The influence of Eurocentrism on South and South East Asian women’s self-perceptions of beauty

Alyna Hwey-Lin Ng

East Doncaster Secondary College, Doncaster East, Wurundjeri Country

Look at this person, what do you find pretty about her? Do you like her hair? Her nose? Does it really matter? Let me tell you right now, it does. You see, beauty is ultimately cultural capital. A non-material, social asset that can promote social mobility in this hierarchal society. Here’s the thing, beauty standards extend to all people, yes? But they are particularly injurious to women, and especially women of colour.

I want you to picture a literal intersection. These different roads represent a different system of oppression. We have the patriarchy, racism, ableism, classism. Now misogyny is our first road here, misogyny has ensured that beauty standards are especially oppressive on women. Naomi Wolfe is a feminist theorist who contends that beauty in Western society was weaponised as this “backlash against feminism”. “Images of female beauty were used a political weapon against female advancement" she says. Now when those images of feminine beauty were examined, a report found dominant portrayals of “idealised, air-brushed and unattainable female physical beauty”. Unattainable, that is the key word. Unattainable but especially unattainable for women of colour. Now, back to my road metaphor, let us consider a woman of colour.

As a woman, she feels this innate pressure to embody beauty, yes? But as an ethnic woman she is impaired from attaining the feminine beauty ideal because the beauty standard privileges whiteness. Essentially, her identity as a woman and a person of colour compound together, they function in tandem to form unique experiences of subordination. Women of colour experience the world and this beauty standard differently.

But hold on, pause, the beauty standard? What did I mean by it centres whiteness? How and why? I asked ‘How has Eurocentrism shaped Australian beauty ideals and consequently influenced South and South East Asian women’s self-perceptions of beauty’.

Okay so in the 19th century, Europe invaded various countries, a lot of countries. This map devised by Vox shows us the massive scale of European imperialism. Because of this history, our Institutions and societies have adopted this worldview where Western culture is the pinnacle of human progress. So, Europe is on this cultural pedestal right, of course European beauty shares that same pedestal. Ethnic women, with features considered external from this Western beauty criterion are hindered from reaping the sociological benefits of beauty and are pushed to conform with Western beauty ideals. You see, South and South East Asia were both victims to European imperialism, so these societies have adopted white standards of beauty and value.

But Australia, the western society of Australia, how has that environment impacted these diasporas’ self-perceptions of beauty? Here’s my hypothesis, so living in Australia means a proximity to Eurocentric media, beauty products and immersion into a predominately white community. I thought this would shape a compulsion to conform with Eurocentric beauty, forming an inferiority complex that parallels the findings of similar studies. To answer my question, I conducted two focus groups, both on the online platform Zoom for convenience. One group of South Asian women and another of South East, each comprised of four participants. Focus groups gave me data enriched by discussion, contributions of both unique and similar ideas through dialogue. But it is important to consider that the group orientation of my methodology centres communitarianism rather than individual, self-perceptions which I feel is quite a disadvantage.

Before I delve into my findings, I want to tell you about ‘thematic analysis’. Basically, I organised my transcribed data into these fragments called codes, I then reassembled these codes into categories that interpret broader themes from the findings. But here is the issue, my study was incredibly susceptible to something called belief bias. I am studying South East Asian women correct, and I am a South East Asian woman myself. Who’s to say my own experiences aren’t influencing the study, maybe I’m trying to fulfil preconceived speculations instead of conducting an objective thorough study.

Here are my solutions, something called inductive coding. Rather than beginning my analysis process with codes I had created, I developed them during analysis. I also pushed myself to exercise constant comparison, I created various even conflicting hypothesis. On top of that, I reiterated throughout a plain language statement, a consent form and over and over again throughout the focus groups itself that I must remain an impartial moderator, so no anecdotal and no emotive input. My questions were broad an open-ended, I told my participants this is a discussion, you guys take the lead.

Now, my findings emerged three major themes and I’m going to walk you guys through them. *Firstly,* South Asian participants described feelings of ostracism when they first Immigrated to Australia in early childhood. They described internalised racism, and a heightened consciousness of ethnic features. They attribute these attitudes to the insularity of predominately white schools. It was commentary from white peers that made participants so conscious of their misalignment with Eurocentrism. They felt othered through discerning, ethnic characteristics such as pigmented skin, curly hair texture, and thicker body hair.

Let me tell you something interesting: I asked both focus groups about Australia’s beauty standard, how do they feel about it, and both denied the existence of a rigorous beauty standard in Australia. *The South East Asians all expressed that* the multicultural nature of Australia has shaped a very dynamic beauty ideal.

But South Asian participants had a very interesting argument. They agreed, yes, the beauty standard is dynamic, but that is because of appropriation. Let me lay this out. So, participants felt that there are certain traits glorified by Australia society, and those have been appropriated from women of colour and celebrated exclusively on the bodies of white women. A double standard in short. Paralleling attitudes were discovered in the South East Asian focus group, they felt as if they simply cannot not compare to the attractiveness of a white woman.

My final finding conveys that perceptions of beauty can be shaped by family and community, not just Australian society. Participants felt pressure from family and community to attain Eurocentric beauty. Both focus groups described instances where families have recommended skin bleaching, or practices such as avoiding the sun to avoid a tan.

But I noticed South Asian participants expressed much greater emphasis on conventional beauty within their community, whereas South East Asians shared fairly optimistic perspectives. So there is a clear contrast between the familial and communal expectations of these diasporas. Before I conclude I want to discuss further research. These are very underrepresented regions in literature, I struggled to find studies on South Asian and especially South East Asian women. I hope my study can incentivise the investigation of two regions and often forgotten in the lens of sociology. Further research should exercise individual interviews or surveys, perhaps both, and they should be of a much greater sample size. Participants should be of varying different South Asian and South East Asian ethnic backgrounds. More homogenous and insightful data could be garnered from a diverse range of participants.

In conclusion, my study has found that the predominately white, Western society of Australia has indeed shaped an inferiority complex. However, families and communities have a large role to play as well, but more evidently within the South Asian diaspora. Thank you.