

The Kardashian-Jenner Family's Influence on Beauty

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The Kardashian-Jenner family rose from a typical American family to the social media moguls they are today. They have greatly influenced the meaning of contemporary beauty over the last decade and continue to feed into unhealthy beauty standards for women. In terms of Elaine Scarry's ideas in *On Beauty and Being Just*, the case against beauty lies in the actions of the Kardashian-Jenner family. Elaine Scarry believes that beauty leads us to justice and in the face of beauty we are prompted to copy it. In contrast to her ideas about justice, the Kardashian-Jenner influence on beauty does not lead individuals to justice. Looking at how the Kardashians rose to fame and continue to profit off the beauty industry, I conclude that beauty leads individuals to ignorance, self-hatred, and injustice.

The family consists of Kim, Kourtney, Khloé, Kendall, and Kylie. The family rose to fame after Kim's sex tape with rapper Ray J was leaked on the internet. In late 2007, the reality television show, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, aired their first season on E! tv. The reality television show focuses on Kim, Kourtney, Khloé, and their mom, Kris. Bruce Jenner, (now Caitlyn), their brother Rob, and Scott Disick also appear in the show. It shows topics like their new fame, family drama, new additions to the family, and their day-to-day life. The show has been airing on television for the last fourteen years with season 20 being their last. To show the impact of their show, the Styles Desk from *The New York Times* writes, "But within years of the premiere on E!, the women of the family and their matriarch "momager" became, in their own right, some of the most famous and influential people in the world" (Styles Desk). Sophie

McMillan says, “These shows are extremely staged and are a representation of superficial accomplishments whilst also sending out an unacceptable and unrealistic portrayal of morals and social norms for the audience watching” (McMillan). This is the power of influence that the Kardashian-Jenner family has. The show’s target audience is teenagers to mature adults. The younger audience that indulges in watching the show are exposed to artificial family drama, unrealistic standards, and gender norms. Despite their show being staged, the family is a household name in America. According to Arabelle Sicardi from *Allure*, “You know how they look even if you've never watched an episode of their show or seen their Instagram feeds” (Sicardi). The Kardashian-Jenner family has become so present in American life, that you can see their influence rub off on beauty, makeup trends, cosmetic surgery trends, and media.

Other than having a television show about their family, the Kardashians monetize their brand on social media. Abbey Maloney from the *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* writes, “According to the *Social Blade*, two of the 10 most-followed Instagram accounts of 2017 belong to members of the Kardashian-Jenner clan” (49). Kim Kardashian-West and Kylie Jenner are in the top ten with Khloé, Kourtney, and Kendall not being too far behind. Their Instagrams are filled with advertisements from companies that they endorse. They get paid to post pictures of clothes, beauty-related products, and health-related products. Additionally, Sophie McMillan writes, “It could therefore be said that we are not living in an information/knowledge society as our sources of value have changed; we are valuing particular famous celebrities that do not provide us with a source of intellectual knowledge and power that we can use to better ourselves or society” (McMillan). We are living in a society where superficial topics dominate our newsstands; hot gossip, ugly remarks, and pointless drama fills

our social media and magazines and adds nothing beneficial to our lives. The content we are consuming revolves around celebrity culture and consumer culture.

Furthermore, Nadia Michael from the University of Pretoria says there is a consistent theme she found in her study on celebrities' portrayal of beauty and how it influences young women. She writes, "it is evident that images that are portrayed of female celebrities prevailing in contemporary media today are predominantly centered around the theme of beauty, one of which is that women can use their beauty and bodies for profit and as a means to power" (Michael 64). This is shown through the business ventures the Kardashian-Jenner family have created after their TV show. After the airing of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, Kim, Khloé, and Kourtney ventured out and took advantage of their new fame together. They opened stores and launched collections like Dash, Kardashian Beauty, and the Kardashian Kollection at Sears. According to Ashna Coster from *Diggit Magazine*, "Kardashian and her sisters are known for being among the biggest influencers when it comes to driving consumer behavior. People want to imitate them by buying what they use, in order to fulfill the illusion of being able to look as pretty as the famous Kim Kardashian" (Coster). This is the epitome of consumer culture and how the Kardashian-Jenner family can influence beauty trends, what to buy, what to wear, and what to eat.

Taking a deeper look at each of the Kardashian-Jenner sisters and their business ventures, Kim Kardashian-West is the blueprint for social media and beauty. She was the first sister to harness how to work social media and appeal to the average user through a screen. Ashna Coster says, "She became '*famous for being famous*' and has had much success by knowing how to market herself to her fans via social media platforms" (Coster). Kim has ventured out from her family to create brands like KKW Beauty, SKIMS, and Kim Kardashian: Hollywood Video

Game. Her older sister, Kourtney Kardashian, recently started Poosh in 2019. According to Danetha Doe from her blog, *Money & Mimosas*, “Poosh is a multimedia lifestyle platform filled with tips and tricks on everything from which vibrators are the best, how to coparent after you split from your partner, to interior design” (Doe). Kourtney created a lifestyle website that focuses on tips from her life to empower women to embrace themselves and nature.

The next sister, Khloé Kardashian, is the co-founder of the brand, Good American. Gianna Nocera from *ScreenRant* writes, “The company started with a focus on creating denim for women of all body types. Khloe uses the brand to promote body positivity amongst her fans” (Nocera). Along with Kim and Kourtney, she promotes women empowerment through fashion and inclusivity. Next, Kendall Jenner has a joint collection with Kylie Jenner called the Kendall + Kylie Clothing Collection that is sold through PacSun and Amazon. Their brand focuses on teenage fashion. Lastly, Kylie Jenner is the founder of Kylie Cosmetics, selling makeup and skincare. Her most famous and successful product is her lip kits designed to give people luscious lips.

In essence, Arabelle Sicardi says, “It was only inevitable that each family member would begin selling what people wanted most from them: Kim's contour, Kylie's lips, Khloé's denim curves, Kourtney's vitamin regimen” (Sicardi). The four features of the ideal beauty that Heather Widdows writes about in *Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal* are to be thin and slim, firm and buff, smooth and luminous, and young and youthful (Widdows). Kim, Kourtney, Khloé, and Kendall, and Kylie’s businesses all help women and men to achieve this beauty ideal. Also, they all exhibit these qualities despite normal inevitable aging. They are temporarily defying inevitable aging by being the standard for beauty.

Through their immense social media presence over the last decade, the Kardashian-Jenner family has been able to create a beauty ideal that revolves around what they look like. Jia Tolentino, in “The Age of Instagram Face,” describes this new beauty standard as the “Instagram face.” She says it is “an overly tan skin tone, a South Asian influence with the brows and eye shape, an African-American influence with the lips, a Caucasian influence with the nose, a cheek structure that is predominantly Native American and Middle Eastern” (Tolentino). The “Instagram face” can be seen throughout social media. Influencers from all walks of life are starting to look like one another through the alterations they get and filters. This face stems back to Kim Kardashian’s influence. She is the blueprint for her younger sisters and social media influencers around the world. Jill Tolentino writes, “...there’s ...this...Kim Kardashian, Kylie Jenner thing that seems to be spreading.... Symmetry, proportion, harmony...the high contoured cheekbones, the strong projected chin, the flat platform underneath the chin that makes a ninety-degree angle” (Tolentino). This is what the “Instagram face” is all about. People who have the money get work done, and people who don’t use the filters provided by social media to portray themselves as the modern beauty ideal.

As a result of the modern social media beauty standard, cosmetic surgery is on a rise. Nadia Michael says, “When looking at images such as these, the message sent out is that of superficiality and unattainability. It promotes that women should look a certain way in order to be accepted, admired, praised, successful and happy” (Michael 63). To fix what young women think they lack, they resort to cosmetic surgery to fulfill their needs. Kim Kardashian-West, Khloé Kardashian, and Kylie Jenner continue to unintentionally promote cosmetic surgery with their unnatural, and unrealistic bodies. The Styles Desk writes about if the Kardashian-Jenners have ever gone under the knife:

They say that their ever-changing bodies are sculpted and whittled and plumped through nonsurgical means: Instagram filters, dermal fillers, contour powder, squats. The claim is both ludicrous and shrewd. The Kardashians were the prototypes for the uncanny cyborg look that has since colonized social media. They exist less as fixed images than as a blur of constant technological upgrades. They refashioned femininity into a computer prompt: enhance, enhance, enhance. (Styles Desk)

Although they denounce the claims of cosmetic surgery, you can see through their “before and after” pictures that their bodies have significantly changed from their younger selves. Kim, Khloé, and Kylie have larger bottoms. Kylie has admitted to getting lip filler. Next, Kendall’s face structure around her eyebrows, nose, and jawline has changed. Lastly, Kourtney has admitted to having breast implants but has since gotten them removed after having children.

All in all, the bodies that they flaunt today have started a new wave for cosmetic surgery. People resort to cosmetic surgery because of the images portrayed on social media. Arabelle Sicardi writes, “Following then-17-year-old Kylie Jenner’s admission of lip augmentation in 2015, searches for “lip fillers” went up 3,233 percent” (Sicardi). Another fact says, “According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, between 2000 and 2018, such procedures increased by 256 percent” (Sicardi). The stigma around cosmetic surgery is changing from something unattainable and fake to something that is accessible and a quick fix. Cosmetic surgery fixes an individual’s insecurity about themselves but promotes unnatural beauty standards to young girls. Jia Tolentino interviewed a plastic surgeon named Colby Smith who said Kim is “patient zero” for his clients (Tolentino). He says, “Ultimately, the goal is always to look like Kim” (Tolentino). She is the “Instagram face” that people want to achieve when they go to get surgery.

Considering the Kardashian-Jenner's impact on modern beauty standards, they are often accused of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is "...the use of objects or elements of a non-dominant culture in a way that doesn't respect their original meaning, give credit to their source, or reinforces stereotypes or contributes to oppression" (Marsh). Kylie Jenner appropriates black culture by getting lip fillers and flaunting her big bottom despite it being unnatural. Kim Kardashian-West does the same as Kylie but more. Kim has been accused of cultural appropriation on multiple occasions like her brand SKIMS, which was originally going to be called Kimono which appropriated the Japanese culture. In 2019 Kim appeared on the cover over *7Hollywood* magazine with visibly darker skin, appropriating black culture. The term for this is called "blackfishing." According to Sicardi, "blackfishing specifically describes when people use tools like makeup, Photoshop, and cosmetic surgery that make them appear more Black" (Sicardi). In 2018, Kim was accused of cultural appropriation for wearing cornrows twice. These are just a few of the many instances of cultural appropriation by Kim. Khloé Kardashian has cultural appropriation accusations against her as well.

Paloma Bennett from San Francisco State University writes about Kim's cultural appropriation:

Kim Kardashian appropriates African American culture to make herself more sexually appealing. African American culture is tantalizing, but threatening because Black bodies are often feared in White heteronormative society. When Kim Kardashian is linked to and seen as embodying Black cultural images, then she becomes even more desirable because of her White body... The Kardashians' brand, in general, makes a significant profit, which has been formed by the sisters and mother appropriating from the African American community. (Bennett 21-22)

What Paloma Bennet is saying is that since Kim's skin color is not naturally dark, she can flaunt bigger features that on black women make them unattractive or provocative. Black women are made fun of for having larger lips and bigger bottoms, but when those features are on a white body, they are considered desirable, beautiful, and can make money off their figure. Having lighter skin makes the body less threatening.

Kim, Khloé, and Kylie have been able to profit off the appearance of minorities, without the negative experiences of those features, and without crediting those minorities. Nancy Johnston-Hunt gives three reasons as to why this is problematic for black women. She says, "Firstly, representing groups or people without invitation enables room for systemic stereotyping" (Johnston-Hunt). Without credit, it allows people to continue to ridicule black women for specific features that the Kardashian-Jenner family is getting praised for and profit from. Black women continued to get bashed for having naturally large lips and bottoms. Some people even question the naturalness of black women's features just because white women have made cosmetic surgery mainstream. She goes on to say, "Secondly, this stereotyping can lead to continued marginalization of minority cultures. And finally, the over exaggeration of physical attributes, such as Jenner's lips, hips and buttocks, reinforces her complicity in exoticizing and fetishizing the 'other'" (Johnston-Hunt). People look at the Kardashian-Jenner family as beauty symbols, but black women are looked at as exotic and immodest. Their unwillingness to be transparent about their bodies and give credit to the correct people makes it harder for black women to feel comfortable in their bodies in society. This exemplifies how double standards work for white women and black women.

The Kardashian-Jenner rise to fame is rooted in redesigning the old beauty standard for women. Naomi Wolf describes this concept as "the Beauty Myth." It is "the premise that there is

a literal – albeit inhumane – state of physical perfection that doesn't actually correspond to any human qualities but that nonetheless, as women, we're all supposed to commit ourselves to" (Abraham). The beauty myth that we are committing ourselves to is harmful. As a society, we are allowing influencers to create a message that values the outside appearance of women and not the inside. Plato, in *the Symposium*, asserts that the love of the physical body helps us to understand beauty because it is the lowest level of love. This level of love doesn't last because the body withers and ages (Plato 76-77). Young women fail to realize that physical beauty is not the only thing that makes them valuable and beautiful. However, the message that's portrayed in the media only revolves around physical beauty.

According to Sophie McMillan, "What individuals do not realize is that celebrities have millions of pounds and are able to visit the gym for multiple hours every day, have someone style their hair and contour their face yet they are still seen as a natural beauty" (McMillan). Influencers like the Kardashian-Jenners are not real. Their lives aren't seamless, and they have the resources to make themselves look like they have it all together. As viewers, we only see one side of the picture being portrayed, not the countless hours in the gym, at the spa, at the plastic surgeon, or during their healing time.

The Kardashian-Jenner empire focuses on two ideas from John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*. Those ideas are called publicity and glamour. John Berger's definition of publicity is, "It proposes to each of us that we transform ourselves, or lives, by buying something more. This more, it proposes, will make us in some way richer—even though we will be poorer by having spent our money" (Berger 131). Publicity is shown in modern advertisements like the ones that the Kardashian-Jenner family posts on their social media platforms. Publicity makes us believe that we will be prettier for buying makeup or more desirable for changing our bodies. "The

media impacts on young people's self-image by portraying beauty as an ideal state... perhaps if you looked more like the Kardashians the boy you like will start liking you back" (Michael 66-67). So, young women adopt this mentality and use products that this family sells and promotes to make themselves align with the new beauty standard.

Also, the Kardashian-Jenner family possesses glamour. According to Berger, "Glamour cannot exist without personal social envy being a common and widespread emotion" (Berger 148). The Kardashian-Jenner family are individuals to envy. People want to be like them, want to look like them, and want to live their life. Therefore, they possess glamour and are the staple of advertisements. "More brands wanted to sign on Kardashian for endorsement deals, more consumers wanted to buy products that would allow them to be like her, and the public liked her better" (Coster). Advertisements on social media work when they possess these two qualities. The Kardashian-Jenner family posts what people want to possess. Nowadays we see images of them on vacations, owning beautiful houses, cars, and unrealistically stress-free. They paint those pictures to the middle class and lower class so that average people can dream of what their life would be like if they possessed what the Kardashian-Jenners do. This isn't the reality for everyone, the image that they portray on their social media is unattainable and unrealistic.

According to Elaine Scarry, beauty prompts a copy of itself because of the force it holds over people. She writes, "It makes us draw it, take photographs of it, or describe it to other people," (Scarry 3). It is almost like we are unable to control ourselves in the face of beauty. We can see this idea in *the Symposium* by Plato. In the text, it states, "The love of generation and of birth in beauty," (Plato 72). He had the idea that love, procreation, and beauty are all related. Procreation is another form of copying and the Kardashian-Jenner family exhibit this idea because average people want to recreate and copy them. Their job as influencers is to make

people want to wear what they wear, use the same products, look the same as them, and want to be like them. This family built their fortune off the working concepts of beauty from philosophers. That doesn't necessarily make their beauty lead people to justice. "The modern hallucination in which women are trapped or trapped themselves is similarly rigid, cruel, and euphemistically painted. Contemporary culture directs attention to imagery of the Iron Maiden, while censoring real women's faces and bodies" (Wolf 17). The Kardashian-Jenner family is the "Iron Maiden" while average women are hidden. This makes it seem like average women need to conform to the modern beauty standard because that is all that's projected in the media. Naomi Wolf says that in the last decade, beauty businesses such as cosmetic surgery, pornography, and consumer spending has all increased and became successful (Wolf 10). These businesses were able to become successful because of how much the beauty industry feeds on women's insecurities. Money flows out of people's pockets to fix insecurities about themselves, so of course the beauty standard today is unrealistic so that money keeps flowing out and into the hands of people.

Ultimately, the Kardashian-Jenner family is a good modern example of the way beauty works in society. They follow John Berger, Plato, and Elaine Scarry's concepts about beauty. Their entire empire only focuses on beauty-related businesses, posts, and advertisements. Even so, people are not led to justice by them. Instead, people are led to insecurities, self-hatred, and artificial beauty. People even develop medical issues like eating disorders and botched surgeries after chasing the modern beauty standard that was created and reinforced by the Kardashian-Jenner family. Beauty is not always related to goodness, and in this case, nothing good comes out of the beauty of the Kardashian-Jenner family.

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