

## **AI and Human Beauty Standards**

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We live in a time of advanced technology and social media, where artificial intelligence (AI) shapes our societal perspectives on how we perceive beauty. This concept is greatly significant for human beings, not only because of how it drives us to make decisions but also due to its impacts on many individuals' mental and physical health. As AI continues to advance, it can potentially democratize beauty and make it more accessible for all, yet it still poses a risk of perpetuating harmful stereotypes and unrealistic beauty standards, particularly for women.

Throughout human history, human standards of beauty have always been influenced by intuition and culture. It is a deeply controversial subject discussed in the field of aesthetics. Human attempts to characterize beauty can be traced back to the era of Ancient Greece. In *Hippias Major*, Plato defines beauty as an abstract notion that includes all qualities of utility, appropriateness, and sheer aesthetic pleasure. This is further developed in his *Theory of Form* - the idea that beauty exists as an ambiguous concept beyond the physical world, in the realm of Form (Pappas). According to the theory, Forms are the utmost levels of reality. It is unchangeable and shows the flawless versions of everything we encounter in our world. Plato believes that our perception of beauty and all knowledge is but a “recollection” of “what has previously existed and is known to us” (*Phaedo*, 73e-74a). He claims that the human pursuit of beauty is driven by our desire to recall the eternal and divine Forms that existed before we were brought to this physical world. This ideology was one of the most popular beliefs in Ancient Greece time: beauty being beyond the human-centric approach. However, in our time of AI, humans became the ones to set beauty standards which were later implemented by AI, through image generators or extensive automatic image editing. Beauty has become more and more definable by humans compared to the godlike vagueness in Ancient Greece.

In contrast to Plato's definition of beauty as eternal, the Scottish philosopher David Hume claimed that beauty “exists merely in the mind which contemplates them” and that “each mind perceives a different beauty” (Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste”). This suggests how he believes that beauty is subjective, and exists only when others perceive and appreciate its pleasure, leading to extremely diverse outcomes where not a single phrase could epitomize them all. In our current time, this idea of subjective, perspective-based beauty is embodied

through AI, which democratizes beauty and makes it accessible to a wider audience beyond the traditional upper-class people. Notably, it makes marginalised people able to perceive their own beauty. AI technologies, such as virtual try-on features for hair dye, reduce the cost of trial and error in beauty experimentation, making more people able to access it regardless of their socioeconomic status. It allows consumers to explore a diverse range of styles and products without the need for any cost, which can be a burden for some members of the community.

Similar to Hume's understanding of beauty, modern humans live in a diverse world with people of all different beauty standards. The standard of beauty is informed by people's diverse backgrounds and identities that are shaped by the environment around them. We seem to define beauty mainly based on visual appearance. Heteronormative traditional beliefs often hold that the beauty of females is restricted to certain traits in body shape, height, weight, and hairstyle that are more sexually attractive to males. French philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray argued in "*Speculum of the Other Woman*" that "any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the masculine" and that the sexualization of women penetrates all aspects of life (Irigaray,133). This can be seen through how AI exaggerates the sexual proportions of females in its illustration, like abnormal-sized breasts. It has been objectifying women and making them into goods that fit into the same homogenous standards.

With the advancement of social media and AI technology in modern times, the judgment of beauty has been transferred from physical to online and virtual. As platforms integrating AI have gained more popularity, it provides a space for diverse people to showcase their unique talents and beauty, such as beauty in visual appearance, music, or other arts and design. For instance, many platforms like AI Music Generation Assistant (AIVA) help ordinary people to create music and become content makers, which were once exclusives for specialized personnel like photographers, musicians, and painters. AI makes it more accessible for people to create content as they can use tools like Mid-journey or Chat-GPT to assist them in finding entertaining subjects and making better quality work in a shorter amount of time. This convenience and universality of AI is predicted to expand the AI social media market size to 2.1 Billion USD by 2024. Therefore, we can expect to see more diverse voices on AI platforms, positively influencing people's standards of beauty.

Moreover, AI algorithms create more opportunities for humans to find those who have similar tastes and appreciate their work showcasing beauty and reach more viewers and likes. It gives hope to those marginalised individuals, such as LGBTQ+ and disabled, to gain recognition for their unique perspectives on beauty. This phenomenon, known as “serendipitous discovery”, occurs when algorithms do not just recommend content based on previous interactions, but areas that the user has not previously engaged and might find interest in (Vuzharov). Studies have shown that this expansion of people’s horizons can foster a more diverse cultural landscape (Goffi). Therefore, it is able to make beauty vary among individuals through these platforms. Just as Margaret Wolfe Hungerford once stated, “Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder”, by making it more accessible for all, more beauty is appreciated, leading to the overall diversity of our standards.

However, AI runs the risk of hurting minority groups by spreading limited beauty standards. First, we need to understand that AI draws its information from its database of existing content on the internet. The internet contains unfiltered information without the approval of reviewers, which can be sexually suggestive, fake, biased, or offensive, which runs counter to our overall goal of making the internet a diverse, inclusive place where everyone feels valued. While existing biases in mainstream and old-fashioned beauty standards are demanding for groups like women, the disabled, and the elderly, AI automatically uses these distorted standards and creates content that contains harmful stereotypes for these groups. They warp out the natural beauty standards and make the original human appear increasingly imperfect. Recently, due to the flawless ideal version of human beauty standards expressed through AI, some individuals even decided to marry these robots, as they are unable to find any human beings as perfect as them in real life.

This distorted standard fostered by AI can be further seen through women. On the one hand, women have become more and more empowered over the past decades with the feminist movements and they started to fight for their right to maintain control over their bodies. On the other hand, conventional beauty which values big eyes, flawless skin, a slender figure, and a defined nose has become more prevalent because of virtual AI platforms. According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), 40% of people who have experienced online attacks such as spiteful comments, private messages, and posts received them because of their physical appearance (Online Hate and Harassment: The American Experience 2022). As more and more content includes AI, repetition can potentially change people's perception of this,

known as the illusory truth effect in psychology, where fluency can lead to an incorrect perception of opinions being truth, perpetuating the existing bias.

Another of AI's implications on human perception of beauty is its negative effect on the mental health of minority groups. According to a survey, only around 54% of people can identify whether something is AI-generated ("AI vs. Human Study"). Since AI tends to generate human images that are too unrealistic and unscientific, like female figures with excessively small waists and huge breasts, it makes those people who are not aware of its credibility feel like it is realistic and achievable, setting those standards for real people in our physical world. These unachievable and unhealthy expectations for vulnerable groups like youth can lead to health risks. For instance, statistics have shown that 50% of young people aged 18-24 are likely to feel anxious about themselves (Booth), a phenomenon further exacerbated by the prevalence of social media use. While AI creates filters that can change people's appearance into an ideal figure, it is easy for youth to compare themselves with those edited unrealistic looks. This can heighten their self-abasement, and even lead to depression.

In conclusion, beauty has always been a very controversial concept since the time of Plato. The democratization of beauty by AI does offer some opportunities for diverse expressions of ideas but also includes risks of perpetuating beauty standards with stereotypes. In all of our past, humans have been trying to explore the standards created by nature, and as technology has developed, humans have become the ones to define and create our own beauty, later implemented through AI. Recently, AI has evolved into the job of content makers and decision-makers, substituting many jobs that were once human. This leads us to question: are we still the ones who master technology and create beauty, or does AI manipulate us, including our standards of beauty?

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