



Introduction. Beauty and Inequality: New Questions for a Fragmented Field

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1 Introduction: Does Beauty Pay?

Physical beauty is highly valued in today's media-saturated, consumption-oriented, service-driven society. We can see this in the steady increase in the resources people devote to their appearance. In the first decades of the twenty-first century, the use of injectables like Botox has become commonplace in many countries. Demand for cosmetic surgery has surged everywhere (IMARC Group, 2025). Skincare products, once the prerogative of so-called mature women, are now used by women of all ages, men, and even teens and preteens. People of all ages engage in exercise to keep their bodies thin and toned. Beauty influencers on social media platforms garner huge followings by showing off their looks, and sharing advice for attaining a similarly ideal face or body. According to Eurostat, Europeans allocate an average of nearly 7% of their total spending solely on clothing and beauty care (Eurostat, 2022). Global studies suggest that many people spend

several hours a day enhancing their appearance (Kowal et al., 2022). In recent years, there has also been a growing market for medication, such as Ozempic, to attain ideal, thin bodies (e.g., Oswald, 2024).

In this expanding “beauty regime” (Kuipers, 2022), people of all ages and genders are willing to spend considerable time, money, and effort on improving or preserving their appearance. This is not just the result of growing prosperity or the invention of new beauty products—it also marks a cultural shift. As the philosopher Heather Widdows (2018) observes, beauty has become an ethical ideal: a good thing in and of itself, worth pursuing for its own sake. In a reversal of the age-old condemnation of vanity, the pursuit of beauty is now seen to reflect positively on people's moral worth. Consequently, people who do not pursue beauty—or if that high ideal is not attainable, at least a well-groomed, youthful look—are increasingly regarded as morally lacking.

Many people consider beauty or “good looks” a resource or a form of capital: something that brings benefits in both private and professional life. This is confirmed by a large scholarly literature suggesting that better-looking people tend to do better in a wide range of domains. For instance, economists have shown that there is a “beauty premium”: more attractive people benefit from their looks in the labor market (Hamer-mesh, 2011; Mobius & Rosenblat, 2006), and in other domains such as health (Gupta et al.,

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2016) or politics (Berggren et al., 2010). Sociologists have analyzed beauty as a form of aesthetic, erotic, or bodily capital that both signals and enhances social status (Anderson et al., 2010; Frevert & Walker, 2014; Hakim, 2010; Webster & Driskell, 1983). Psychologists have analyzed the “halo effect”, a bias that leads people to assume that good-looking people are also more talented in other areas of life (Batres & Shiramizu, 2023; Kaplan, 1978).

Along similar lines, but more critically, scholars have pointed to disadvantages and injustices suffered by those who do not have this valued asset of beauty, and do not have the means to acquire it. Social scientists, for instance, have argued that beauty standards reproduce or exacerbate social inequalities, for instance on the basis of race/ethnicity, gender, and social class (Craig, 2002; Skeggs, 1997; Vandebroek, 2016). Communication scholars and psychologists show how unrealistic beauty standards, and the constant attention for appearance fueled by (social) media, lead to mental and physical health problems, especially among younger women and vulnerable groups, including racial/ethnic minority groups, sexual minorities, and people with disabilities (Grogan, 2016; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). In recent years, the field of fat studies has tackled the exclusion and discrimination of people on the basis of body weight, which is widely stigmatized as “ugly” (Cooper, 2010). Finally, scholarly and public debates have emerged about “lookism”, the discrimination and exclusion of people considered ugly or plain-looking (Warhurst et al., 2009). However, whether critical or more agnostic, the same basic assumption underlies these studies: “beauty pays”, as the economist Daniel Hamermesh (2011) briefly summarized this field. And we might add: ugliness or plainness is penalized.

What this means is that beauty is related to, or even a form of, inequality: people have unequal life chances as the result of something that they have very little control over. These chances are shaped by people’s social positions, and they affect their social positions over their life course. In recent years lively though fragmented debates have sprung up across academic fields discussing how appearance relates to both

unequal chances and outcomes. Scholars have argued that the effects of beauty are less straightforward than “beauty pays”. For one thing, there is not always consensus on what counts as “beauty”. Rather than a reward for beauty (or penalty for plainness or ugliness), the beauty premium might be a reward for most closely resembling the beauty standards of dominant groups in society. These dominant beauty standards tend to favor white, youthful, middle-class, able-bodied standards, making the beauty premium—like other social privileges—harder to attain for people from less privileged social backgrounds. In other words, beauty follows privilege, not the other way around.

Moreover, empirical work suggests that beauty does not always lead to advantage. In some settings, and for some groups, good looks can even be a disadvantage. For instance, in a recent review Kukkonen et al. (2024) showed that, overall, men are more likely to benefit from their attractive appearance than women, because women can also be excluded or penalized for being too good-looking. In her ethnographic work on fashion models and women in the high-end party circuit, Ashley Mears showed how many women working in such beauty-oriented fields do not benefit from their beauty. In the “winner takes all” field of fashion modeling, the most successful reap all the rewards, leaving a majority with little to show for their hard work (Mears, 2011), while in the party circuit the rewards of women’s free labor tend to end up in the pocket of others—typically men (Mears, 2020).

Yet, the idea that “beauty pays” strongly resonates with popular beliefs about beauty. Studies showing a beauty premium, or promoting the development of one’s “erotic capital”, get a lot of traction in popular media, and live on social media in the form of clips and memes about “pretty privilege”. In our neoliberal era, the suggestion that beauty, whether a natural given or the result of hard work, will be rewarded aligns with cultural beliefs about individual merit and success. Beauty, rather like intelligence, can be construed as a convenient mixture of a natural gift that can only be admired, and a matter of effort and dedication that will yield well-deserved outcomes. Thus, the academic insight that beauty

functions as a form of capital, while contested by some researchers, might work as self-fulfilling prophecy. As the Thomas theorem (also known as the first law of sociology) has it: if people believe a situation to be true, it is true in its consequences.

With this *Handbook of Beauty and Inequality*, we want to move forward both academic and public debates on physical appearance and its relation with social inequalities. This Handbook gives an overview of what science can tell us about what we see as an increasingly pressing social question: how is appearance related to various forms of advantage and social exclusion in contemporary societies? Does beauty pay, and if so: when, for whom, how—and in what currency? Which persons and groups are most likely to benefit from their appearance? Does beauty add to existing forms of inequality, for instance on the basis of class, gender, race, ethnicity, education, nationality, sexuality or health; or can good looks also temper such social inequalities? These questions are addressed in 28 chapters, written by social scientists, psychologists, media scholars, and philosophers from around the world. Each chapter is written by an expert in the field and aims to offer an up-to-date overview of the state of the art in a specific research field.

The aim of this Handbook is twofold. First, we want to provide both novices to the field and advanced scholars an overview of the main insights, concepts, theories, and research findings on beauty and inequality. We bring together insights from various disciplines, in which researchers have tackled remarkably similar questions with vastly different methods and concepts. Second, and more ambitiously, we aim to put the study of beauty and inequality on the map as a distinct research field at the intersection of various disciplines, notably sociology, economics, psychology, media and communication studies, and philosophy. Beauty is often dismissed as frivolous and feminine. In this handbook, we aim to show that in contemporary societies beauty is not only a key cultural concern, but also a place where inequalities are increasingly played out, reproduced, and defined.

In this introduction, we aim to provide some guidance in navigating this scattered field. The 28

chapters show that neither “beauty” nor “inequality” are clear-cut, easily definable concepts, and different scholarly traditions have defined and studied them in distinct, some would say: incompatible ways. We provide a brief overview of the various ways researchers have tackled three key issues in the study of beauty and inequality. First, what is beauty? Second, how does beauty shape inequality (or vice versa)? Third, how to study beauty and inequality? On the basis of the answers to these questions, we distinguish no less than seven research traditions, which we summarize in Table 1. In the final section of this Introduction, we give an overview of the structure of the Handbook, including a very brief introduction to each chapter.

2 Beauty and Inequality: An Overview of Research Traditions

The relation between beauty and inequality has been studied from different vantage points. Sometimes, researchers started off with an interest in beauty or appearance and this led them to questions related to social inequality. In other cases, researchers started off studying various inequalities—related to gender, class, age, sexuality, nationality, or race/ethnicity—and this led them to consider beauty as a domain where such inequalities are produced and reproduced. Consequently, research in this field is scattered and fragmented. Researchers are based in different disciplines, and use different concepts to talk about more or less same thing such as: beauty, attractiveness, appearance, or body image. They often have different or even conflicting assumptions on the nature of social inequality. Moreover, they use different methods and may have difficulty accepting the validity of other methods.

To create some order in this scattered field, we distinguish seven distinct approaches to beauty and inequality. These “approaches”—an admittedly vague word—range from full-fledged theoretical paradigms such as evolutionary theory or sociological field theory, to emerging bodies of research that are only starting to converge around

Table 1 Approaches to beauty and inequality

Approach	Disciplines	What is beauty?	How beauty creates inequality?	How to study beauty and inequality?	Chapter in which this perspective is strongly represented
Beauty as sexual selection and fitness information	Evolutionary psychology; humane biology	Physical features that indicate fitness: Largely universal and gender-specific	Beauty has (real) sexual and social advantages	Experiment; comparative (cross-cultural/cross-species) observation	5. Lidborg & Boothroyd
Beauty premium/ aesthetic capital Subtype: Intersectional aesthetic capital	Economics; social psychology; sociology of labor and stratification; philosophy	Physical appearance conforming with standards that are widely shared in a given society (and possibly universal)	Beauty creates social advantage, either because beauty has value, or because of bias that privileges good looks. As a subtype, interactional/intersectional perspective: Emphasizing that stereotypes related primarily to gender but also to race, etc., influence who benefits from beauty in different contexts.	Experiment; survey	9. McClintock; 11. Raudenska; 12. Smith & Hamplova 25. Wolbring 29. Mason & Midtgaard Subtype: 10. Kühn & Wolbring 16. Monk
Beauty as (gendered, classed, racialized, etc.) power structure	Gender studies; feminist theory; sociology; anthropology; media/cultural studies; ethnic/racial studies; fat studies	Culturally shaped standards applied to both appearance and styling/clothing/presentation, which apply differentially to different social categories	Beauty standards and beauty ideologies reflect and reinforce social categories and hierarchies	Cultural critique; media (content) analysis; ethnography; interview	2. Craig 6. Sarpila, Brans & Kuipers 7. Kuipers, Chow, Chong & Zhou 4. Kaplan 15. Ojala & Pietilä 17. Monier & Mears 21. Kuipers, Narh, Pieters, Pirhayati, & Rabasa 22. Menon 26. Christensen & Malae

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Approach	Disciplines	What is beauty?	How beauty creates inequality?	How to study beauty and inequality?	Chapter in which this perspective is strongly represented
Beauty standards as cultural capital	Cultural sociology; anthropology; cultural & consumer studies	Group-specific standards for evaluating physical appearance and grooming/styling/presentation. Standards vary across groups, and across contexts/fields.	Beauty standards function as cultural capital: a way to signal and recognize group membership and social status.	Ethnography; interviews	2. Craig 18. Vandebroeck & Kuipers 14. De Keere, Sarpila & Vonk 19. Karademir 23. Nickson & Warhurst
Beauty as (mediated) ideal	Communication, media studies	An idealized/unrealistic image or standard for physical appearance (notably body size), spread mostly through media but also through other socializers (e.g., family members)	Portrayals of beauty create and reinforce stereotypes, and set unrealistic ideal that harm well-being, particularly of women and disadvantaged groups.	Media content analysis; experiment	13. Guest & Daniels 20. Keyser-Verreault 24. Pieters
Cumulative advantage/ Matthew effect	Epidemiology; medicine; dentistry; sociology; ethics	Desirable aspects of appearance that can be modified	Advantage enhances beauty	Cultural analysis (survey or experiment would be apt, but we are not aware of such research)	18. Vandebroeck & Kuipers
Beauty as a belief system or ideology	Philosophy; sociology	A social belief system or ideology that posits norms and beliefs regarding appearance	Belief systems and ideologies legitimize and thereby sustain beauty-based inequalities.	Cultural analysis; media analysis; survey	3. Widdows 8. Sarpila & Kukkonen 23. Nickson & Warhurst 27. Brans & Pieters 28. Van de Peer

a number of shared questions. Table 1 presents overview of these approaches. It summarizes how researchers in each of these approaches have answered two central questions: “What is beauty?” and “How is beauty related to inequality?”

The first approach we distinguish is rooted in evolutionary theory and most commonly associated with human biology and (evolutionary) psychology. We propose to call it: *Beauty as Sexual Selection and Fitness Information*. In evolutionary theory, beauty or “attractiveness” is central to the mechanism of sexual selection, that

is, the spreading of genes via mate selection and sexual reproduction (Etcoff, 2011; Trivers, 2002). This mechanism is distinct from the principle of natural selection, commonly summarized as “survival of the fittest” (although some popular versions of evolutionary thought tend to conflate both mechanisms, suggesting that more attractive people are also “fitter” and more likely to survive. This reasoning sometimes brings them dangerously close to eugenetics). Seen from the perspective of evolution theory, beauty—or wider, any aesthetic pleasure—is nature’s way of telling us

that we should pay attention: we should try and get close to this beautiful thing, as it is (or might be) good or beneficial for us. In the case of physical beauty, this is generally taken to mean that physical features that are experienced as beautiful indicate the capacity to produce healthy offspring (with a specific individual, in a specific ecosystem, cf. Rosenthal, 2017).

This has led evolutionary scholars to assume that markers of “attractiveness”—the preferred term in this paradigm—are by and large universal across humanity. Attractiveness reflects visible signals of the capacity to procreate, such as youthfulness (large eyes, clear skin, thick hair), gender-specificity (hourglass figures and big lips for women; square jaws and triangular torsos for men), and (most controversially) symmetry. Such claims about attractiveness as a marker of evolutionary fitness or even “gene quality” have entered popular discourse. However, at the same time evolutionary research on beauty has moved on. Research in this field increasingly shows that people’s evaluations of attractiveness may vary over time. For instance, in times of scarcity people tend to prefer people with fuller bodies than in times of abundance (Batres & Perrett, 2017). Moreover, evolutionary researchers have increasingly identified cultural factors, and especially the presence of visual media, as central to the development of standards of attractiveness (Boothroyd et al., 2016; Kowal et al., 2022).

From the perspective of evolutionary theory, beauty brings real biological benefits that can spill over to social and economic benefits. In other words, beauty in itself is a form of inequality. Because of its biological roots, the human response to beauty is strong and not always conscious; it is therefore bound to play a role in contemporary society, even in domains where sex is not supposed to come into play. This power of attraction can be harnessed in various ways (Etcoff, 2011). However, when evolutionary researchers write about the societal consequences of beauty, for instance when writing about beauty and gender, or about unequal access to mates (as they call it), they usually don’t formulate this in terms of social inequality. Most commonly, it is understood in terms of psychological “bias”.

A notable exception is feminist evolutionary theory, which explicitly connects attractiveness with gender inequalities (Gowaty, 2012).

The second key approach has been discussed above: the *Aesthetic Capital/Beauty Premium Approach*. This is the key paradigm in social scientific and economic studies of beauty. In this approach, inequality takes center stage: the guiding question is how attractiveness shapes unequal life chances (Wolbring & Riordan, 2016). As in the evolutionary field, the preferred term is attractiveness, which refers to physical appearance conforming with (gender-specific) standards that are widely shared in a given society, and possibly universal. This agreement is important: for attractiveness to work as a resource, people need to agree who does or doesn’t possess this valuable asset. Most studies in this approach create measures of attractiveness by asking people to rate people’s appearances, and compute an average. This procedure usually shows a considerable degree of agreement, and results in a quantitative measure of attractiveness that then can be connected with social outcomes, either in lab settings or in large datasets (Hamermesh, 2011; Jæger, 2011).

In the approach, beauty shapes inequality, but this relation is probabilistic rather than deterministic. There are many factors affecting unequal life chances, but overall more attractive people are more likely to have better social and economic “outcomes”: higher wages, better jobs, larger social networks, higher well-being, and better health (Kukkonen et al., 2024). Researchers have suggested various mechanisms to explain these inequalities. Some researchers argue that beauty creates actual value, which is then rewarded in the labor market (Bozoyan & Wolbring, 2018). Most commonly, researchers see the preference for beauty as a form of psychological bias: unconscious responses that people rely on, for instance, when they need to make quick decisions, lead to “appearance-based discrimination” (Hamermesh, 2011). Finally, scholars have connected unequal outcomes with structural inequalities, for instance on the basis of class or gender, which leads some forms of appearance to be rewarded more highly than others (e.g., Schneickert et al., 2020).

The *Aesthetic Capital/Beauty Premium Approach* has increasingly converged with recent work on intersectional inequalities, which analyze how different “axes of inequality” work together to create complex patterns of advantage and exclusion. As Table 1 shows, we see this intersectional approach as a subtype of the “aesthetic capital” approach, though with crossovers with the critical third and fourth approaches. A notable example is a study by Monk and his colleagues (2021) showing that while most African-Americans in the US earn less than white people in similar positions, this is not the case for a small group of African-Americans who are unusually beautiful: they tend to earn more. This pattern, moreover, works slightly different for men and women. Hence, the outcomes of beauty depend on a specific intersection of race and gender (and probably nationality, as this will probably work differently in other countries).

A third approach, which we propose to call *Beauty as Power Structure*, analyzes the relation between beauty and inequality in terms of power: all standards, experiences, and evaluations of beauty are embedded in power structures. This approach has its roots in feminist theories that identify beauty as a central aspect of gender inequality and male domination (Bordo, 2004). Scholars in this paradigm have also analyzed how beauty reflects and reinforces structural inequalities other than gender, for instance inequalities based on race or ethnicity (Craig, 2002). Today, it is associated with so-called critical approaches (which in academic usage means: approaches that focus on power relations) throughout the social sciences and the humanities.

In this approach, beauty is not a natural “given”, but a social and cultural construct central to the subordination of some groups and the domination of others. Therefore, beauty is not just about presumably natural physical traits, but about all aspects of appearance, including body and face, but also styling, clothing, and demeanor, which together create the (deeply gendered) experience of “beauty”. Beauty, then, is understood as a set of culturally shaped standards and practices that are applied to both appearance and styling, clothing

and presentation. Importantly, such standards and practices apply differently to different social categories. Things that make women look beautiful will be considered ugly for men—and that is precisely the point.

The relation between beauty and inequality, understood from this perspective, is two-pronged. First, beauty standards reflect the views and interests of groups with more power, and make it easier for members of such powerful groups to attain beauty. Second, power structures create ideologies about beauty, for instance, beliefs about which group is supposed to work on their beauty and why, and which group is exempt from such “beauty work”. Such ideologies allow the powerful to control or exploit the beauty of others. For instance, a long-standing line of feminist critique shows that both men and women have internalized a “male gaze”. This not only implies that everyone looks at female beauty through (imagined) men’s eyes, but also that women are there to be looked at, while men’s place is to look at women.

What sets this critical approach apart from evolutionary and most beauty premium/aesthetic capital studies is the assumption that beauty is the outcome of a social process (shaped by power relations), rather than a given trait of certain individuals that sets in motion social processes. Note that this insight is not in itself incompatible with the aesthetic capital approach. In fact, the emerging intersectional approach can be seen as a successful cross-over, combining quantitative analysis of unequal social outcomes with a critical perspective on the social categories that make up stratification systems.

A fourth approach, which we dub, *Beauty as Cultural Capital* shares many assumptions with the “beauty as power” approach, but is more specifically rooted in cultural sociology and cultural studies. This approach understands both beauty and beauty standards as a form of cultural capital: a form of “good taste” that people show in their own presentation, styling and grooming, and in their judgments of the appearance of others. Following Pierre Bourdieu (1984), the sociologist who coined the term cultural capital, the starting point of these studies generally is social class

rather than other axes of inequality such as gender or race/ethnicity.

In this approach, beauty refers to group-specific standards for evaluating both physical appearance and grooming, styling and presentation. As in the “beauty as power” approach, beauty is not just about physique, but about all aspects of a person’s appearance. (The preferred term is, again, beauty rather than attractiveness which suggests a more objective and measurable entity.) With their aesthetic style and self-presentation, but also with embodied markers of social status such as stature, pose, muscularity, or body size, people signal their social status and group membership. Moreover, they recognize this in others and use it to place them socially.

Beauty is related to inequality, then, because it sets in motion processes of social distinction: people with high cultural capital tend to shun or look down upon people with different beauty tastes and practices (Skeggs, 1997). Moreover, beauty standards of people with higher social status tend to be seen as more legitimate, which means they may be embraced or understood as superior by those who cannot attain them (Vandebroek, 2016). Ultimately, cultural capital—whether based in beauty or other tastes—tends to reproduce societal inequalities because it allows people to “convert” their cultural capital into money (economic capital), social connections (social capital), or prestige (symbolic capital).

The fifth approach, which we call *Beauty as a Mediated Ideal*, takes us to a very different field at the intersection of social psychology, communication, and media studies. This paradigm aims to understand how people are affected by social norms about appearance, especially how such norms are communicated through representations of beauty. Through socialization in families, schools, everyday interaction, but increasingly through (visual) media, people learn norms related to appearance, bodies, beauty, and gender which they apply to others and to their own appearance (Cash, 2004; Grogan, 2016). In this socialization process, people are exposed to norms and representations that may be harmful (Holland & Tigge-mann, 2016; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012).

For instance, they may be exposed to unrealistic beauty ideals, such as excessive thin or muscular bodies, or highly sexualized or objectified images. People may also feel unrepresented: people who embody “beauty” in the media are overwhelmingly white, thin, young, and able-bodied, making it harder for people outside this narrow norm to think of themselves as beautiful.

In this paradigm, beauty is understood as idealized (often unrealistic) images or standards for physical appearance, spread through various socializing agents. The key concept in this field is “body image” which is broader than “beauty” or “attractiveness”. It refers to the “inside” view of beauty: as individual’s own perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about their own appearance distinct from how people perceive and react to others’ appearances.

From this psychological/communication perspective, beauty contributes to inequality, first, because portrayals of beauty create and reinforce stereotypes, which tend to be more negative about vulnerable or disadvantaged groups. Moreover, they set unrealistic ideals that are particularly harmful to (young) women and disadvantaged groups. In line with the psychological bent of this approach, negative effects of beauty are mostly framed in terms of individual harm and well-being. While body image studies have mostly focused on young white Western women, studies have shown that beauty ideals cause psychological problems for everyone deviating from beauty norms, e.g., relating to body size, race/ethnicity, sexual/gender identity, and dis/ability (Grogan, 2016).

The sixth and seventh approaches are less firmly established and are best understood as emerging perspectives: a converging of similar ideas across different fields. As the sixth approach, *Beauty as Cumulative Advantage* we identify a scattered collection of observations, made by scholars from a range of fields (sociology, anthropology, history, cultural analysis), that beauty is not only the cause, but also the result of inequality (Frevert & Walker, 2014). This insight seems obvious, but somehow has not been studied or theorized systematically: Richer people will look better, because they can spend

more money on their appearance. By comparison, the less well-off will look plain or even ugly.

The process has, for instance, been observed for teeth (Craig, 2021). Across the world, but especially in more prosperous countries, teeth are an important marker of social inequality. Richer people usually have straight, white, complete—in other words: beautiful—teeth, while poverty is often marked by irregular, less white, or decaying—and therefore: ugly—teeth. Similarly, high-status people are generally thinner (Vandebroek, 2016), but when they are overweight they also have better access to means to lose weight, from dieting to personal trainers (Darmon, 2009). The examples seem endless: the well-off have access to better food, better skincare, better healthcare, better hairdressers—all things that serve to improve their looks.

This is, in fact, a special case of the so-called Matthew effect of cumulative advantage (Rigney, 2010). This is a well-known mechanism in stratification research, as it explains how inequalities have a tendency to increase over time: there is a feedback loop where advantage in one domain (say, money) creates advantage in another (say, beauty), which in turn may lead to the advantages theorized in the aesthetic capital/beauty premium approach. This approach zooms in a specific aspect of beauty: the parts of faces and bodies that can be modified and improved. Until recently, this mostly referred to aspects of grooming, clothing, or exercise. With the expanding possibilities to improve one's appearance with cosmetic surgery and medication such as Ozempic (which is currently very expensive and not accessible to everyone), this "beauty gap" is likely to widen.

The final approach, which we refer to as *Beauty as Belief System and Ideology*, refers to recent publications in philosophy and social sciences, noting that beauty and appearance have a special place in contemporary society. For instance, philosopher Heather Widdows (2018) described beauty as "an ethical ideal", and labor sociologists Warhurst and Nickson (2020) have argued that employers increasingly ask employees to engage in "aesthetic labor" as part of their

work. This perspective departs from earlier critical analyses of beauty culture or beauty ideologies by suggesting that this ideology applies to (almost) everyone in society, not just women or young people.

From this perspective, beauty is understood as a social belief system or ideology that posits norms and beliefs regarding appearance. More particularly, this contemporary belief system (which Kuipers (2022) calls a "beauty regime") holds that beauty is important, and that people who fail to measure up to beauty standards, or who fail to work toward this aim of beauty, can be considered morally deficient. At the risk of becoming (too) self-referential, this introduction can be seen as an example of this approach.

Arguably, this is a meta-approach that is compatible with each of the approaches discussed above. Rather than identifying specific mechanisms by which beauty relates to inequality (or vice versa), it explains how beauty-based inequalities are legitimated and naturalized. If everybody believes that beauty is important and deserves to be rewarded, people are more likely to accept beauty-based inequalities—which in turn will sustain such inequalities.

3 Methodologies: Studying Beauty and Inequality Empirically

Just as the field of research is diverse in its approach to beauty and inequality, the field is also methodologically diverse and fragmented. As seen from the methodological examples in Table 1, this fragmentation primarily concerns a division between quantitatively and qualitatively (or mixed-method) oriented approaches. Rather than presenting all methodological nuances and the latest innovations, we describe the basic premises of the quantitative research tradition on appearance and inequality, and the main trends in beauty and inequality research that uses qualitative and mixed methods.

Methods used under *the Aesthetic Capital Approach* presented in Table 1 form a kind of archetype for quantitative methods in the study

of beauty and inequality. As noted, this approach assumes some (but incomplete) mutual understanding among people about who is more or less beautiful. This leads to the understanding that beauty is a measurable attribute. A typical beauty measure is a numerical scale, for example, with values from one to seven. One end of the scale is dedicated to very beautiful people, the other to very unattractive ones. Using such a scale, a group of “judges” recruited for the studies (often ordinary people or students) evaluate the beauty of other people, for example, from facial photographs or headshots that include part of the upper torso and visible clothing. In some studies, the research interviewer acts as such a judge. In the latest studies, the task has even been outsourced to artificial intelligence.

This approach assumes that each participant’s level of attractiveness can be assigned a numerical value—similar to how researchers might have a numerical value for someone’s monthly income. Like income, the value assigned to attractiveness naturally varies between individuals: some possess more of this “beauty resource” than others. Any potential inequality can then be revealed through statistical analysis by examining the relationships between the numerical values of attractiveness and, for example, income.

To investigate the cause-and-effect relationships between beauty and its outcomes (such as income, social relations, well-being), researchers often use experimental designs. For example, in real-life field experiments, researchers may use photos of individuals who have previously been rated for attractiveness using standardized evaluation methods. These photos are then attached to otherwise identical fictional job applications and sent to real job vacancies, changing only the applicant’s photo. This design allows them to examine whether a candidate’s attractiveness influences their chances of being invited to a job interview. Thus, beauty-based discrimination can be studied: do attractive job applicants receive more callbacks than less attractive ones? (Maurer-Fazio & Lei, 2015; Ruffle & Shtudiner, 2015). Recent (quasi)experimental studies have begun using advanced technologies such as deepfakes to isolate and manipulate

facial attractiveness in video-based job applications, allowing researchers to examine its causal impact on hiring decisions (Kühn & Wolbring, 2024).

Experimental designs are also used in psychological body image research, where researchers study, for example, participants’ reactions to different body and beauty-related content in (social) media. The tradition of body image research includes attitudinal studies, which typically rely on well-validated questionnaires to examine an individual’s body image (dis)satisfaction. Although the primary interest is individual-centered, a perspective on inequality is at least implicitly present, for example, in comparisons between genders. In addition, quantitative methods are used more broadly under what we call the *Beauty as Mediated Ideal* approach, where, for instance, the prevalence of different beauty representations in a specific media context may be mapped through content analysis.

However, not all scholars studying beauty and inequality share the fundamental assumption of quantitative research regarding the measurability of beauty. An alternative analytical lens is needed to analyze the social construction of beauty ideals and the social processes of meaning-making involved. For instance, understanding how beauty standards are produced and reproduced in various social situations and contexts, and through which social processes beauty is transformed into the kinds of advantages and disadvantages, is not something that can be resolved using the quantitative research tool kit.

Understanding such questions of aesthetic meaning-making and the social construction of beauty requires an alternative lens rooted in qualitative methodologies: by interviewing people, by observing them, and often also by participating in social situations oneself. These kinds of qualitative interview methods, as well as ethnographic approaches, are typical of the approaches we refer to as *Beauty as Power Structure* and *Beauty Standards as Cultural Capital* (see Table 1). A representative example of this research tradition is Ashley Mears’ ethnographic study of fashion models (Mears, 2011) and beauty in the VIP party circuit (Mears, 2020), in which the researcher

herself took on the roles of both a model and a VIP “girl”.

Particularly in the *Beauty as Power* approach, scholars often use historical analysis. Only by understanding history—which in practice means engaging with historical sources—can we grasp how beauty and especially gendered, racialized, and class-based inequalities have become institutionalized over time. One example of this is Maxine Craig’s analysis of the US dental care system (Craig, 2021). Media materials, such as fashion magazines or books of manners, are key sources for analyzing the cultural and historical meanings and representations of beauty.

It is important to note that quantitative content analyses are not entirely excluded from this type of inquiry, as demonstrated, for example, by the study conducted by Kuipers et al. (2017) on 30 years of gendered fashion model representations. *The Beauty Standards as Cultural Capital* approach has also employed quantitative (Vandebroek, 2016) and mixed methods research. An example of this is the Q-sort method developed by Kuipers, which is also featured in this book. In this method, participants are asked to rank images according to perceived beauty, while interviews conducted alongside the sorting process provide insights into individuals’ beauty tastes. The method thus differs significantly from the pure rating approach described earlier, which yields only a numerical score reflecting the perceived attractiveness of the person being evaluated (Kuipers et al., 2022).

Finally, it is worth noting that not all research on beauty and inequality is empirical. This research tradition is also represented by philosophical and theoretical inquiries, exemplified by Widdows’, 2018 book *Perfect Me*.

4 Beauty and Inequality: Mapping a Scattered Field, Posing New Questions

What is at stake again? This handbook, first and foremost, makes an intervention in the study of beauty and inequality: we stake out beauty and inequality as a scholarly field in its own right.

This is important for scholars of inequality who do not have a special interest in beauty itself. As the significance of beauty is increasing, it becomes a more important axis and source of inequality. This happens in an era where social inequalities are rising across the board (as can be seen, for instance, in the rise of wage inequality in most countries around the world, and in the rise of a new class of the “super-rich”). Beauty-based inequality is probably no exception to this trend. Moreover, as beauty becomes increasingly central as a domain of meaning-making, beauty is often used to express and reproduce other inequalities. For example, in contemporary politics beauty styles are used both as a tool to express political identities, for example through displays of muscular masculinity and traditional femininity (Pieters, this handbook), and as a means to express social activism through “beautyvism” (Brans and Pieters, this handbook).

But understanding beauty and inequality is not only of academic importance: it has important societal implications too. As this handbook shows, the individual and societal consequences of beauty are real—ranging from individual exclusion and psychological and health vulnerabilities, to exclusion of social groups and the exacerbation of other inequalities, whether along lines of race, class, gender, sexuality. As many have argued (e.g., Lamont, 2023; Piketty, 2014), inequality in itself damages society. The constant quest for beauty leads to a rat race that drives up beauty standards, demanding an ever-increasing need to invest resources in appearance (Kuipers, 2022). This has environmental costs too. Beauty products strain our energy and natural resources and pollute water (Brausch & Rand, 2011), and the beauty regime plays out on resource intensive social media platforms with considerable carbon footprints (Batmunkh, 2022). In other words, understanding the pathways between beauty and inequality potentially holds a large societal dividend.

To get there, this handbook brings together an ensemble of scholars looking at beauty from various disciplines and traditions and with various aims. We gave them a simple question: from your expertise and research area, what can we

learn about the relation between beauty and inequality? Together, we developed this handbook through two rounds of online workshops, in which people presented key insights from their fields and relevant findings from their own work. Contributors commented on each other's work and helped further strengthen the cohesion between the different parts. This ultimately led to the current handbook.

This handbook consists of four parts that each tackle another aspect of the beauty and inequality. Part 1, *Beauty*, showcases the conceptual diversity around the notion of beauty as each author reflects a different approach to beauty. In the first chapter “[Beauty as Subordinate Capital](#)”, Maxine Craig brings together feminist and Bourdieusian approach to conceptualize beauty as a form of “subordinate” capital with limited convertibility. In the chapter “[Beauty and Morality](#)”, Heather Widdows explains how in contemporary societies beauty has become a moral imperative, shaping access to success and opportunities in life. Focusing on the role of sex and sexuality, Dana Kaplan shows how beauty is intertwined with sexual capital in her chapter “[Sexual Capital](#)”. In their chapter “[Evolutionary Approaches to Beauty](#)”, Linda H. Lidborg and Lynda G. Boothroyd discuss the evolutionary psychological approach to beauty. They draw on recent psychological research to challenge earlier evolutionary-derived hypotheses about the universality of beauty that promoted biological determinism and legitimated appearance-based discrimination. Outi Sarpila, Luuc Brans, and Giseline Kuipers approach beauty as a gendered inequality in their chapter “[Beauty as Gendered Inequality](#)” by examining the gendered nature of beauty standards, practices, norms, and outcomes, looking ahead to studies of gendered beauty beyond the gender binary. Integrating various approaches to beauty and inequality in a new cultural sociological framework, Giseline Kuipers, Yiu Fai Chow, Gladys Pak Lei Chong, and Wanying Zhou reformulate beauty as a form of evaluation in their chapter *Beauty as Evaluation*. They use empirical evidence from Hong Kong to show how different evaluations of beauty have different consequences for social in/exclusion.

In the chapter “[Beauty and Meritocracy](#)”, Outi Sarpila and Iida Kukkonen draw on Finnish survey data to discuss to what extent beauty can be seen as a form of merit: an achieved characteristic that legitimizes inequalities in an era where inequality is increasingly understood as meritocracy.

Part 2, *Mechanisms*, brings together various chapters that analyze the outcomes of beauty. Different chapters zoom in on the mechanisms by which appearance brings about inequalities: how and to what extent are the life chances of people who are considered more or less attractive affected by this? In her chapter “[Beauty and Romantic Outcomes](#)”, Elisabeth McClintock studies the role of beauty and appearance in one of the classical themes of evolutionary studies, and simultaneously one of the more intimate parts of individual lives: partner selection. Reviewing sociological, psychological, and evolutionary psychological debates on heterosexual partner selection, McClintock offers a (counterintuitive) account of how physical attractiveness relates to partner selection, and how this ties into social stratifications. In their chapter “[Beauty and Hiring Discrimination](#)”, Juliane Kühn and Tobias Wolbring ask how beauty contributes to hiring discrimination and lookism in the labor market, reviewing the evidence for various mechanisms that have been suggested to explain this discrimination. Further looking at the preferential access to friends and other networks that attractive people have in her chapter “[Beauty and Social Capital](#)”, Petra Raudenská zooms into the links between beauty and social capital using data from the Czech Republic. In their chapter “[How Beauty Impacts Life Satisfaction: Objective, Subjective and Mediating Effects](#)”, Michael Smith and Dana Hamplova draw on the same Czech data to ask why more attractive adults are more satisfied with their life and whether subjective factors, such as self-image, or objective factors, such as others' evaluations, matter more for life satisfaction. In the chapter “[Beauty, Media Representations and Body Image](#)”, Ella Guest and Elizabeth A. Daniels examine the impact of beauty ideals in legacy and social media on body image and societal expectations around appearance, exploring how body ideals in the media affect psychological

well-being. They also ask whether social media can be used as a tool to foster positive body images. In the chapter “[Looking Right for the Job: Appearances, Unequal Chances, and Gatekeeping in the Labor Market](#)”, Kobe De Keere, Outi Sarpila, and Laura Vonk draw on the sociology of valuation and evaluation to show how “looking good” in the labor market is not the same as “looking right”. They analyze the assessment of gatekeepers in the labor market, showing how they rely on visual cues not just based on beauty, but also extending to other domains of inequality.

This ties to Part 3 which looks at *Intersections*. Intersectionality points to the interaction between different “axes of inequality” and is rooted in critical approaches that connect inequalities to societal power struggles. Although not technically incompatible with the idea that inequality effects are best gauged or “measured” at the level of individuals, this approach typically looks beyond individual effects. In their chapter “[Beauty, Gender, and Ageing](#)”, Hanna Ojala and Ilkka Pietilä explore how bodies are gradually marked as “old” and how this intersects with gender inequalities, drawing on critical gerontology, feminist gerontology, and sociology of aging. In the chapter “[Beauty, Race/Ethnicity, and Gender Inequalities](#)”, Ellis Monk demonstrates how race intersects with beauty and shapes patterns of social. In the chapter “[Beauty, Bodies and Elites](#)”, Anne Monier and Ashley Mears show how elites’ bodies, particularly women’s, at the top of the class hierarchy are controlled, scrutinized, and disciplined, developing a gendered theory of elite display. Continuing the focus on bodies and class in the chapter “[Body Size and Social Class: Beauty and Stigma in a Tale of Two Habitus](#)”, Dieter Vandebroek and Giselinde Kuipers review existing explanations that link bodies and class to present a sociological perspective on weight differences as habitus, moving beyond approaches to large body size as pathology or as social stigma. In the chapter “[Clothing, Beauty and Inequality](#)”, Irmak Karademir explores how taste in clothing reproduces inequalities, specifically focusing on women’s everyday clothing practices instead of the glitzy world of high

fashion. Analyzing the case of Turkish women’s clothing practices, the chapter uncovers how class processes generate embodied femininities. In her chapter “[Beauty, Gender and Parenthood](#)”, Amélie Keyser-Verreault looks at the intersection between beauty and parenthood, demonstrating how beauty is part of a normative discourse of good motherhood. The chapter explores both the transition to motherhood and the maternal body, and the transmission of aesthetic value in mother-daughter relationships in the context of the hyper-sexualization of the female body. Finally, in the chapter “[Beauty Regimes and Global Inequalities](#)”, Giselinde Kuipers, Emmanuel Narh, Narges Pirhayati, Carolina Rabasa Rucki, and Wanying Zhou show how beauty and beauty regimes are shaped by global power relations, and how this is changing as the domination of the Global North is waning.

In Part 4, *Fields*, we see how the general insights from the previous parts, on processes, intersections, and mechanisms rooted in divergent approaches to beauty play out in concrete fields such as teaching, fashion, politics, and labor. Many crucial developments that link beauty and inequality happen not on the general macro-level of the society, but rather on the meso-level of the field, and from there on impact the rest of society. Lookism, for example, was originally studied and found in labor but then was quickly found across society. Taking a closer look at fields shows us how general mechanisms and processes of beauty and inequality operate in practice in distinctive ways in the relatively autonomous spheres that fields are.

The first field that this section explores is cosmetic surgery. In her chapter “[Cosmetic Surgery](#)”, Alka Menon shows how cosmetic surgery’s proliferation and globalization has led to a spread of beauty ideals while reproducing gender, race, and class inequalities with some potential for subversion. The chapter “[Beauty and Work: Continuity and Change in the Analysis of Aesthetic Labour](#)” brings Christopher Warhurst and Dennis Nickson to look into the field of work by zooming into aesthetic labor, one of the key

concepts in understanding beauty and inequalities, showing continuities and developments in their discussion of the past 25 years of scholarly work on this concept. Sanne Pieters draws on online ethnographic research in a women's oriented manosphere group in her chapter "[Sexual Fields and Women's Sexual Capital: Online Challenges and Insights](#)" to argue for a field-level approach to illuminate structured gender inequalities in sexual capital. In the chapter "[Beauty and Teaching](#)", Tobias Wolbring looks at beauty in the field of teaching. The chapter contributes to the theme of inequality by showing how seemingly neutral evaluation practices can reflect and reinforce beauty—and gender-based biases, with real consequences in academic work life. In their chapter "[Beauty, Dating, and Desirability](#)", Mackenzie Christensen and Katelyn Malae look at the sexual field of online dating, specifically hook-up culture, to show how beauty and the construction of desirability shape dating experiences. The chapter "[Beautyvism: Beauty as a Political Tool](#)" brings us to the field of politics and social movements, as Luuc Brans and Sanne Pieters develop a typology of "beautyvism", a portmanteau of beauty and activism, to describe how social movement activists both target and rely on beauty in historical and contemporary political struggles over social justice and equality with emancipatory, revolutionary, or even reactionary political outcomes. Aurelie Van de Peer takes a closer look at beauty in the field of fashion in her chapter "[Beauty and Fashion](#)", drawing on philosophical theories to argue that the two are not inherently linked but mobilized in a politics of time that perpetuates class-based hierarchies. Finally, in the chapter "[Lookism: the Morality of Appearance Discrimination](#)", Andrew Mason and Søren Flinch Midtgaard investigate the morality of "lookism", or appearance-based discrimination in the fields of employment and personal relationships, drawing on theories of what makes discrimination wrong when it is wrong.

Taken together, these four parts and twenty-eight chapters demonstrate the breadth of current scholarship of beauty and inequality and illuminate the connections between these approaches.

Bringing them together offers us a comprehensive view of what we know so far, but also what we do not know and thus where potential fruitful avenues for future research are. Each chapter explicitly offers ideas for these new directions; whether it is about understanding beauty beyond a gender binary (Chapter "[Beauty as Gendered Inequality](#)") or the political implications of beauty for the current era of radical politics (Chapter "[Beautyvism: Beauty as a Political Tool](#)") or the potential of cross-national research into cosmetic surgery (Chapter "[Cosmetic Surgery](#)") and the beauty styles of elites (Chapter "[Beauty, Bodies and Elites](#)"). Thus, we also see this Handbook as an invitation for all readers—young and old, academics and non-academics—to join our quest to understand how inequalities are produced and maintained through something that seems on first sight so frivolous and joyful as beauty.

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