuff, so it was kind of, I kind of got over it because it happened frequently.

-Ellie, Mixed-race, Canadian, 19 years old

Negotiating between two cultures with different beauty norms had a large impact on Ellie's body image perceptions. People outside of Ellie's family who question her heritage by claiming that she "does not look Black" reinforce the confusion associated with this conflict.

Nora's family and peers also have an influence on her body image perceptions. Nora spoke of trying to fit in at school while also trying to meet her family's expectations at home. She states:

Yes, so like my hair for example, I have highlights in my hair, and that's kind of just so I can fit in more with people around me, with white people right, like the majority of my friends are Western beauty, I don't have very many Indian friends, so I want to fit in and make sure that I look like them also. So I'll do my hair, and I'll do my nails, and all that kind of stuff. But back at home that's not ideal, like in India, it is not ideal to do your makeup and to colour your hair and what not, so I definitely think that, yeah. Like if I were to walk around in a sari or something at school, I think that I would be judged more than wearing like a normal, white Canadian outfit. I don't have saris here, but I can't walk around with that here.

-Nora, Indian-Canadian, 20 years old

Negotiating expectations between Indian culture and Western culture is an ongoing challenge for Nora. She describes struggling between two different cultures with conflicting beauty norms, similar to Ellie. However, class also shaped Nora's experience with Western beauty pressures early on when she felt she was unable to fit in. She said:

When I was younger, I definitely felt excluded, because I was different than other people. So, when it comes to money wise, like my parents are not extremely wealthy, so I would shop at say, a Bluenotes outlet where things were really cheap. I wouldn't put a lot of money into my clothing, whereas the girls in middle school wore Hollister and Abercrombie and like, all of the expensive brands, and I wouldn't be able to fit in with that.

-Nora, Indian-Canadian, 20 years old

Nora's experience highlights the role that culture and class plays in her ability to meet Western beauty norms. bell hooks (1992) validates this experience in her research when she discusses the ways in which blackstudents tried to pass as "white" by talking a certain way, wearing certain clothing and choosing to spend most of their time with white friends. However, if women are unable to afford clothing and products needed to achieve Western beauty norms, they may feel excluded.

Sam discussed the role men played in shaping her experience with her body image. Sam describes an event in which a man's comment negatively impacted her feelings about her body. She said:

It was a male. It was during the frosh tower party, and all of my friends and I, we had gotten all dressed up, you know, club apparel, nothing like, too riské or anything, and the comment that was made, there was a guy around, and you could tell that he was looking at us and everything, and I was not facing him, and he said something, I can't remember exactly, but it was like, she's got such a great ass, it is too bad that she is flat as a board. It was like, you have a great ass, and oh well, too bad, it wasn't like, oh, you've got a great ass, it was like oh, you've got a great ass, but because you don't have boobs, see-ya.

-Sam, White-Canadian, 18 years old

As can be seen in Sam's narrative, male reactions to a woman's appearance can have a lasting impact on her self-esteem.

6.4. Cosmetics

Sam discussed insecurities that come with being a young woman in Western culture and how these insecurities make her feel she needs to purchase and use cosmetics. Sam said:

I went out and bought cover-up, and then I watched YouTube videos about how to do your makeup well, and then it gradually just came to be more and more, to the point that I realized, oh, I am kind of good at this. I can make myself look really nice, but at the same time, there are some days where you might have a cold, or you are really tired, and you think I don't want to do this, but I have to do this. But I never really thought of it, like, there were some girls who are like, my face is fat, I am going to contour it so I look skinnier. I know girls who will contour their nose because they believe it is too fat, or not skinny enough, or buttony, and they want it thin and angular. There are all of these resources now, like on You Tube, that you can go to where you can fix anything you want about your face, without surgery, but with makeup. But you are still doing the same mental damage to yourself.

-Sam, White-Canadian, 18 years old

Sam feels strong social pressure to wear cosmetics. However, makeup is not the only product promoted to women to achieve Western standards of beauty, nor is Western standards of beauty always the same for different women. April discussed Western beauty standards through the widespread use of skin-whitening products in India in comparison to the popularity of tanning in Canada. She struggles to negotiate these two conflicting beauty “ideals.” She said:

Well, my background is Indian, so I kind a find, there are certain things that we kind of adopt but it’s actually kind of the opposite, like, over here, I have noticed a lot of Caucasian women, they like to tan, tanning is considered nice, but in Indian culture, the lighter you are, the more pretty you are considered, so, it’s weird because I’ve grown up with that, so I avoid the sun like crazy, especially in the summer, because I have this weird thing of getting darker. I don’t want to get darker. I’ve grown up with that. When I go back to India, over here you’ll see like a whole bunch of tanning stuff and everything, you go there and everything is whitening this, whitening cleansers, whitening colour, makeup, whatever, and it’s really weird. They are called fairness creams. That’s what they are called. People will bleach their faces and stuff to make themselves look whiter. Yeah, it’s a painful process I have heard. I know this is like based on history when the British came to India, it was like back in their days where even the beauty standards were fair women are better looking. I don’t like to get tanned at all. I avoid the sun like crazy.

-April, Indian-Canadian, 20 years old

White colonization has had a lasting impact on beauty standards in India. April spoke of avoiding the sun to prevent becoming tanned, while white women in Canada are encouraged to purchase tanning products and spend time laying in the sun. Through April’s narrative, it becomes evident that there is a hierarchy of beauty in Western culture.

6.5. Weight

The women I interviewed experience pressure to conform to the thin Western beauty standard. However, women experience this pressure with different intensity levels. For example, April often wishes that she resembled thin women in advertisements. April said:

Yeah, definitely, when you look at a Victoria’s Secret model, she has absolutely no body fat whatsoever, but she has the biggest boobs, the nicest ass, and you are just like, where is that coming from? It’s so unfair. So you kind of get used to wanting that. That would be my ideal body type. If I could have that. I would die for it, literally.

-April, Indian-Canadian, 20 years old

Unrealistic images of thin women in Western culture makes women feel like they do not measure up. The thin Western beauty standard is not only pervasive, but working towards achieving it takes a significant amount of time and effort. This is difficult for women who are in school or who work. In order to compensate for this, Nora talked about her previous habit of weighing herself every morning and how she skipped meals if she was not satisfied with the number on the scale. Nora said:

I haven’t been doing it so much now, but in the summer time, there was a point where I was weighing myself every morning, and that’s bad. And depending on what I would weigh that morning, I would not eat all day. Yeah, if I was a couple pounds more that morning, then I wouldn’t have lunch.

-Nora, Indian-Canadian, 20 years old

Nora was not the only woman that I interviewed that would adjust her eating habits to achieve the thin “ideal.” Sam, April and Kristen also altered their eating habits in order to meet the thin Western beauty standard. For Sam, restrictive eating began at age 11. She said:

When I was in elementary school, the weight issue, was huge. It was huge. It was, you know, like the puberty, awkward chubby stage, then you kind of grow out of it. But during the awkward chubby stage, that’s when, I wouldn’t eat a snack at snack time, because I knew that I could restrict my meals. The restricting started at like, age 11. And the end of elementary school was very, very serious, in the sense that I was seeing a professional because I wasn’t eating. And then you are thinking, anorexia at 13, that’s crazy, and then high school only fuelled that.

-Sam, White-Canadian, 18 years old

April talked about skipping meals in order to look thin for a formal:

Yeah, I think that's pretty much it. I went to a formal, last week, and I didn't eat the entire day because I was worried that I was going to look fat in my dress. So I had an apple in the morning, and that was my food for the whole day. It was one of those tighter dresses, and I'm like, I swear if I eat a meal I am going to look 3 months pregnant.

-April, Indian-Canadian, 20 years old

Kristen talked about her struggle to maintain a low weight in her first year of university:

For me, it started, I was with a guy and he was making comments to me, like, you better not gain weight when you go to school, so umm, yeah, it started with that. And then, I guess I felt that pressure when I went away to school. At first I didn't care and stuff, and then, I had unintentionally lost weight first year when I came to school, and then that progressed further and it started, like, it kind of internalized within me. It was, you start losing weight, and then you can't stop. It's never enough, you know what I mean, like, you wanna lose more weight because it's like, you want to be thinner. Like thinspiration online, it's pictures of really thin girls. It's not about being fit, it's about being thin, and that eventually progresses into pro-ana sites, which are pro-anorexia sites. It's crazy what's out there, and you fall into that, and I was looking at those thinspo blobs every day, because it was like you just become addicted to it.

-Kristen, White-Canadian, 20 years old

The thin Western beauty standard impacted all of the women I interviewed. However, the women I interviewed experience this pressure with varying degrees of intensity. This intensity varied from focusing on maintaining a healthy body to restrictive eating and excessive exercising.

6.6. Resistance

The women I interviewed not only experience Western beauty pressures with varying degrees of intensity, but they find unique ways to resist them depending on which strategies are effective for them. Kelly boycotts magazines that promote Western standards of beauty:

I don't like them, I don't like supporting them. When I was younger I did, but I definitely grew out of that pretty quickly. I just went into a direction where it was like, this is fake, I don't like this.

-Kelly, White-Canadian, 22 years old

Nila resists Western beauty pressures by reminding herself that images of women are often digitally-altered and unrealistic. She said:

I think until recently I have always had this negative association with advertisements and people on TV and people on magazines because I know also, they are not even real, so I don't really believe what I am seeing when I look at things like that.

-Nila, Filipino and Jamaican heritage, Canadian, 20 years old

Kristen resists Western beauty pressures by trying to avoid them:

I don't watch TV anymore, I don't read Cosmo. I stay away from all that stuff. Even on the internet, I mean, it is kind of like, unavoidable, but I try my best to channel what I interpret, what I view as beauty. And you have to make a conscious effort to avoid it too, because it literally is everywhere.

-Kristen, White-Canadian, 20 years old

The women I interviewed resist Western beauty pressures in unique ways depending on which avenues of resistance are available and effective for them.

7. Discussion

The findings in this research show that women experience Western beauty pressures differently and at different intensity levels. As Western beauty and body "ideals" intensify, more and more women feel inadequate and strive to make drastic changes to their appearance to relieve their discomfort (Kilbourne, 2010). Women's gender, race, class, culture and size all largely shape their experiences with Western beauty pressures. This was evident in this research project in a number of ways.

Female athletes are often dehumanized in a masculine domain in which gender differences are not evident through the use of makeup, clothes or other forms of “gendering the body.” Thus, women who are perceived to be masculine often endure sexual and homophobic harassment as a result. Being a mixed-race woman or a woman of colour in Western culture meant having to negotiate between two cultures with different beauty “ideals,” making it difficult for women to develop positive perceptions of their own beauty. People who question the legitimacy of a woman’s identity based on prescribed notions of how they think she should look reinforce this struggle. Class also impacted women who could not afford to spend copious amounts of money on beauty products and clothing. If women are unable to afford clothing and products needed to achieve Western beauty norms, they often feel excluded. Additionally, due to the idealization of the white Western beauty “ideal,” women of colour spoke of avoiding sunlight and using light concealers to meet Western beauty standards (Rice, 2010). This is fuelled by the new industry of face-whitening products designed to aid women of colour in achieving the white beauty “ideal.” Lastly, regardless of their intersecting identity, every woman in this study is impacted by the thin Western beauty standard. This intensity varied from focusing on maintaining a healthy body to restrictive eating and excessive exercising.

Rice (2009) argues that women resist Western beauty pressures on their own terms, depending on what is available to them at the time. The women I interviewed found unique ways to resist Western beauty pressures. Kelly boycotts magazines that promote the Western beauty “ideal,” while Nila resists by reminding herself that images of women in advertising and in popular culture are digitally-altered and unrealistic. Lastly, Kristen resists by trying to channel what she allows herself to see in magazines, on television and on the internet.

Based on the findings from this research, it is crucial for feminist scholars and activists to continue to challenge Western beauty norms that present beauty as restrictive and conformist rather than open and subjective. Previous research that focuses on loving fatness (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013), loving blackness (hooks, 1992) and loving gender queer and transqueer identities in a heteronormative world (Siebler, 2012) offers feminist activism the opportunity to strive for the acceptance and celebration of multiple beauties/identities. Feminist activism can begin to achieve this by honouring women’s most empowering option for resistance while working to create alternative images and broader definitions of beauty that challenge gender binaries and celebrate women’s cultural and individual differences in opposition to multi-billion dollar industries that aim to make women feel inadequate for profit.

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Endnotes

1. A small sample size and a general lack of diversity in my sample makes it problematic to generalize my findings so it is recommended that future research utilize qualitative research methods to interview a larger, more diverse sample of women in order to be able to generalize the findings.
2. Despite the separate themes in this research, I recognize that the themes overlap and create unique experiences of oppression and resistance among women.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. This study is designed to explore how diverse women experience pressure associated with Western beauty “ideals.” Do you feel that your experience with Western beauty pressures is unique, and if so, how?
2. Name a woman in popular culture who you think is beautiful and state what you think makes her beautiful.
3. Are there any tasks associated with Western beauty “ideals” that you always perform prior to entering a public space?
4. Do you feel the need to alter your appearance to meet Western standards of beauty? (in any way)
5. Do you or does someone close to you diet to meet Western standards of beauty?
6. Do you purchase beauty magazines (such as Cosmopolitan, Vogue, GQ, Glamour, etc.)? If so, what do you hope to get from these magazines?
7. What do you think makes a woman beautiful? (appearance wise)
8. How do images of women in advertising and in popular culture make you feel about yourself?
9. Do you find that you engage in comparisons with other women regarding beauty? If so, how do you think these comparisons affect you?
10. Would you say that Western beauty “ideals” have an influence on you? If so, how?
11. Do you ever try to resist or shield yourself from cultural messages about beauty?
12. What purpose do you think Western beauty “ideals” serve? Who do you think benefits from this?