

Webinar: Cultural Beauty Standards in the Workplace presented by the Culture & Ethnic Diversity Network



On Thursday 10th July 2024 the Culture & Ethnic Diversity Network hosted a webinar to raise awareness of and respect for the different cultural beauty standards around the world and explain the implications of these in the workplace.

What are some examples of Cultural Beauty Standards?

Wordcloud Poll 26 responses 12 participants



Cultural Beauty Standards – are the physical characteristics & appearance of an individual that are perceived as beautiful or attractive by society.

These vary across countries and cultures and now that we live in a world with greater geographical mobility, resulting in more culturally diverse workforces, this can be problematic.

Research has suggested that not conforming to the beauty standards of the country / culture you are in can be a barrier in your professional life. This is because of a bias known as the **“Attractiveness – Halo Effect”** whereby individuals attribute positive qualities such as competence and professionalism to people who they deem to fit societal beauty standards.

Furthermore, many companies adopt dress codes which are still based on **Eurocentric** and **Heteronormative** ideas of

“professionalism”. By this we mean white & westernised standards of dress and hairstyle such as men in a suit and tie, women in skirt and pantyhose, straightened hair etc.

As a result, many employees are made to feel like they need to conform and suppress their individuality or heritage in order to fit in. No one should feel as though they need to make a choice between being their authentic selves or staying the course of least resistance to elevate their career. We have created this summary to bring attention to the fact that to be truly inclusive we need to begin to redefine expectations of how employees show up to work.

DS Smith colleagues share their experiences of cultural beauty standards:



Mattie Keessen

Korean vs Dutch Beauty Standards

“I am originally Dutch, but I had the opportunity to live in Korea for 4 ½ years and I was surprised at the contrast between what was considered “attractive” in Korea compared to the Netherlands. In some cases, my natural appearance and inability to conform with Korean beauty standards affected my career progression. I wanted to share these experiences with you, as I think whilst it is important to recognise and appreciate the beauty standards of all cultures, this should not be a barrier in your work life.”

Korean Beauty Standards

Many of the beauty standards in Korea have historic origin, dating back to the Joseon dynasty. To be ‘beautiful’ was to have white, glass-like skin as this was perceived to be an indication of wealth as you didn’t need to be out in the fields doing labour in the sun.

Lookism or **외모지상주의** is a big phenomenon in Korea. It is a type of prejudice and/or discrimination against people based exclusively on their appearance. If you do not fit Korean perceptions of what is “beautiful” or “attractive” you are at risk of not getting a job and not being allowed into restaurants, bars, clubs, or gyms.

As a result of these high societal beauty standards, Korea has since become the **facial-plastic surgery capital** of the world with most parents saving money for their daughters, and nowadays also sons, to pay for their plastic surgery – which they usually have between ages 13-19. Once people reach their 20s, they actively pursue beauty treatments such as Botox, masks, acne scar removals and so on.



Dutch Beauty Standards



“Act Normal, it’s crazy enough”

In contrast, cultural beauty standards in the Netherlands favour “normality”. Their perception of “normality” in relation to appearance is as follows:

Weight: Don’t be too buff, don’t be a fitness babe, don’t be too skinny, don’t be too fat.

Clothes: A lot of Dutch people have a slight aversion towards designer brands. Jeans & a shirt to work? YES! A dress/full suit is sometimes considered extra.

Make-up: Just a bit of mascara, and lipstick will do the trick, just try not to overdo it.

I respect you; you respect me: In the Netherlands, we are all free to say anything. Dutch people probably won’t be hurt if you say you don’t like their top. But they will also reserve the right to return the favour.

Indian Beauty Standards

“I was born and grew up in the UK, but I am half Indian. I was brought up by my Nan who has instilled many aspects of the Indian culture within me. Both in and outside of work I have had experiences which really highlight the juxtaposition between UK and Indian culture. For example, a common Indian practice is regular **Hair Oiling** to improve the health of your hair. I remember when I was in primary school, people would make comments about my oiled hair just because it was different. I used to throw a lot of tantrums at home to stop my hair being oiled. Social media has now made hair oiling a western trend although it is still out of the norm within the workplace. The topic of cultural beauty standards is close to my heart and I hope that with more awareness, organisations can be more inclusive and tackle the discomfort around expressing your culture and heritage through your appearance at work”.



Radhika Joshi

The core fundamentals of Indian beauty standards derive from ancient and mythical references of gods and goddesses, often idealizing features such as lotus-shaped eyes outlined in Kohl, long, thick hair and symmetrical features.

Indian Beauty Standards Word Cloud

Kajal – Kohl Large Eyes
around the eyes Clear Skin
Long, Dark Hair Bhandis
Wedding Chooria
Lotus Shaped Eyes
Symmetrical Features Jewellery

Jewellery also plays a large role in Indian culture for all genders. It is seen to enhance beauty and around certain celebrations it is said to bring good luck. Whilst most westernised workplaces allow some jewellery in the office, this is very different to Indian jewellery which normally has symbolic meaning. An example is the **Wedding Chooria** pictured on the right. Traditionally brides in certain Indian cultures had to keep their Chooria on for a year after the wedding, however nowadays this has been reduced to 40 days. Research has shown that Indian women in European workplaces



have faced challenges around wearing their wedding choora to the office.

Middle Eastern Beauty Standards



Jeel Desai

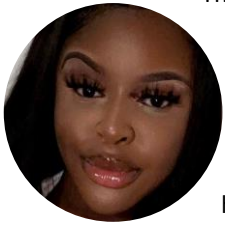
“I am Indian, but I grew up in Dubai for 15 years and have also lived in the UK and Netherlands. I feel like my experiences living in different countries has shaped my perspective on cultural beauty standards”.

Emphasis on eyes: Middle Eastern beauty often highlights large, expressive eyes with dramatic eyeliner and mascara. Women are expected to cover their bodies and hair through modest dress, leaving the eyes as one of the most visible, beautiful, and expressive features.



Cultural Dress: In many Middle Eastern cultures, dress codes are influenced by Abrahamic religious teachings, which advocate for modesty. It is also influenced by societal norms and expectations, where dressing modestly is associated with respectability, dignity, and honour. Traditional garments, such as the **abaya**, **hijab** and **jilbab** for women and the **dishdasha** and **thobe** for men, are worn in professional settings, especially in more conservative regions. This is often seen to preserve cultural identity and heritage.

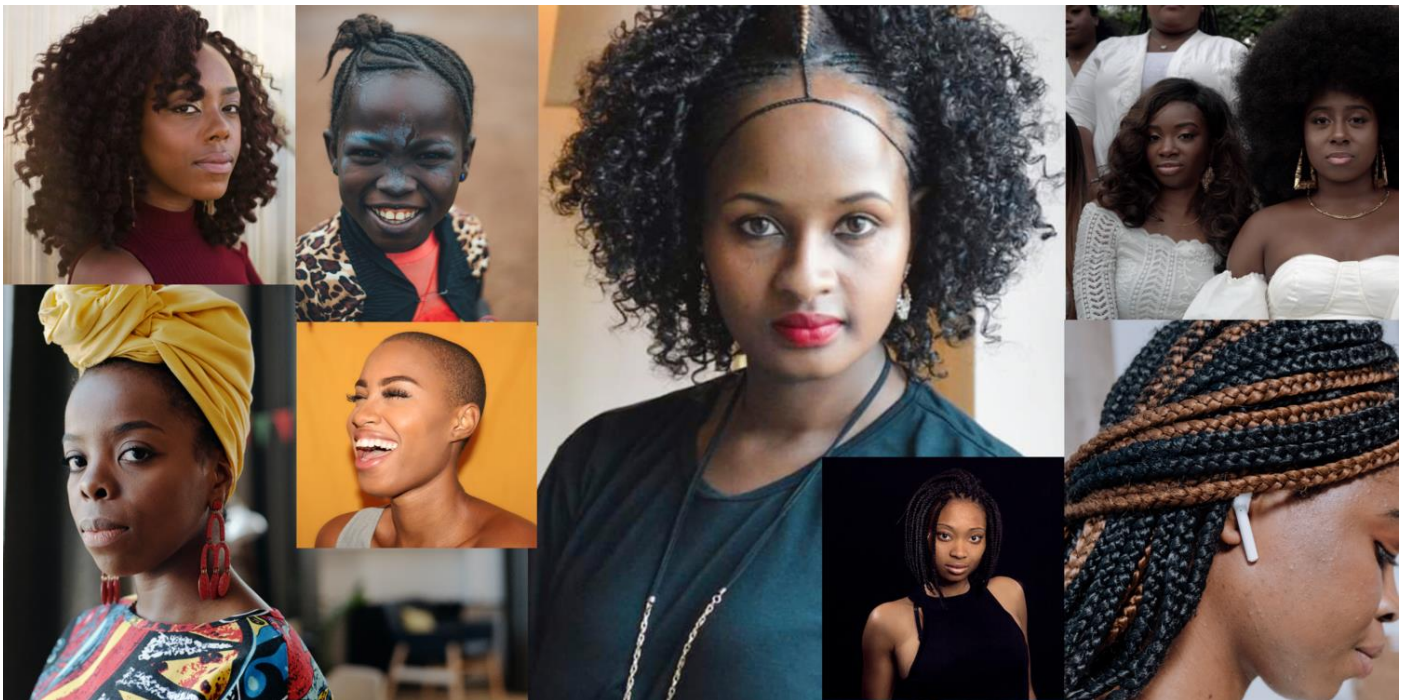
African Beauty Standards



Tara Lawson

“The topic of cultural beauty standards is important to me, particularly in relation to **afro-textured hair** and **protective hairstyles**. Protective Hairstyles are those that maintain the health of hair by keeping the ends tucked away and free of manipulation. This prevents additional stress and breakage and, in hair textures such as my own, promotes natural hair growth. For years people with have these types of hairstyles have faced prejudice and discrimination. I vividly remember a story a friend of mine told me about a job interview she had. My friend wears her hair in dreadlocks which is a common protective hairstyle that many people of black heritage wear. They were denied the job on the basis of their hairstyle with the hiring manager commenting that they thought the hairstyle wasn’t suitable for a client facing professional role. I was shocked at the treatment of my friend, and this is why I wanted to bring awareness of this topic to my colleagues”.

Research from World Afro Day found that one in five black women feel societal pressure to straighten their hair or present it in a Euro-centric style for work. This has led to the creation of the Crown Act in the US and similar campaign pledges such as the Halo Code in the UK which make it illegal to deny employment or educational opportunities based on an individual’s natural hair texture and use of protective hairstyles.



Additional Resources

- You can find out more about the different cultural beauty standards around the world by using this interactive map: [World Beauty Standards - Interactive Map](#)



Summary brought to you by the [Culture & Ethnic Diversity Network](#)