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Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder: Body Dissatisfaction Amongst Asian American Women

Body dissatisfaction and pressures to adhere to societal beauty standards are inherent struggles amongst women, but they are even more striking concerns for young Asian American women, whose body perceptions are influenced by acculturative stress, conflicting cultural beauty ideals, familial judgment, and social media trends. Body image issues are defined as an individual's negative attitude towards their own body size, weight, and shape (Shen et al 2). This discontent not only causes young women to grapple with low self-confidence and hyperawareness of their body parts, but could also lead them to dieting, anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating behaviors. Historically, White women have been documented as having the highest rates of body shame and eating disorders. However, Asian American women have often been neglected by researchers, even though they exhibit a greater likelihood of engaging in restricted eating to achieve an idealized thin body type (Javier and Belgrave 141). Their health issues have long fallen under the radar of professionals due to assumptions that they possess naturally petite body sizes, and that as the "model minority group," they must have high levels of mental wellbeing (Cheng 823). However, Asian American women actually have the most intense levels of body dissatisfaction, as they feel pressured to obtain an appearance that can satisfy Western and Asian beauty ideals (Hu et al 17).

Acculturative stress is a prominent driving factor that enables Asian American women to develop insecurities and eating disorders. In particular, second generation individuals experience the most body dissatisfaction, compared to those of the first and third generations,

as they try to maintain identification with both their native and host cultures (Tsong et al 156). Therefore, body image issues arise as a response to being caught in a bicultural space that sees a clash of individualistic American attitudes and collectivist Asian values (Javier and Belgrave 142). In the United States, the ideal female body has been characterized as being tan, athletic, and thin, with toned muscles and curvy hips or thighs. However, American media in recent years has slowly progressed to showing more and more diverse body types, emphasizing body positivity and accepting an individual's unique self. Meanwhile, Asian cultures traditionally desire pure thinness, and encourage all women to conform to the same appearance. As a result, Asian American women are constantly affected by mixed cultural messages about the concept of beauty, and thus, this "inability to simultaneously achieve two differing standards of body acceptability produces higher instances of purging, restriction, and body dissatisfaction" (Tsutakawa et al 3). Acculturative stress plays a role in Asian American women's lack of confidence and stability in their appearances, which in return makes them more vulnerable to allowing internalized American and Asian beauty expectations determine their self worth.

On the surface, American beauty culture appears to advocate for self acceptance and body diversity, however, it is still deeply rooted in valuing Eurocentric features over ethnic ones. As a result, many Asian American women have experienced having their appearances and bodies subjected to racial discrimination. Firstly, "racial discrimination acts as an impetus for the development of eating disorders by affecting an individual's self perceptions," as it highlights Asian American women's differences and makes them feel inferior to the White race (Javier and Belgrave 143). In the United States, women's attractiveness is typically contextualized within racial hierarchies, with Whiteness and Eurocentric features being viewed as the most desirable form of beauty (Brady et al 485). Therefore, it is common for ethnic minorities to endure racial teasing and stereotyping over their ethnic features, which

makes them question their attractiveness, and develop a sense of self-hatred. Specifically, Asian Americans who have been heavily ridiculed for having small eyes, flat noses, and yellow skin are reported to have a stronger desire to “adopt Western standards of appearance ideals to gain a sense of approval by the mainstream society” (Cheng 826). Even though it is biologically impossible for Asian American women to achieve Eurocentric beauty norms, they still feel a sense of failure for not having curvaceous bodies, light colored eyes, double eyelids, and pale skin (Brady et al 485). Thus, they see increased vulnerability to body image issues and disordered eating, as they “are constantly reminded that they have distinct and unchangeable features that are inconsistent with Western ideals of beauty” (Tsutakawa et al 11).

Furthermore, if women’s features are not emphasized in a negative manner, then their differences are sexualized as being exotic. Compared to women of other racial groups, Asian Americans face significantly more hypersexualization and stereotyping from their White peers (Brady et al 486). For example, their appearances are often categorized as mysterious and seductive “Dragon Ladies”, or infantilized as cute and petite “China Dolls” (Cheng 113). This behavior is problematic as it dehumanizes Asian American women to inanimate sexual objects or to an array of body parts, conditioning them to think that their personhood is defined by their image. (Brady et al 486). Therefore, in an attempt to disassociate themselves from a constant need to have their looks validated through a White lens, many Asian American women may shift towards aligning themselves with Asian beauty expectations.

Asian American women, who maintain high identification with their native Asian culture, are more likely to participate in strict appearance pressures, and to internalize body judgment from their interpersonal relationships (Javier and Belgrave 142). Asian beauty standards, particularly Chinese ideals, stressed that “women should have a tall and thin body, big eyes, a watermelon seed-shaped face, fair skin, and *qi zhi* (inner beauty).” In particular,

Chinese history has attributed pale skin with elegance and high social class, while those with darker skin tones were looked down on for having to do manual labor due to their low status. This colorism still permeates mainland Chinese and diasporic Chinese communities today, as fair complexions are not only intertwined with urban residency, wealth, and privilege, but also associated with maintaining youth and innocence. Furthermore, big eyes with double eyelids, as well as tall noses, stem from a romanticization of Eurocentric features, and women are often encouraged to seek cosmetic surgery to achieve these characteristics (Zhang 437, 440, 443). While there is an array of specific expectations for women to follow, the foundation of Asian beauty standards is still to be slender. This pressure to sustain a thin body type has conditioned individuals to monitor their food intake, lose weight, and fear any form of weight gain altogether.

Moreover, Asian American women face significant pressures to be slim from their families and their cultural values of filial piety, collectivism, and conformity (Tsutakawa et al 3, 12). Relatives, such as parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, play a prominent role in influencing body image issues and eating disorders amongst Asian American women. It is common for family members to make unprovoked comments on individuals' appearances and bodies, as well as tell them that they are eating too much or too little. This can prompt women to become hyperconscious about their body parts, overvalue others' opinions of them, and reconsider their eating habits, in hopes of fulfilling their family's expectations of attractiveness (Javier and Belgrave 146). While body criticism is typically framed by Asian elders to be a form of care and encouragement, commenting on others' figures is considered taboo in Western culture. Thus, Asian American women often have an acculturative mismatch with their relatives, and internalize these opinions about their bodies being substandard (Tsutakawa et al 12).

In addition to input from their White peers and family members, Asian American women's perceptions of their bodies are also heavily impacted by social media. Spending time online viewing photos and videos of other women causes individuals to draw constant body comparisons, and thus, intensifies insecurities and the desire for a thin ideal (Lazuka et al 85). Western and Asian social media promote different types of content about beauty aspirations, but both still make young women feel insecure about their weight regardless (Cheng 822). Western social media platforms, such as Instagram, typically focus on "thinspiration," which is content that pushes thinness and weight loss, and "fitspiration," or content that encourages rigorous exercise. Posts from these two areas of content typically show slender women in tight clothing and objectifying poses, promoting diet culture and exercise with the goal of changing one's appearance. While these Instagram trends do feature women of different ethnicities and body types, young White women with clear skin, small waists and toned bodies are still at the forefront of these posts (Lazuka et al 85-87, 90). This not only reinforces the idea that women should strive for a thin and fit body, but also ostracizes Asian American women from the Western model of beauty due to the lack of representation online.

However, Asian American women endure greater pressures to be skinny when viewing Asian social media rather than Western platforms. Social media challenges on apps like Douyin, or Chinese Tiktok, are proven to be more harmful than thinspiration and fitspiration posts. In the A4 waist challenge, women aim to show whether or not their waists can be covered by the width of a sheet of A4 paper. Another popular challenge is the coin challenge, which asks Douyin users to see how many coins they can fit into the hollow of their collarbone. Being able to hold a large number of coins means that one has a prominent clavicle, indicating that they had met the idealized level of thinness. These trends are extremely detrimental to women's health, as they promote a dangerous level of thinness that

wants women to become as skinny as possible (Hu et al 2-4). Since online content can circulate rapidly across different platforms through reposts, these types of posts easily penetrate diasporic communities instead of only staying confined within Asian societies. Thus, Asian American women are simultaneously consuming the messages of thinspiration, fitspiration, and skinny body challenges, receiving heightened body pressures from each side of their cultural identities.

The unattainable expectations from both American and Asian beauty standards has undoubtedly engendered negative effects on Asian American women's mental health. The eating disorders that they develop to suppress their stress and dissatisfaction could also likely catalyze into depression and/or anxiety. Even though they struggle with mental health concerns, many Asian American women still refuse to seek professional treatment due to cultural stigmatization of mental health problems (Javier and Belgrave 142, 149). Asian Americans are reported to have the lowest tendency to take advantage of mental health resources, as their traditional cultural values of persevering through hardship have taught them that it is a sign of weakness to seek help (Tsong et al 156, 158-160). In particular, many individuals feel that family influences are a major reason to not turn to professional treatment for their eating disorders. Family members of the older generations either do not believe in mental illness, advocate that methods other than therapy could be used to treat these issues, or believe that eating disorders stem from a lack of control with food (Javier and Belgrave 148-149). Thus, many Asian American women end up hiding their body image issues and eating disorders, or they choose not to acknowledge that they even have a problem, in order to avoid feeling defeated and embarrassed for needing treatment. This isolates them in their body dissatisfaction, stifling them from ever being able to fully love and accept themselves (Tsong et al 158).

Body image issues and eating disorders are prevalent amongst young Asian American women, as their White peers, family members, and social media algorithms make them feel that their bodies can never achieve any socially acceptable level of beauty. They lack feeling a sense of control over their own appearances, as their bodies are constantly subjected to outside influences about how they should look. American beauty expectations prefer women to be thin but still remain toned and curvaceous, while Asian beauty standards desire petite and bony women. These body pressures teach Asian American women to pick apart their weight, and to always feel that their appearances need to be changed. While body dissatisfaction is a deeply rooted personal issue that takes time and effort to unlearn, one way to start is to reject all beauty standards altogether. Beauty expectations will always be designed to make women feel that they can never be beautiful enough, regardless of how hard they try. The most beneficial practice that Asian American women can do is focus on creating an individualized appearance that satisfies themselves, rather than attempting to replicate American or Asian beauty expectations. In this way, they can grow to highlight the positive aspects of their bodies, putting themselves on the path towards body confidence.

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