

Project Summary

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In 21st century Western society, there has been a resurgence of ideas about appearance-based practices such as makeup, hairstyling, clothing, tattoos, piercings and cosmetic surgery, as tools that women can embrace for harmless fun and/or to visually express their inner selves (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). Modern Western society has led to our appearance becoming tied to our identities. Essentially, what we look like is who we are. Our bodies have become a self-identity project with women in particular being encouraged to continuously alter their bodies through appearance-based practices (Gill, 2007). This is in attempt to project an image of how we see ourselves or who we want to be. As a result, our bodies are sending signals about ourselves to people in our society. In return, people read these signals and have an understanding about that person from their appearance (Donaghue, 2015). What has not been particularly researched is the idea of whether women take into account how their appearance will be read by others, when choosing and avoiding particular appearance-based practices. The current study aimed to explore how women understood their use of appearance-based practices to shed some light on why women avoid particular appearance choices in everyday life.

23 women above the age of 18, living in Perth, Western Australia, took part in the current study. These women were either current University students or recent graduates. The current study was advertised with posters around Murdoch University campus and on the Murdoch Psychology Subject Pool website as an opportunity for women to have their voice heard, on what women have to say about appearance-based practices. In particular, what women themselves believe to be the reasons behind why they choose particular appearance-based practices and avoid others. Participation in the current study consisted of a 90 minute focus group, consisting of between four and six women. The focus group was organised around the discussion of several issues that are relevant to identity and the use of appearance-based practices.

Women talked about their engagement in appearance-based practices largely in terms of the benefits they receive from participation, such as a

way to exercise agency to achieve confidence and empowerment and authenticity. However, women's talk became complicated through issues of over-confidence, body size, age and social pressures.

The key finding from the current study is that women's talk about their experiences and attitudes towards appearance-based practices was not explained in a straight-forward manner. Women largely talked about how they found beauty practices in particular, quite fun and harmless and they allowed women to not only embrace being female, but along with other appearance-based practices, they allowed women to visually express their inner selves. However, women did also acknowledge that they were aware of judgement from other people, in the event of creating an appearance that was far from the 'ideal'. Women also talked about how the threat of potentially giving off the wrong impression, in regards to their identity, was enough for women to avoid particular appearance-based practices, even if they liked them. In order for women to feel content with using appearance-based practices that resembled the Western beauty ideal, these women expressed a sense of taking control of the situation, by using these appearance-based practices as a way to get what they want. However, although these women talked about consciously using these appearance-based practices for their own gain, if these practices or the desired image were not compatible with the women's own preference and desires, then women were left feeling like they were using these practices for other people rather than themselves. A situation that was expressed as wrong and not empowering for women.

References

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